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Public Opinion Leaders Designing in Modern Neo-Information Society

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Abstract

The article discusses the mechanisms of building public opinion leaders in modern neo-information society. A number of methods were applied: a study of the authors using the focus group method `Bloggers=influencers?' (n=10); secondary analysis of the sociological research of the ZIRCON research group in a personal interview ``The image of a journalist in the mass consciousness of Russians'' (n=1604); a framework analysis of the construction of hype as a social phenomenon in media discourse; authors' research using the case study method ``The phenomenon of Diana Shurygina.'' Chronological scope of the study: 2017-2019. It is concluded that the strengthening of the actors of the blogging institution in the media was made possible as a result of a ``crisis of confidence'' in ``traditional'' media, in particular television, with a politicized media agenda leading to the acquisition of a propaganda vector, defining thereby the trend of piarisation the media. Being the influencers (mainly for the younger generation, which is exceptionally loyal), bloggers affect the building of a system of norms, values and attitudes of their audience. At the same time, the functioning of bloggers as leaders of public opinion contributes to the inspiration of marketing strategies: the sale of various goods and services through local advertising and product placement, the so-called influential marketing. In addition, by creating social phenomena such as hype, bloggers become drivers of hyponomics (or the economy of hype).

Keywords: leader of public opinion, influencing, media, blogging, hype, hyponomics

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1. Introduction

In a modern neo-information society, characterized by the dominance of information and communication processes through Internet technologies, the formation of a unique group of leaders of public opinion is observed. A similar pattern was predicted by E.N. Yudina in the mid-2000s. According to her, ``the most educated and critically thinking part of the television audience - opinion leaders - who do not want to give up their cultural and informational habits, have the opportunity to leave television space, compensating for the shortage of non-commercial media products by actively exploring the Internet. <... > The development of the Internet and multimedia technologies

will contribute to the reduction of the public sphere in the media space. Unable to withstand the manipulative pressure of the mass media at the macro level, individuals will seek to control information flows at the micro-level. Multimedia technology and digital broadcasting currently being introduced give the citizens the opportunity to forms the information content from the reliable sources. That means that in the next decade, the media will practically cease to be social and cultural attractors, forming certain solidarity groups'' [1].

To justify the theoretical framework of the problem, it is necessary to turn to P. Lazarsfeld's theory of two-stage communication [2], in the terminology of which public opinion leaders are regarded as ``carriers of social interests who realize through mass media their targets, consisting of influencing the mass consciousness'' [3].

Working closely with political actors because of the ``high reliability'' generated by value judgments and their active broadcast in the media space in a ``favorable'' tone, public opinion leaders interpret information directly for society. It should be noted that in accordance with the two-stage communication model (presentation of information+ transmission of influence), within the framework of which P. Lazarsfeld presented and substantiated this phenomenon, public opinion leaders play an exclusively mediating role.

S.V. Volodenkov reveals the dualistic role of bloggers in modern neo-information society, who simultaneously act as `public opinion leaders for network users, and as officially recognized mediums, thus leading to the disappearance of the traditional channel of content broadcasting from the media to the public opinion leaders described in the classical P. Lazarsfeld's model, which, therefore, needs to be revised in relation to modern conditions of socio-political communications' [4]. The realities of the modern neo-information society demonstrate that a blogger with a high ``credit of trust,'' endowed with power and, as a result, being an influencer, can act as a direct medium, setting the media agenda for a loyal audience. At the same time, these two bases complement each other.

S.I. Shelonaev calls modern bloggers media intellectuals, considering them to be a new group that ``competes with journalists and not only independently forms the conceptual and discursive basis of their messages, but also transcodes this information into a form suitable for perception by the mass audience'' [5]. Studying the phenomenon of bloggers as leaders of public opinion, we should indicate that it is connected with the horizontal information and communication links in the Internet field, resulting in the ``formation of own semantic charge of the net broadcasted content, which differs from the semantic characteristics of the similar content broadcasted by the traditional

media'' [6]. The scientist explains this regularity from the standpoint of the theory of social interactionism by G. Blumer, according to which ``the semantic meaning of any concept or object is determined not so much by its properties but by the results of the social interaction'' [7]. Thus, the social interactions in the Internet field make it possible to represent an alternative media picture as opposed to the ``traditional'' media.

In turn, the rating (the number of views, comments and ``likes''), which forms the ``highest status'' of the blogger, acts as social capital, on the basis of which processes similar to the ``traditional'' media are observed. First of all, it is connected with the manipulation of mass consciousness, which makes it possible to achieve programmed reactions and, as a result, to receive dividends.

2. Methods and Equipment

2.1. Theoretical and empirical bases for influence

To get a complete picture in 2019, the study was carried out using the focus group method `Bloggers=influencers?' (n=10), where non-media students of Moscow higher educational institutions participated as respondents (aged 18-22 years old; male -- 50%, female -- 50%).

During the study, the interviewees admitted that they refused to receive information through television, on the one hand, identifying TV with something archaic (``My grandparents are constantly watching TV. For them, V. Solovyov and D. Kiselev are the real heroes'' (Valeria, 18)), and on the other, simultaneously emphasizing self-discrediting of this information channel due to the politicization of the content (Ukraine, USA), the acquisition of propaganda vector in the news representation (``My parents finally began to suspect there was something fishy... It is obviously a shady business... I refused long ago and have no regrets. Moreover, today, there is a real choice'' (Irina, 20 years old)).

The current stage in the development of a neo-information society is defined mainly by the process of journalism de-professionalization, with the representatives performing functions not characteristic of this type of activity. In turn, the media stands out as volition actor of the political and business elite, leading to the journalism de-institutionalization, determined by the revolutionary-evolutionary regularities, revealing the `primitive' core change of roles from the `fourth estate' to an instrument of propaganda of the other three branches of the government. As a result, the propaganda vector in the development, primarily of television, facilitates the process of media piarisation [8]. Even though in the `classical' theory of mass communication journalism and PR are mutually exclusive

concepts, and advertising appears in the media as separate blocks and must be marked, current realities demonstrate more and more apparent processes of media piarisation.

According to A.V. Safonov, in the context of constructing a media-political form of social space and constituting a political theater, the `traditional' media (especially television) ``performs the role of a platform for staging a play that cultivates a certain set of values. A given value orientation destroys journalism as an independent social institution. All these stipulate the crisis of fact journalism. The fact in these conditions is valuable not by itself, but as an illustration of a certain ideological concept. The main requirement for the fact is not reliability, but credibility. In the end, it undermines the confidence of journalism as an information resource, leaving for it, at best, the role of a discussion platform, and at worst - a propagandist and agitator'' [9].

As a result, a `crisis of confidence' appears in the neo-information society in the `traditional' media in general and television in particular [10]. According to A.P. Korochensky, the source of the `crisis of confidence' is the so-called `PR-ism' as a form of transformation of journalism. The scientist focuses on its mutually dangerous consequences both for the media and for political actors (for the sake of which journalism has turned into `PR-ism'): ``Bounding the media to official PR-sources ultimately not only deprives journalism of the ability to influence the authorities. The `crisis of confidence' of the audience devalues the press as an instrument of political influence in the interests of the authorities'' [11].

These determinants made it possible to talk about de-institutionalization of journalism. According to Z.O. Serebryakova, this phenomenon relates to the historical development of the country and the ongoing socio-political processes, as ``professional media were not ready to meet the expectations of society regarding the delegation of civil rights and freedoms to journalism'' [12]. Considering the increasing control over the media and the politicization of the media agenda, journalism has commenced converting into a propaganda tool, losing its role of a social institution in the society.

In 2018, commissioned from the Media Standard Foundation and the Civil Initiatives Committee, the ZIRCON group experts carried out a sociological research using the personal interview method `The Image of a Journalist in the Mass Consciousness of Russians' (n=1604). It turned out that over four years (since the beginning of the presentation of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis in 2014), the level of respect for the profession of a journalist decreased by 4% (from 69% to 65%). Besides, assessing the impact of journalists on the life of the country, only 41% of respondents noted a positive nature; negative -- 12%; the option `Do not have a major impact' was chosen by 30%; while 17% found it difficult to answer [13]. Thus, the second and third answer options, generalized

(42%), confirm the previously put forwarded thesis about the decline in the authority of the profession of journalist and journalism as a whole as a social institution.

Modern Russian journalism manifests the processes of de-institutionalization, having the internal factors (changes in the institutional logic, its transformation under the influence of the authorities, advertisers, customers) and the predominating external ones (the information and technology revolution and the appearance of `creative audience'). The de-institutionalization displays externally in the formation of de-institutionalized journalism (journalism outside of the institute), and internally in the concealed or open protest of the institutional media journalists against the changes in the institutional logic, the attempts to distort the essence of the matter [14]. We understand the de-institutionalized journalism as blogging, which in modern media and communication realities is methodologically justified to be considered as an independent social institution.

Returning to our empirical study, we should note that in this background, the respondents enumerate Telegram and YouTube channels as an alternative where bloggers realize their projects. Also, 80% of them regularly monitor blogging projects, and 20% do this periodically. The demand for bloggers is explained by the relevance of the content they represent, because ``modern television does not orient its programs to young people at all. I think that when we were children, TV programs had more variety, and now full of stagnation and static'' (Andrey, 21). In turn, bloggers, on the one hand, adapt the content to the needs of the audience, while on the other hand, ``make their shows not trivial, and you want to watch and watch them. I like the freedom of their views, and not such a narrowness of thinking and mood as ordinary journalists'' (Anna, 18).

According to the respondents, these are the bloggers who set modern trends among young people. ``This manifests in many aspects: concerning the current political situation, self-awareness in this world, as well as in the manner of expression, dressing, etc.'' (Dmitry, 19). It is emphasized that a full-fledged leader of public opinion is considered to be a blogger who ``has been in the blogosphere for a long time yet, is well established, has a positive image, and the indicator is more than 2-3 million subscribers. So, he/she has become a model for others. Of course, the numerous `clone bloggers' who copy the promoted projects in the form or content cannot be called influencers. Moreover, they are unlikely to become these'' (Oleg, 20). As a result, the search for originality, mass-replication of content to one degree or another leads to the borrowing of media trends, causing the standardization (and, partly, banalization) of blogging (with the backgrounded process of its formatting).

The main influencers are Yu. Doud (100%), A. Lebedev (90%), I. Varlamov (80%), Ivangay (70%), N. Sobolev (60%). Interviewees also noted that the institution of blogging is now formed and clearly segmented: ``Despite the fact that the space for blogs is too dense, users have already spread through niches, finding their leaders in them. It is unlikely that the usual, albeit a promising author, will suddenly be able to appear and gain popularity there'' (Julia, 21).

Regarding the reflective perception of the freedom of blogging, respondents say that ``bloggers must also make money. Their projects have enough advertising (perhaps it was done more skillfully and less intrusively than on television), so it is impossible to talk about complete independence. But, nevertheless, bloggers are less controlled, unlike journalists'' (Igor, 22).

3. Results and Discussion

It is necessary to point out a marketing approach in order to justify bloggers as leaders of public opinion, indicating the influence of these actors on the sale of certain goods and services through local advertising and product placement. On this basis, a discrete marketing strategy, called influence marketing, was formed, which implies ``promotion through bloggers with a large audience to increase the recognition and attractiveness of the product or service among potential consumers'' [15].

According to Mediakix, ``the global influencer marketing market for Instagram alone is valued at $1 billion, and the entire market is to reach $5-10 billion by 2020 [16]. According to Sway Group, ``in the US, every dollar invested in the opinion leaders generates an average income of $6.85'' [17]. Also, according to Collective Bias, ``70% of millennials are ready to buy a product if it is presented by bloggers'' [18].

Besides, it should be noted that, as public opinion leaders, bloggers construct social phenomena, one of which is hype. Etymologically, the term has its origins in the depths of economic science (HYIP -- High Yield Investment Program), referring to the projects like an investment fund with high profit. Researchers note that ``usually hype projects are built on the Ponzi principle, paying the fabulous interest due to new investments and attracting many participants. Thus, fresh money replenishes. After the cash flow stops or is not enough to cover current liabilities, the hype closes, all payments cease'' [19]. In this context, the hype phenomenon is akin to the phenomenon of a financial pyramid. M.V. Kolesnik indicates that hype atmosphere contributes to the monetization of consciousness, in which enterprising actors begin to `make money from the air.' An entire marketing strategy designated as `air selling' has been institutionalized [20].

As applied to media, the use of the `hype' concept was first encountered in the book *Media Virus* by D. Rushkoff: ``The main method of work of American media is hype. This word was originally used in the United States in the 1920s to indicate the drug dose. It was short for hypodermic needle'' [21]. According to the scientist, hype becomes the basis for the construction of media viruses. The emphasis is set on the viral influence of the media through hype technologies -- the desire for artificial sensationalism, obsessive advertising, creating excitement around a phenomenon or a person. Thus, the definition by D. Rushkoff fixes a stable notion of `hype' in the modern communication space.

In new media communication conditions hype is a process of reinforced, `viral' replication of the information about a certain actor or phenomenon, based on the well-known political/ideological/cultural archetypes, but offering a new perspective, a different view, an original approach [22]. Like any PR-strategy, hype contributes not only to the popularization of an object or a subject, but also to the real profit.

However, considering the continuity and intensity of the existing media stream, the hype phenomenon (by analogy with HYIP -- financial pyramids) is ephemeral: quickly becoming banal and routine, inevitably losing the interest from the audience.

K.V. Kiouru defines the essential functions of the hype:

1. informative -- the creation of informational matters regarding ``viral'' content;
2. communicative -- building connections between the hype object and the target audience;
3. formation of public opinion -- the construction of public trends based on an object being represented;
4. advertising -- the promotion of certain phenomena, actors or media products with a focus on their commercial attractiveness;
5. recreational -- ``maintaining the attention of the hype content by memes, quotations, parodies, and anecdotes'' [23].

This functional series in its entirety explicates the function of popularization through the dissemination of specific patterns of behavior, cultural norms, rules and guidelines in the society as a result of their borrowing from the leaders of public opinion (mainly bloggers).

K.V. Kiouru also allocates several varieties of hype:

a) negative;

b) positive;

c) personal;

d) situational.

The negative hype is based on scandals, controversies, and tragedies. There is an example of an increased public interest to the court case on the participation of the Russian footballers A. Kokorin and P. Mamayev in fights, and condemnation of their behavior: ``Remember, what was the boom? In mid-October, there was no news more important at all than the adventures of bosom friends from Krasnodar and St. Petersburg in the center of Moscow'' (*Lenta.ru*, January 8, 2019).

The positive hype is mainly based on cultural and socially significant events. For example, the hype around `Queen' connected to the release of the `Bohemian Rhapsody' in 2018: ``The most streamed music of the last century has become known. It is the song `Bohemian Rhapsody' by the British band `Queen,' which collected more than 1.5 billion of listening. According to media reports, the movie with the same name, nominated for the Golden Globe Award, helped to achieve such record levels'' (*Gazeta.ru*, December 11, 2018).

Personal hype is divided into two subspecies:

1. the subject uses the hype event in order to become famous;

2. the subject himself does something extraordinary, strange, resonating.

In the first case, the hype will be synonymous with the concept of self-PR. Example: ``The CEO of the PR-agency `Prostor: PR & Consulting' P. Maslennikov sued the blogger, editor-in-chief of Sports.ru Yu. Doud for drug propaganda. He talked about this in a video on his Facebook page. Mr. Maslennikov demanded to recover from Mr. Doud one ruble for moral damage. According to him, Mr. Doud, asking some of his guests of how they were able to stop taking the drugs, increases the interest to the subject'' (*Novaya Gazeta*, June 05, 2018). Due to the widespread popularity of the blogger Yu. Doud, the claim information and the name of P. Maslennikov came to the front pages of leading Russian publications (*Moskovskiy Komsomolets, Afisha*, etc.).

The story of the rap-artist Oxxxymiron can serve as an example of the personal hype of the second subspecies. After the huge interest to the rap-battles in 2017 with his participation, he had a concert tour over the country: ``There was an Oxxxymiron conceert at the `Olimpiyskiy: with a full house the artist presented the `Imperium' program and showed what place he deserves in the sky of Russian rap. Over the past year, the rapper Oxxxymiron has turned from just a famous subcultural artist in one of the main characters in Russian life'' (*Gazeta.ru*, July 11, 2017).

The situational hype, in turn, is formed around a resonant event. Example: the increased public attention over the world to the fire at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, which occurred on April 15, 2019 (as a result of enhanced presentation in social media and blogs), which led to the rise in sales of the work with the same name: ``Victor Hugo's novel `Notre Dame de Paris' after night fire hit the top ten most popular books on the Amazon site, according to BFM TV'' (*RIA Novosti*, April 16, 2019).

Ultimately, the systematic construction of hype by bloggers as leaders of public opinion leads to the appearance of such socio-economic phenomenon as hyponomics (formed by the merging of the lexemes `hype' and `economy'). Hyponomics (or the economics of hype) is a socio-economic strategy based on media and communication technologies, where hype is defined as the main engine of demand and monetization. This phenomenon has especially been widespread in the late 2010s -- at the stage of active development of the neo-information society.

The case related to Diana Shurygina can be considered as evidence of hyponomics, since the real media bomb became the release of the talk show `Let They Talk' (dated January 31, 2017), dedicated to the raped 17-year-old. The appearance of the program (archetypally built on the principles of a city meeting) caused a mixed reaction from the public. On the one hand, an attempt was made to rehabilitate a young man who received criminal punishment for allegedly raping a girl by stigmatizing a pseudo-victim (with emphasis on perversion and commercialism using blackmail), on the other hand, the methods and forms of achieving social justice themselves were extremely controversial. The program was teeming with details of D. Shurygina's sexual contact, which was accompanied by guests comments, using stylistically rude vocabulary and jargon: ``She wanted to booze it up and have sex,'' ``Everyone smoked spice,'' ``She got sloshed with vodka.'' The experts of the program, adhering to accusatory rhetoric, constituted the image of the ``damn spawn:'' ``This is who you need to be sent to jail!'' ``This is some kind of deadly girl,'' ``If I had such a daughter, I would rather die of shame.''

This representation of the social precedent is entirely consistent with the ideas of J. Baudrillard about consumer society and popular culture. The scientist determines that the current media agenda is built on the laws of the sexual explosion and `escalation of eroticism:' "Sexuality is in the foreground of the consumer society, colorfully affecting the entire semantic area of mass communication. Everything that can be heard and seen acquires sexual vibrato. Everything intended for consumption takes on the form of a sexual exhibitor" [24]. Using the `digging in dirty laundry' technique, the aesthetic needs of the society are satisfied (when people ask for points on the verge of foul). Although aesthetic needs are at the top of the A. Maslow pyramid [25], the products

of mass culture (television talk shows, soap operas, and false reality shows), on the contrary, make the very structure of the aesthetic values primitive.

It should be noted that immediately after the broadcast, the recording of the program was posted on the Internet (both on the official website of Channel One and some other portals through reposts). According to the Yandex.Wordstat service, analyzing user queries, the name `Shurygina' was entered about 6 million times for a month [26].

Active discussion took place on social networks, where a new media meme was made from D. Shurygina using vivid phrases from the program: `On the Bottom,' `I'll imprison for eight years,' `Sex, drugs...' and so on. The representation of the story was accompanied by the comments from the users using ironic rhetoric and allusion: ``This is a diagnosis'' (Anastasia ***); ``Good deeds cannot be glorified'' (Igor ***); ``She brings not only an excitement among boys but also the criminal cases against them'' (Sergey ***); ``500 points on the drum, what is the word right away? Yes, eight'' (Inna ***); ``It's not my fault, he came himself'' (Mikhail ***).

The media meme of D. Shurygina can also be identified with the media virus. D. Rushkoff, the author of this concept, claims that ``the `protein shell' of a media virus can be an event, an invention, a technology, an idea system, a musical phrase, a visual image, a scientific theory, a sex scandal, a clothing style or even a pop celebrity -- the main thing is that the shell attracts our attention. <... > The more provocative the `picture' or the sign -- whether it is the video of the police atrocities or the new text of a famous rapper -- the farther and faster they travel through the infosphere'' [21]. The phenomenon will not be able to arouse interest in a society in which cultural immunity is formed, and social boundaries are secure. And, on the contrary, the damage to the cultural code makes the `command structure' vulnerable and susceptible to the media manipulation.

As for the ratings, the `Diana Shurygina Phenomenon' has become mutually beneficial for both media controllers and the main character. As a result, on a flashy `wave' of media interest to this story (the rating exceeded the share of views of the Sunday Time and Vesti programs [27]) Channel One management decided to shoot four more episodes, and D. Shurygina herself became the face of a number of advertising products and was invited to participate in popular reality shows and series. At the same time, it is appropriate to assume that if, at the initial stage, this hype was situational (in fact, the lexeme itself began to spread widely simultaneously during the development of the described precedent), since the ``success'' of the talk show was unexpected for the creators themselves, then, subsequently, as a result of systematic promotion, this

precedent was the basis of hyponomics, in the context of which bloggers acted as drivers for promoting the image (trolling, creating memes, etc.).

4. Conclusion

The study allows us to portray bloggers as leaders of public opinion, characteristic of a modern neo-information society. Strengthening blogging actors in the media was made possible by the emergence of a ``crisis of confidence'' for ``traditional'' media, in particular television, in the process of politicizing the media agenda, which led to the acquisition of a propaganda vector, as a result of which the media became known. Being influencers (mainly for the younger generation, who are extremely loyal), bloggers influence the development of a system of norms, values and attitudes of their audience. At the same time, their functioning as opinion leaders contributes to the formation of marketing strategies: selling various goods and services through their own advertising and product placement, the so-called influence on marketing. In addition, by creating social phenomena such as hype, bloggers become drivers of hyponomics (or the economy of hype).

Of course, the presented concept needs further study and refinement. However, even today this allows us to outline the theoretical framework for a promising area of research, which will also undergo specific changes as the media space and neo-information society develop.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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