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Post mass media in the modern informational society
"Journalistic text in a new technological environment:
achievements and problems"

USERS' MEDIA BEHAVIOUR IN SOCIAL NETWORKS: RESULTS
OF SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY

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Abstract

The article considers the peculiarities of media behaviour of users in the social network. The topicality of the problem under consideration is connected with the fact that today social media sufficiently spread their functional abilities which led to the growth of the number of registered users, the increase of time amount spent online, and the status of social networks as the main source of information. In social networks all the norms are based on the special social responsibility of users, so one of the acute directions in the study of informational content of social networks is the study of opinion and peculiarities of media behaviour of the audience. To study the self-identity of media behaviour and media needs we conducted a sociological survey among the users of VKontakte (N=500). The results of the survey helped us draw the following conclusions: social networks are the true sources of information; a part of users, especially young people, do not count the time spent in social networks which often leads to negative effects on their activity and psychological state; the audience seldom makes a critical analyses of the information spread through social networks; users claim that they often meet unnecessary and spam information. Nevertheless, the audience starts obtaining the criteria in relation to the opinion leader which influence the degree of critical relation to the posted publications.

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Keywords: Media behaviour, media consumption, social network, audience, sociological survey.



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1. Introduction

Social networks have recently become a significant component of free time and even a part of life of contemporary people. It is worth assuming that social networks not only form life principles of the audience and its cultural values, but also delete the margins of national personal identity, impose certain stereotypes, and the contemporary audience of media has to adjust and live in accordance with the laws existing in media space, in spite of their preferences and the level of culture.

The specialists of various fields of scientific activity research problems of the so-called ecology of mass media content: they study ways of safe and rational use of communicative resources by the audience, the impact of virtual content upon the realities of life (Pocheptsov, 2019). The close connection between mediatization and reality means the creation of certain values influencing the personal characteristics, communicative strategies and behavioural reactions. This question is discussed by various scientists (Smeyukha, 2015; Kaminskaya, 2015; Arpentyeva, 2016).

A social network may be a single media resource with exclusive content, and it may perform a supporting role of extra media platform for traditional mass media (Gradyushko, 2014). The mass social networks like VKontakte built their own mass media content with inner mass media – communities (groups and publics) (Stepanov, 2015).

The social networks as mass media are characterized with their technological and content peculiarities (Braslavets, 2009; Pavlushkina, 2014). Such resources became social in their nature, because the audience itself gets involved in the process of production and spread of information (Pichugina, 2013) which tells about the new social phenomenon and the transformation of human life activity into the cyberspace. A special social and cultural reality provides a man with not only new unique opportunities of interaction and development, but also demands to gain the new knowledge, norms and behavioural skills, bears new problems (Sergodeev, 2014).

In social networks the audience is one of the mass information sources. There is a widespread presence of opinion leaders in the respondents' social media feeds, bringing attention to news they otherwise would have missed, and just as important, delivering interpretation and context. The study also indicates that these opinion leaders are perceived as central or even crucial to the news-gathering process. (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018).

Their information becomes essential for a great number of users and on the whole may influence their relation to certain things or events (Lazutkina, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

In 2012 the survey among the Canadian citizens proved that social networks are becoming an important source of news for the Canadians. Two-fifths (40%) of social networking users said they receive news from people they follow on services like Facebook, while a fifth (20%) get news from news organizations and individual journalists they follow. Users said they valued social media because it helped them keep up with events and exposed them to a wider range of news and information (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012).

But the 2013 survey among the Russian citizens showed that less than 20% of respondents turned to social networks for any information.

Nowadays social media in Russia significantly expanded their functional abilities, new social networks (for instance, Instagram) and messengers (for example, Viber, Telegram and others) emerged and became popular with users, the amount of Internet users with mobile phones increased significantly, also there is a rise in Internet coverage on the whole.

As users in social networks have an opportunity to spread the mass information without mass media, it brings to the absence of «professional ethic filter» (Zholud, 2012), so there appears a difficulty of formation common standards (Vartanova, 2019).

The content of social networks hides a number of dangers of different character, users are not safe from invalid or provocative information, including the one which abuses common moral norms (Abilkenova, 2012). So along with undoubted advantages of social networks and their inclusiveness in the system of mass media there are real problems: various kinds of ethic violation, problems of informational validity, influence on mind and behavioural reactions of the audience, violation of language norms, violation of the RF laws etc.

Thus, in the context of social media all the norms are based upon a special social responsibility of users of social media resources, which are simultaneously the content makers and its consumers. So, we believe that one of the acute directions in the research of informational content of social networks is the study of opinion and peculiarities of the audience media behaviour.

3. Research Questions

We may take as a hypothesis that today social networks possess a number of unique signs and perform as the main resources for the Internet audience from the view point of informational consumption.

- 1) Which place is occupied by the social networks in the informational space of the Internet, are they the main source of information?
- 2) What problems in media consumption are frequently faced by users?
- 3) How can we describe the media behavior of the social network users:
 - how often do users consult the news line?
 - what in social networks serves as the source of information (communities, users' pages)?
 - what are the reasons of joining a community?
 - how much is the audience dependent upon the social networks?
 - who is the opinion leader?
 - are users critical about the information consumed in social networks?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose is to define the main principles and motives of media behavior of contemporary users in social networks by the example of VKontakte.

5. Research Methods

To study the self-identity of media behavior and media needs of the audience we used the survey method. The survey was conducted in 2018 (N=500). The respondents were people at the age of 12-60 (a goal-seeking quote selection), Internet users and account owners of at least one social network VKontakte – the most popular social network in Russia nowadays: over 300 million users (The audience VKontakte, 2019). According to gender and age characteristics of certain regions we asked 40% of male respondents and 60% of female respondents.

Most of the interviewed have higher education or incomplete higher education (are currently students), and only less than 30% have secondary or technical secondary education

6. Findings

The survey contained questions which stated the place of social networks in the system of mass media, defined the role models of users and their media activity, and called the problems of media safety of the social network audience.

We shall consider the results in details (in some question the total is over 100% because they could choose more than one answer, i.e. several answers out of many).

We detached the main kinds of Internet resources and offered the users to choose those, which are of some interest and form their news view. Also with the means of the question we defined the place of social networks in the informational space of the global Net (Table 01).

Table 01. The analyses of preferences of the respondents about the informational resource in the Internet

Kind of mass media	%
Of publics and groups in social networks that do not have their own site or have a site in the form of the analogous social net line (for instance, «Lentach» and others)	47.5
In news line on the search engines (for example, Google, Yandex, Rambler)	44
Sites of professional independent Internet mass media (for example, «Lenta.ru», «74.ru» and so on)	34
News line in social networks (NOT the news about friends; we mean here the news of socially significant format, which are posted by users)	30.5
Of blogs of famous journalists and bloggers (including video blogs)	25.5
Of publics and groups in social networks of professional mass media (for example, publics «Lifenews», public of the First Channel)	23.5
Of blogs and accounts of common people and friends	19
Accidentally from the first watched site in the Internet	16
Of the site of usual mass media (for example, «South Ural News», «FM News», «Moscow Echo», «A&F»)	13
Of sites made by schoolchildren or students (for example, site of the School of Journalism in CSU, Media group VGUIT etc.)	6.5

The hypothesis that social networks today are the main source of information for the Internet audience has been proved. Then we asked the question about the problems the users face when watching news in their accounts. The table below shows the details (Table 02).

On the one hand, such results may mean the significant amount of information of a dangerous character, appearing in the social networks; on the other hand, it testifies a more rational attitude of the users towards the information

By 2018 the amount of the consumed information in social networks has grown significantly: one third of respondents watches the news line in social networks as the only source of information (34%).

Table 02. Main problems of news line for users of social networks

Problem	%
A lot of unnecessary information in reposts and posts of my friends	48
A lot of unnecessary information in community line to which I subscribed	9,5
I see little information which is interesting or necessary	42
News occupy too much of my time	27
I see the information which causes depression or bad mood	15,5
I see the information which causes aggression	9
None of the above	6,5
Other	6,5
I see little information and have nothing to be busy with	5,5
I see dangerous information which may ruin me psychologically	4
I see the information which may encourage me to dangerous actions	1,5

The survey had the question about the amount of information from social networks, which is received by users within the general information. The opinions of the interviewed about the usefulness of such information differed: 20-50% claimed its usefulness.

The amount of information, which is shown to the audience of social networks in the news line, depends in a greater degree upon the number of communities a user joins – the greater is the number of communities, the more information is in the line scrolled under his attention. Also, this factor is influenced by a number of friends and their activity in social networks (own publications, reposts), and the frequency of the news line following in the account.

Males, as a rule, join a smaller number of communities than females do. The respondents younger than 21 join a greater number of communities than the interviewed of the older age. On the average a user joins 20-300 communities.

The reasons to join a community are quite different, the main are the following: hobbies and interests (88,5%), work/study (61,5%), news (44%), search of information for entertainment (42,5%), upon friends' request (26%). There are no people who would not join a community. Almost half of the interviewed (44%, with the age of about 23) claimed that they use social nets for news reading.

The growth in number of smart-phones influences the increase in the number of respondents who scroll the news line regularly (21%) or every time they enter their account, fearing to miss something (51%). Thus, a user sees involuntarily a great amount of information. Even if he joins a little number of communities, the information is received through advertising or friends reposts in the news line.

We asked the question allowing to define the level of dependence of the audience upon the social networks. 65,5% of respondents deliberately tried to avoid Internet for a few days and more. Almost half of them felt the necessity to communicate and receive information though they managed to do that; the other half thinks they had no problems doing this. Though 7% of all the respondents answering this question still claim that such an experience was hard for them. 24,5% do not see any necessity and are not planning to use such a measure, 10% claimed their desire to avoid Internet at least for some time.

Such an experiment of social networks avoidance for some days involved a greater part of the audience – 73,5%. A little over half of the interviewed managed to do that without any problems, others mentioned they had felt some discomfort. A little part of users chose the answer – “it was hard”. 19% refused to participate in such experiments, and 7,5% are planning to do that in the nearest future.

At the end of the survey we asked several questions concerning the opinion leader, which deserved the highest trust of the audience.

First of all, the respondents trust the author with a high quality of posts on his page: for example, depth, sense, importance of subjects, literacy etc. (56%). Most users pay attention to the presence of photos, their variety, “openness” of the author’s face: for instance, a picture with no glasses or hats, straight look etc. (54%), and the author’s account life period (53%). Also, the respondents state the importance of the personal information on the page: for example, education, personal data, contact data etc. (47%).

It is interesting to notice that a small part of the interviewed pays attention to such characteristics as the number of likes, reposts and comments of users (18%) and the presence of communities/groups (13%) on the author’s page, though this information may serve as a good characteristic of the author’s interests, demonstration of the active range of his friends, which may help revealing some peculiarities of the audience response to his materials.

Further on we offered the interviewed to mark the most important, in their opinion, indexes of the author (from users’ personal view point), which becomes important in the matter of trust in the information he published. The respondents see the most importance in life experience on the whole and in his posts; for example, children, marriage, travel experience, cookery skills, efficiency of fitness trainings etc. (53%) and the acknowledgement of the author on the whole and in certain circles: academic establishments, district, city, professional communities etc. (53%); social status or profession (51%), level of education: for example, higher education, scientific degree, information about master-classes, special training etc. (48%).

Concerning the age, the respondents tend to trust their age mates or older people.

The next question offered to mark the parameters of the author’s page and informational messages in social networks that may lead to mistrust.

First of all, this is obvious fakeness of the page: name, personal data, photos do not belong to the owner, being fake (73%), and a great number of advertisements, messages about suspicious vacancies on the author’s page (69%), then they mention illiteracy of the written speech (56%), absence of the real photo (52%) and presence of the information which violates the ethic norms: vulgar language, erotic, pornography, disrespectful statements about some categories of people etc. (52%).

The question of the audience attention to the author of media text as a primary source of information is still open. Along with this the problem of search of the mechanisms to define the validity of information

on the users' pages is still important. The increase of the general level of media literacy of the Internet audience allows diminishing the risks of media consumption in social networks.

The general look of a user from the viewpoint of media consumption of information in social networks is the following (Table 03):

Table 03. Media consumption in social networks

Criteria	Characteristics
<i>Main consumer of information in social networks</i>	User of 30 years old, both male and female
<i>Regularity of media consumption in social networks</i>	Each day
<i>Frequency of media consumption</i>	Several times a day
<i>Main source of information</i>	Communities
<i>Thematic variety</i>	Social subjects and social life, entertaining topics
<i>Self-reflection of users about media safety</i>	Excellent
<i>Results of the experiment on media literacy</i>	Satisfactory
<i>Main problems of media consumption</i>	A lot of unnecessary information in reposts and publications of friends; in followed communities, not enough necessary and interesting information
<i>Meaning of information for the audience</i>	A high degree of meaningfulness
<i>Availability/clearness of information</i>	Is defined by a kind of mass media
<i>Choice of information</i>	Upon the quality of submission
<i>Sign of trust</i>	Proven sources

7. Conclusion

Upon the research we may state the following peculiarities of media consumption in social networks, based on the results of the analyses of the sociological survey of users:

1) Social networks are the true source of information, being the main source for the half of the respondents, and the only one for the third. The main source of information in social networks is communities (groups and public pages).

2) New abilities in social networks increase the amount of time spent by the audience. The Internet gained the sign of being omnipresent, increasing the duration and the amount of information consumed. The contemporary society is becoming more dependent on the regular informational flow. A part of users, especially young people, do not control the time spent in social networks, which in some cases negatively influences their activity and psychological conditions.

3) The question of ethic norms of the social network content is acute because the critical analyses of the information spread through social networks is rarely conducted by the audience who do not have clear understanding of what information and how to doubt. Users notice that they more frequently face a greater number of unnecessary and spam information.

4) The audience start building the criteria for the opinion leader (the author and medium of information), which influence the degree of critical relation to the posts published.

5) A part of users has a deliberate and strong desire to periodically and temporarily avoid the social networks, which may mean that, on the one hand, the audience understands the dependence on these resources and, on the other hand, tries to control the wasted time.

We may notice that nowadays there is no question about the limitation of social media use, but there is a question about gaining the skills of their proper appliance. Social networks provide great opportunities. Combine various functions but there is a necessity to underline the perspectives of increase in the level of the audience media literacy. They are basically the development of critical thinking of users, especially young people under 23, in relation to any information, both in social networks and in the Internet on the whole.

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