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COMMUNICATION»****MEDIAECOLOGY OF THE URBAN SPACE**

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Abstract

The modern media is becoming an increasingly essential part of our lives. This process is especially noticeable in large cities that are now called “mediapoleis” by many researchers. Ecological concerns have long since become public concerns and are gradually turning into public responsibilities. Similarly, the problems of mediaecology – ecology of mediaspace, are also emergent and deserving attention. Our article analyses the key characteristics of the operation of the modern megapolis through the lens of mediaecology. Based on the comparative analysis of the informational space of two cities – Voronezh and Tambov, we determine the shared principles of formation of the modern urban mediaspace. The article explores content produced by the most popular regional media-sources and its effects on the populus. Through the course of the research, we uncover a number of positive trends that generally strengthen the city’s microclimate. Our analysis has determined a number of common positive tendencies that strengthen the city’s microclimate: positive content, upholding the basic humanitarian values, supporting constructive approach to solving global problems. Simultaneously, it uncovers the negative effects of media, shared among the two cities: the spread of alarmist information, “fakes”, formation of the dominating epicentre, utilization by the media of manipulative technologies, avoidance of “unfavourable” topics, the spread of informational and semantic noise. The latter are capable of provoking the reactions of sensibilization, desensibilization, informational poisoning, informational hunger, alarmism. The similarity between the two city’s mediascapes allows us to predict a similar situation in other regional centers in Russia.

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1. Introduction

The city can tell a lot about the civilization that built it, as it is one of the main indicators of society's development. It is increasingly characteristic of the city to have a strong relationship with the media. It is hardly coincidental that the term "Mediapolis" is being employed by many researchers nowadays. The novelty of our research lies in the urgent need for study into the functional and structural characteristics of media communication as it operates within a mediapolis, and to determine its positive and negative effects on society. The emerging mediareality operates according to its own laws just as perceived reality does, and it is imperative to study and analyze these laws through the ecological lens, accounting for the potential risks for the city's inhabitants, and with the goal of creating an eco-friendly urban mediaspace.

2. Problem Statement

The matter of the role of media in an urban environment has been reviewed by many researchers in various aspects. Scientific publications on this topic have appeared almost simultaneously with those in popular media itself. The authors of the publication series «The Village» (Faberova, 2014; Polishchuk, 2013), have compiled a short characteristic of the publications taking into account such aspects of the publications as funding, advertising, editing, key materials, conflicts of interest, etc. «Meduza» have concluded their three year period of operation with a list of 10 trends in the Russian media (Russian media, 2014-2017:..., 2017) and determined the essential factor of development of the «new city media» – a demand for high quality regional reporting.

The inception of the scientific reflection can be narrowed down to the year 2012, to the nation-wide conference «Communicational infrastructure of the modern city» (Public office of the Russian Federation, faculty of journalism MSU of M. V. Lomonosov and the national association of mass-media researchers). The informational logistics of the modern megapolis has been then put into the spotlight along with the role of the internet in the urban communication system, media preferences of the citizens and other topics. The conference Communication infrastructure of a modern city was held in Moscow in 2012. That same year a collective study by the department of the theory of journalism and mass communications of SPbSU, has explored the megapolis as a product of civilization, a unique environment of the modern individual and the society at large.

The subject of the research (Shabaev et al., 2018) is the anthropology of the city, the study of the urban identity and the city as a socio-cultural object. Problems of media exposure were studied by such scientists as Kuznetsova (2020), Yanglyeva, and Yakova (2019), Svitich et al. (2019).

Later, the idea of a multi-discipline nature of these topics has been expanded upon by Abashev and Pechischev (2018), who considered the study of the new city media to be most suited for a cross-discipline research between urban research and media-research in the context of the problems of development and planning of the metropolitan space and environment. The same line of research can be traced through the works of Zelentsov (2015), Nigmatullina (2016).

A project titled «Newsletter-journal periodic in the metropolitan media-space in Russia in the 2010s» by the department of periodical print of the faculty of journalism of MSU, 2016-2017 is deserving attention in that regard. The authors have conducted a survey of the urban mediasystem of the modern

regional centers in the context of demographic, economical, and socio-cultural characteristics, in both regional and inner systemic characteristics of the printed press (Vartanov et al., 2018).

Thus, by 2018-2019, the academic world has formed two approaches to studying the new city media – analysis of the journalistic practices of specific urban mass media and study of global civilizational processes in the space of a megapolis.

Summarizing the background research, a shared among the scientists opinion can be formulated: that urbanization and civil activism have produced unique qualities of the new urban mediaprojects, ones that maintain a characteristic consistent image of the city, its citizens, and their reactions towards its troubles and daily happenings. Nearly all researchers are in agreement on the characteristics of the audience of the new city media – it's the concerned citizens that are equally interested in socio-political and entertainment-related reporting, that are looking for information and guidance specific to their situation, that are interested in the betterment of the city infrastructure and the quality of life, that are open to getting involved in social activism and social initiatives related to the life of the city. As justly noted by Kiuru and Krivosov (2018), the new media allows the user a more involved participation in the communicational process. It allows an agent of this process to filter the influx of information, changing both the quantity and the quality of communication between the agents.

These conclusions are back by the research conducted by the authors of this article on the characteristics of the local online media (Zvereva, 2019), online urban media sources (Vidnaya, 2016) and the psychology of informational behaviour of a denizen of the modern megapolis (Shesterina, 2019). It is, however, important to note that this research, while directly related to the topic in question, don't fully cover the functioning of the urban mediareality in modern conditions, all the while this reality is becoming just as inhabited and important as the physical, so-called objective one. The novelty of our research lays in its attempt to, for the first time, conduct an analysis of the characteristics of the behaviour of mediareality in an urban environment, showcase both its positive and negative effects that it has on our lives as individuals and as a society. We will, for the first time, review the mediareality as a whole, accounting for all kinds of media, and through an ecological lens.

3. Research Questions

Through the course of the research we expect to receive the following results:

3.1. Determine the mediaecological characteristics of a modern citydweller's informational field;

3.2. Specify the positive processes taking place in the sphere of mediacommunication;

3.3. Specify the negative processes of mediareality that significantly affect the life of a modern urban environment as a whole, and of an individual within that environment.

This framing of the research questions, we think, is imperative, as it is increasingly more noticed by researchers that the mediasphere experiences fundamental shifts over time. The essential markers of such shifts are:

- intensification of the informational exchange;
- the increasing involvement of media in our lives (informatization of the various spheres of life);

- changes in the audience's informational behaviour;
- integration of media into other social institutes;
- increase of the media's role in the process of socialisation of a modern human, their physical and psychological health.

As the societal developments catalysed by the pandemic show, all of these processes accelerate in the atmosphere of uncertainty and global cataclysms, making the audience's dependency on media total. As we care for the ecological health of our physical space, we also do need to care for that of the mediaspace. Thus, the final question here is: how ecologically healthy is the modern urban mediaspace, and is participating in it good for us?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study is to research the urban mediareality. To facilitate this research, we attempt to describe the modern urban mediascape and analyses the content produced by the Mass Media as to determine its positive and negative effects on the city's mediafield. As a result, we are planning to reach an understanding of the role of media in the life of the modern megapolis.

5. Research Methods

The data for this research consists of the content produced by contemporary media operating in such cities as Voronezh and Tambov. The choice of the cities to analyse is deliberate: both picks are regional centers of the Central Black Earth Economic Region. They have a lot in common, but also demonstrate a number of differences – both in population size and in economic, political, and sociocultural situation. Analysis of these two cities with employment of the comparative approach will highlight the shared characteristics (those can then be extrapolated to other regional centers) and the specifics unique to each region. Chronologically, the research has taken place from early 2019 to early 2020. Besides the comparative approach, we will be employing the content analysis method, the comparative-typological and the hystorical-functional methods.

6. Findings

The general state of mediaspace derived from our research into the two subject cities presents itself as rather mixed and non-uniform. In Voronezh, there are currently 14 newspapers, 19 TV stations, 15 radio stations, and 24 internet based news sources. On the official portal of the local government of the region of Voronezh, 42 state-run news sources are listed, 7 of which are regional, and 35 operate on the scale of a single district. These media sources show complete loyalty to the state. Those news sources that are not funded or controlled by the state demonstrate a different, critical view of the state and its actions, often presenting a different opposing perspective on the reported events. Among those most influential news sources in the region of Voronezh are, according to «Yandex. Metric», «VSTRC (Voronezh State Tele-Radio Channel) – channel Russia Voronezh», «TNT-Gubernya Voronezh», radiostation «Radio of Russia»,

«Love radio Voronezh», «Road radio Voronezh», «Europa plus Voronezh», newspapers «Voronezh courier», «My Voronezh», «Commerçant Voronezh», «Komsomolskaya pravda Voronezh», «MK in Voronezh», «Kommuna», informational portals «RIA Voronezh», «Notepad Voronezh». Also of note are printed journals – mostly of consumer-oriented or cultural-educational variety, although their print sizes are negligible, and they don't have a significant effect on the city's informational field. Besides that, a number of independent media sources exist that aren't officially registered with the state and are thus considered illegitimate but do nonetheless have a substantial effect on the regional microclimate (independent socio-political portal of Voronezh «Four Quills»). It is important to note that, in recent years, the number of printed publications has significantly declined, but their overall presence, mainly through their online versions, has increased.

The peculiarity, albeit not uncommon, of the Tambov region's mediaspace is related to a lack of independent news sources and a total control of the local informational space by the state media that pushes the narrative of loyalty to the state and to big business. Overall, the local government and the news are thus interested in painting a positive picture of the regional situation through positive media content. The structure of mass media of this regional centre reflects this trend. Among the notable structures are: regional «Life of Tambov», official «Our city Tambov», two federal channels: FSUP «VSTRC «State TV station «Tambov»», and a pro-governor TV station «New age» broadcasted through cable TV and on the channel «OTP». Among online news sources that affect the public opinion, two independent sources can be highlighted: «Informational Agency Online Tambov.ru» and «NewTambov.ru», that are, according to «Medialogy», leaders in public outreach. The popular websites of traditional news sources include those of two TV stations: «RIA «Top68»» and «ID Michurinsk».

Citizens of these two cities have a mostly unconstrained access to online media which in a certain way dilutes the effect of the state-run news sources. However, for example, citizens of Voronezh often point to the regional media as their primary source of information about the socio-cultural events and life of the city, paying the most attention to audio-visual news sources. The population of the Tambov region also names regional media as their primary sources of local information, but the local media consumption there is a lot more passive, with content gaining a relatively large audience with little engagement. Interaction of the population with the media is largely situational, but the first place is being strongly held by online publications, including online versions of traditional media. An average citizen there cannot name a specific channel or publication and instead refers to the media in general: TV, internet, etc. Many turn to online media and messengers for information.

6.1. Analysis of the mediasphere of Voronezh has identified the following positive effects of mediareality

1. Generation of positive content. In times when the majority of federal and international news sources report concerning and frightening information, mass media in Voronezh maintains a generally positive disposition (e.g., an interview by TV station «Vesti Voronezh» with a professor of Voronezh State University Zemskov (2020) on the topic of COVID-19 in which the interviewed proposes a so far unsupported by facts opinion that the virus will calm down as the seasons change;

2. Upholding of the perceived basic humanitarian values – life, health, the institution of family. These topics form the basis of both printed and online media through the reviewed time period, and also dominate the hot topics of audio-visual media. Activisation of such narratives is especially noticeable in time of change and social unrest (e.g., during a pandemic). Appealing to these topics in time of crisis stabilizes and harmonizes the city's psychosphere;

3. Framing problems as solvable that is supported by continuously reporting on the most favorable examples through the course of their development. For example, reporting by «TV Gubernya» on a dissatisfaction of the citizens of Voronezh with a lack of public transport has led to the local government increasing the number of buses and trams in operation (03.04.2020). Demonstration of positive scenarios of solving problems in the informational space presents itself especially important in the wake of large-scale psychosis perpetrated by the nation-wide media.

Along with this, several negative effects are identified:

1. Presenting information is a destabilizing form as to cause social unrest – mainly through constantly correcting the narrative and presenting unverified, in-the-moment given opinions. Reporting on COVID-19 in the region is especially emblematic of this, as the information about the spread of the infection and the number of those infected in Voronezh varied significantly across publications and various news sources;

2. Spread of «fakes». The most notable among recent cases are in regards to the attempts by the state to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 that are intended to impress the audience with misinformation. E.g., an article by «Notepad Voronezh» 03.04.2020 titled «Russian scientists have found the way to fight coronavirus» covers the research that found that water treated cold plasma has shown to damage the viruses' cellular membrane. Obviously, the article does not meet the expectation created by its title;

3. Formation of the dominating epicenter – a persistent, consistent reaction to a specific stimulus. E.g., such words as «nickel», «apple garden», «roads» cause a strong negative reaction in Voronezh due to a strong link to specific problems and their continuous coverage;

4. Utilization of manipulative technologies. Those most often manifest themselves in grey and black propaganda, substitution of facts with opinions, hyperbolization of problems. E.g., the report by a TV station «Gubernya» titled «The situation with landscaping fires in the Voronezh region is getting hot once again» (03.04.2020) in actuality covers a rather mundane and minor incident typical for the season, that caused no casualties and minimal damage;

5. Avoidance of «unfavorable» topics (for Voronezh, those are the problems of renovation of homes for the elderly and palliative care institutions);

6. Spread of informational and semantic noise that is most often manifested in mixing up factual information with subjective, often uninformed opinions.

6.2. Analysis of the content produced by the Tambov mass media has shown the following positive effects

1. Generation of positive content. E.g., an informational-news portal in the Tambov region «RIA «Top 68»» compiles the majority of its content from positive stories about the lives of the locals: artistic projects, various hobbies and small victories in non-professional contests. The second place in the amount

of published material is being held by stories about the professional routine of the local people, with various professions of the locals presented in a decidedly positive way. A TV station «New age» has launched a radio-cast with a telling name «Good day».

2.Upholding of the perceived basic humanitarian values – life, health, the institution of family. The portal «RIA «Top 68»» nearly always presents the topic of health as a story of an individual victory over one's illness; the audience is presented with positive feel-good stories from the local population of those that managed to persevere through disease and hardships. The «New Tambov» website often focuses its attention of the problems of a specific city block, thus forming a sense of comradeship among its denizens.

3.Framing problems as solvable. Through the course of the research on the informational-news portal «RIA «Top 68»», only one negative story has been unearthed – one about a local that has not been able to obtain Russian citizenship for a long time. But even that story has been developed into a positive narrative: about a citizen «trapped in USSR», that the news sources such as «Uvarovskaya life» report on and investigate, make requests to the local government and post information about the case on social media. Thus, these stories are built on positive examples, with a mandatory happy ending and a positive message of hope, that it is always possible to rise above the circumstances and turn your life around. The problematic situation itself is then often presented as a happy ending of a darker story.

Alongside that, several clearly defined negative effects emerge:

1.Avoidance of «unfavorable» political topics, loyalty to the state and big business, a lack of independent legitimate mass media and serious criticism of the state. The most notable and significant scandals or cases of corruption are reported in strict official terms, with only the state-mandated information: e.g., the start of a criminal case against a candidate to the regional дума (Information Agency «Tambov-inform»);

2.Low activity of citizens themselves in the official media environment (in legitimized media): e.g., a post in the newsfeed of the community of the portal «RIA «Top 68»» on the popular Russian social network «VKontakte» gains, on average, 14.5 likes, 5.5 reposts, and rarely any comments. At the same time, posts of an unofficial community «Tambov without sugar» gain, on average, 25 likes and are often discussed in the comments when they cover pressing regional issues.

3.Utilization of manipulative technologies as a means to distract the population from actual significant problems. For example, both the portal «RIA «Top 68»», and the unofficial community «Tambov without sugar» have once posted a video in which a local man is feeding his dog alcohol out of a bottle and mocks it, commenting on what's happening. In the comments to this post, the people of Tambov have started a heated debate of the situation and identified the man in the video. As a result, the man under allegations of animal cruelty, has posted a video in response, in which he tries to convince the concerned people that the bottle contained water and not alcohol, and that his actions towards his dog thus could not be considered animal cruelty. Thus, controversial videos with animals are an apparent form of manipulation provoking a uniform expected response to the problem of animal cruelty;

4.Spread of informational and semantic noise, minimization of quality expertly produced content. For example, an analysis of publications «Information Agency Online Tambov.ru» demonstrates a reduction in the portion of quality content. The authors don't support their findings with references that prove their factual correctness, don't provide opinions of experts on the matter of publication, as is required

by the format of a serious informational agency. As a result, the most popular types of material are reports of traffic accidents and criminal reports that together amount for the largest portion of all publications of this news source;

5. Formation of the dominating epicenter of the Tambov mass media is expressed in all of the events covered by the state media (the overwhelming majority of media as a whole, even online media) are centred around the governor and other state officials.

7. Conclusion

Among the found effects of the media's expansion into the lives of city dwellers, the most notable are:

Sensibilisation that manifests itself in a hypervigilant response to the hot topics circulating in the regional media (traffic jams in Voronezh, garbage collection and recycling in Tambov);

Desensibilisation that manifests itself in a lack of engagement and detachment of the citizens from the city's notorious widely represented issues due to oversaturation (quality of roads and garbage collection in Voronezh, beautification and demolition of old buildings in Tambov);

Informational poisoning caused by the satisfaction of correlated needs through the mediasphere (this effect is especially noticeable in the period of self-isolation; aggressive spread of "fakes" – false information about the virus perpetrated by the media; overlapping, uniform newsfeed from different sources);

Informational hunger – an inability to find the desired information in the newsfeed (e.g., polls of the citizens of Voronezh show their dissatisfaction with the contents of official web-resources of the city administration and the difficulty of finding useful precise information on these resources; lack of reporting and general information on accidents and expert commentary);

Alarmism as the process of encouraging reactionary tendencies among the citizens (e.g., provocation of the acts of protest in the regional media of Voronezh)

Thus, the urban mediascape can be generally characterized as superior to the national media, but also producing the abovementioned unique negative side-effects. Despite the significant difference in the approach to keeping the population informed, both Tambov and Voronezh mediafields demonstrate problems typical of Russian cities. Mitigation and eradication of those problems seems prudent with regards to harmonization of the regional mediaecological space.

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