

The New Form of Televised Information in the Postmodern Age

The Role of Ritual Communication

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Abstract—The article is dedicated to the analysis of the actual problems of the postmodern society connected to the communicative and informational mass-media space. The author provides brief overview of the current state of media and reviews the ritual view of communication.

Keywords—*media; communication; ritual; postmodernity*

I. INTRODUCTION

While considering a postmodern society, we shall proceed from the fact that a postmodern human being is involved in the communication relations fundamentally different than those of the modern era. A subject nowadays is found in the endlessly circulating torrents of information for the production and transmission of which were created means that even in definition reflect their purpose: "means of mass communication", "mass media".

By the beginning of the 20th century, media has undergone radical changes and are associated with globalization, informatization, and technocracy of the society. Instead of the so-called "traditional" media, emerges "new" media (Internet, mobile technologies, alternative informational and social networks) that constitute and define nowadays an individual's social life. The aforementioned individual is not only seized in the pervasive flow of information but is also included in the very media production system that shapes the public consciousness at the same time manipulating and creating the phenomena of the "public opinion", that is often illusory, mythological, "hyperreal" in terms of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Elite consumer, lone person, who is analyzing the incoming information and reflecting on current events and facts came true, is now an exception in the chain of media messages being created and transmitted.

The modern days (whatever definitions you use—"late modernity", "reflexive modernity", "postmodern") significantly change the state of an individual, his way to work and perceive the world around, i.e. reflexive forms of the knowledge obtained. Media products' effects on individuals are very specific. Generated media messages, images, symbols and signs not only form the basis of perception of social facts and processes but also become a

key to understanding the contemporary social reality and sometimes can even replace reality itself in an individual's mind. So society in its traditional sense, according to J. Baudrillard, is gradually being replaced by "cyber artificial limb"—a virtual reality, comprised of dominative simulacra, simulations, imitating social interactions and illusive communication.

II. THE CURRENT STATE OF MEDIA

When speaking of the current state of media, many modern scholars tend to put the Internet on the banner of the changes, ignoring the good old television. We believe, that the TV still stands its ground, although not so firmly as, say, 10 years ago. In order to prove our point, we would like to address the latest full-scale sociological research "The Russian Media Landscape: TV, Press, the Internet", conducted by the independent Levada Center in 2014 [1]. According to the data obtained, the main sources of news for the Russian across the country in March 2014 were: TV—90%; friends, relatives, and neighbors—25%; Internet—24% (not counting the social media). The state-owned WCIOM, however, showed that in 2014 only 60% of the Russian chose TV as their main news source with the Internet (not counting social media) being on the second place with 23% [2]. Anyway, the overwhelming majority obtains the news from TV. The difference in data may be accounted to the different polling methodology. While showing some decline, TV is still the primary news source for the people: 62% in 2015 and 57% in 2016 chose it to be so [2].

What's in it for us? We find ourselves in an extremely curious position, observing the slow demise of TV and an advent of Internet. The tug-of-war between these two is obvious when considering the spending on media during the US presidential campaign. Hillary Clinton relied heavily on Media Buy with \$237,4 mln spent and just \$15,8 mln spent on online advertising, while Donald Trump spent \$68 mln on Media Buy and \$58,6 mln on Digital Consulting and Online Advertising [3]. The result is on the news worldwide. Worth noting, that Barack Obama also invested heavily in Digital and Online during both of his campaigns.

Modern information, networking, virtual, digital, communicative society has lost the old features of real-life

social interactions over the accomplished set-goal activities and is for now defined as mediated society, embraced by the constant infusion, injection of media messages, media myths, images, new semantics, signs, symbols. Information technologies, on-screen forms of perception, started to perform a substitutive function of interpersonal communication needed for the diverse and comprehensive socialization process of an individual. The most important function of the media nowadays is the social reality construction and distribution. From this point, media creativity is largely mythological and, in fact, not represents the objective reality. The crisis of representation and objective references is veiled, staged by media. That, surely, requires the new scholar models for description and comprehension.

The ritual communication is one of the most actual and all-encompassing models of the media. The ritual model of communication rests upon institutionalized forms and methods of messages transmission and acts primarily on the emotional level. It thus allows drama, spectacle, and exaltation to be used in the media messages, mostly on TV.

III. RITUAL VIEW OF COMMUNICATION

In 1975 an American scholar James Carey offered an alternative view on communication—communication as a ritual. For Carey, communication is connected to beliefs, values, and judgments, shared by members of a community. The main point is, thus, not the transmission of a message (which determines the transmission model of communication), but the representation of shared concepts. Under these circumstances, communication contributes to the unity and affirmation of the social group in time and space.

The ritual model is aimed at the expression of emotions and feelings, universal beliefs, existential excitement of a group, includes some element of performance art. The message in a ritual communication is usually latent and ambivalent, laying on associations, symbols, not being chosen by the communicators, but already immanent in the culture. It's almost impossible to separate the medium from the message. Ritual communication is, in a way, timeless and unchanging.

Quite often the ritual transfer of information is used in political and advertising campaigns. In such cases, the ritual model involves the use of symbolic systems of signs, the historical and cultural appeal to the joint past, linguistic culture, traditions, etc. Worth noting that the ritual forms of the communication are often based on artificially created myths. In the framework of ritual, expressive, model, we may not speak of the traditional understanding of media as a mean of information broadcasting. It is inevitable to override the "informational" essence of the media, as the communication is of self-importance, regardless of content. The rapture of media is the self-identity of an individual; media is, hereby, a ritual.

I would like to provide a vivid example using the renowned satirical TV show *South Park*. In the episode "Dances with Smurfs" one of the show's main characters,

Eric Cartman, uses the opportunity to become a school's morning announcer. During his first announcement Cartman starts a continuous rant and makes politically charged accusations against student body president Wendy Testaburger. While denying the school principal's power to silence him by bringing the 1st Amendment and ACLU in, Cartman accuses Wendy of all the possible crimes, revealing her ultimate plot to kill Smurfs and thus turning the students against her. Eventually Cartman is outplayed on his own field by Wendy herself, makes it to the student body president chair and is now being nitpicked by the new announcer.

While being entirely fictitious, the *South Park*'s episode served as a parody and social commentary on the style of Glenn Beck, an US radio host and former Fox News political pundit. Mr. Beck is not alone, however, as his style is quite popular around the world and is inherent to a number of political commentators found also on Russian TV, including Vladimir Kiselev, the notorious chief of Russia Today International News Agency, Vladimir Solovyov, a radio and TV host of the political talk shows on the national state-owned media, and so on.

Cartman perfectly seizes the very idea of media message as a ritual. He doesn't listen to any reasoning, doesn't even try to understand the charges of the student body president. Instead, he appeals directly to the students' emotions, fears, and immanent cultural symbols as the Smurfs are popular and beloved children characters, rants endlessly about the conspiracy theories and spills causeless and absurd accusations (e.g. the line "Is she [Wendy] a love spawn of Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot?").

Moral, social, cultural imperatives not only undergo a narrative treatment, but are being staged, dramatized, and engulfed by entertaining gowns. This is how a mythologized media content of a postmodern culture is being created. One of the most important principles in the ritual model of communication is the social form of information creation and consumption. The socializing effect of the media rituals rests upon common emotions and affects, uniting different social groups and classes. J. Baudrillard in his "Transparency of Evil" noted, that the fact of taking someone hostage, due to the instant spread across the media sources, causes not only the negative feelings and condemnation but also gives rise to empathy and co-experience along with the hostages. This feeling combines lots of strangers into one collective, albeit for a short time.

The leading role in the ritual broadcast is played by TV because of its immersive ability, i.e. the ability to create the effects of the presence and belonging to what is happening on the screen. Television is reflecting in a way what people want to do: they want to observe while not being observed. Television, thus, satisfies this need, with political talk shows and reality shows, that are, actually, quite the same.

We shall note that not only the, so to say, "priests" (i.e. the professional communicators – journalists, editorial staff, cameramen, filming crews, etc.) contribute to the ritual communication, but also the perfected presentation technique, according to which the information is allowed to be

broadcasted in media. An event must undergo a certain processing in order to get into the air. The aforementioned “priests” edit, visualize and actualize the event for it to comply with the corporate norms and media formats.

Most of the TV shows today are a kind of “collage”, created by the many people, working on every program. Mosaic TV shows can be diverse, with analytics diluted with entertainment and bright visual images, with personal interest stories of those affected by some events; what is common for all the tiles of the mosaic is the conflux of information and myth, real and unreal.

IV. CONCLUSION

A radical change of media structures, communication forms shaped the very foundation of postmodern culture. The culture of the book, printed form morphed into the culture of the screen. Social relations in the audiovisual postmodern culture transform into human-machine relations. An individual perceives the reality beyond any prefaced language (as it was within the book culture with visuals and images serving as the basis for understanding the world in its diversity).

A major problem for media influence is the silence of a recipient who can't respond to the messages, transferred through the screen. Both ritual and transmission models of communications, despite the apparent interactivity, are one-sided, unidirectional. Communication is carried out by media outlets only. However, we shall not make absolute of the negative effects of the media influence. Let us emphasize the idea of J. Rancière that the most important thing in the media—human relationship is the possibility for an individual to decode, comprehend and organize media messages and symbols.

It seems to us that the French philosopher brilliantly reflected on the aforementioned ambiguity in his “The Emancipated Spectator”:

“For the dominant media by no means drown us in a torrent of images testifying to massacres, massive population transfers and the other horrors that go to make up our planet's present. Quite the reverse, they reduce their number, taking good care to select and order them. They eliminate from them anything that might exceed the simple superfluous illustration of their meaning. What we see above all in the news on our TV screens are the faces of the rulers, experts and journalists who comment on the images, who tell us what they show and what we should make of them. If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak” [4. P. 96].

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