

RUSSIAN MASS MEDIA: PROSPECTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

РОССИЙСКИЕ СМИ: ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ

*Jozef M. Dzyaloshinsky, Doctor of Philology, Professor,
National Research University Higher School of Economics,
Moscow, Russia
imd2000@yandex.ru*

*Иосиф Михайлович Дзялошинский, доктор филологических наук,
профессор,
Национальный исследовательский университет
«Высшая школа экономики»,
Москва, Россия
imd2000@yandex.ru*

This article analyzes the communication matrices that determine the functioning of Russian mass media. It is shown that the prospects for Russian mass media transformation are determined by the contradictions of the Russian social system, and dependent on the chosen model of national development.

Key words: *public institution; mass communication; communication matrix; matrix media; mass media.*

В статье анализируются коммуникационные матрицы, которые определяют функционирование российских СМИ. Показано, что перспективы трансформации российских СМИ определяются не только технологическими и экономическими факторами, но и противоречиями российской социальной системы, и зависят от выбранной модели национального развития.

Ключевые слова: *социальные институты; массовые коммуникации; коммуникационные матрицы; медиаматрицы; СМИ.*

The debate about what is happening to Russian mass media, and in what direction national journalism develops, began with perestroika, involving journalists and scientists alike. The goal of the debate is to find answers to the following questions: why the media quality has declined, why tabloids and yellow journalism dominate the media, and why it is corrupt, incompetent, and servile; why we still cannot have a free, fair and objective press.

There are a variety of answers from the corrupting influence of the West, and a Jewish-Masonic conspiracy, to the iron hand of the Kremlin. The tones of the conclusions are also different, from restrained and balanced scientific statements, to the apocalyptic emotionality of journalistic media criticism.

It would appear that involvement of pundits in this “exploratory” activity should lead to the desired result. And, indeed, numerous scientific studies on the analysis of media and journalism were carried out, in which scientists tried to identify the patterns and trends of media processes. Thus, research of mass media is adequately covered by three main complexes:

- **socio-centred research**, considering the mass media as a specific social machine that performs a set of functions (the composition and content of which are disputable);
- **media-centred research**, analyzing the organizational aspects of media companies;
- **anthropic-centred research**, in which the problems of journalistic creativity and audience behavior are brought to the forefront.

Obviously there have been quite serious attempts to answer these questions; however, it is equally obvious that almost 20 years of debate has not led to concrete conclusions. Why are these questions still unanswered?

In my opinion, the answer is simple: *Mass media comprise a social institution that organizes the activities of people in its sphere of influence using certain long-lasting, narrow matrices, which resist change.*

I will try to elaborate.

Mass media as a social institution

I remember the year 1979, when as a young scientist I spoke at a scientific conference and proved that the future work of the journalist shall be determined by norms and rules. The head of Kiev University's School of Journalism, D. M. Prilyuk, stood up, frowned, and said that I was wrong, because journalism is a creative profession, and there can be no rules.

Now the idea that the media is an institution of mass communication, acting according to certain rules, has become commonplace. Today, one does not need to prove that mass communication is a system providing rapid production and mass distribution of semantic constructs, the core of which is a way of life in a changing environment, and creates (of course, using elements already available to the community) a set of social institutions and activities, ensuring its operation and development.

Mass media are one of such institutions, and journalism allows this institution to function. Mass media as a social institution require journalism to follow regulations and rules of professional conduct, which are based on certain principles and legal bases, and perform stimulating and sometimes forceful functions (through prohibitions, permissions, obligations, etc.)

Just like any social institution, mass media arise in response to a social need to have an objective process of labor division, and in more general terms – the different human processes of objective activity and public relations. Needs and wants form the respective interests and priorities that act as direct determinants for social institutions, establishment and development. Therefore, one of the specific features of such institutions origins, is that they appear as a result of the joint goal-oriented activity of a group of people, and the realization of their target settings. The institutionalization of the activity presupposes a certain standardization of these settings, their consolidation in certain forms and creation of conditions for their reproduction.

This means that the media in general are not just a set of organizations and teams, performing certain freely chosen obligations. This is a rather

rigid system of rules, regulations, and public expectations, according to which such obligations should be performed¹. These rules, norms, and expectations manifest themselves in the production of mass media, as well as in roles that are assigned (and sometimes imposed) to people associated with the institution².

In this sense, the media, as well as any social institution, appear as part of the social whole, which according to the expectation of other elements should behave in a certain way, that is, to realize well-defined functions. But just as the behavior of an individual can deviate positively or negatively, the functioning of a social institution may or may not meet the expectations of the social order and other social institutions. If the institution fails to perform its functions (or there are inappropriate deviations), it (namely, individuals performing it) face various consequences.

However, it is time to move on, starting with the understanding that the media are a social institution.

Communication matrices

Contemporary science has proven that any communicative action is mediated by binding regulations, which determine mutual behavioral expectations, and which must be understood and recognized, by at least

¹ ‘Journalists should ...’. ‘Journalists should not...’ The President, the Prime Minister, the speakers of both houses of the ministers, the oligarchs – the list goes on until the last drunkard – all they know what journalists are supposed to do and what they should not. And woe to the journalist, whose opinion about his duties does not coincide with the public’s expectations.

² The concept of ‘role’ (as a rule, together with the definition ‘social’) traditionally assigned to an individual and is used to denote the set of rules, determining the behaviour of individuals acting in a social system depending on the status or position they have, and actions implementing the these standards. However, in my opinion, the powerful heuristics potentiality of this concept gives a possibility to represent a specific aspect of the functioning of the various social actors (organizations, institutions – various subsystems of society, with the status, position in the system of social interactions).

two communicating subjects. Everyone involved in communication, intuitively aims to follow some rules and regulations, which allow, in their opinion, effective and successful communication. These ‘regulators’ are defined by different concepts: principles, postulates, rules, policies, discourses, conventions, and codes.

For example, one of the linguistic studies states that “domestic and foreign scholars in the field of speech act theory – A. A. Leontiev, L. S. Vygotsky, M. R. Lvov, A. E. Suprun, E. V. Kluev, T. G. Vinokur, J. Austin, J. R. Serl, G. Grice, G. Sanz and others – have developed rules (principles) of speech communication: the co-operation principle, the consistency principle, the preferred structure principle, the politeness principle, the equal security principle, the de-centric orientation principle, and the utterance perception principle” (Umantseva, 2007).

The concepts of “discourse” and “convention” are the most popular at the moment.

The word “**discourse**” (*fr. discours, lat. discursus* – reasoning, argument) is translated in Russian as speech, statement, and reasoning. However, these words do not convey the meanings that experts associate with this concept. Discourse is seen not only as a tool to master the reality through “articulation,” but also as a tool to construct normative models – perception frames and behavior scenarios. Thus, the discourse is both a process and a result (as established methods, rules and logic necessary to discussion). With this idea, discourse is considered a linguistic method of organizing reality, which is a perception of the world, realizable in a variety of (not only verbal) practices, and therefore, not only reflecting the world, but also developing and co-creating it.

Any discourse relates to institutionalized communication. Institutional discourse is a discourse, carried out in social institutions, in which communication is an integral part of the organization itself.

The main parameters of institutional discourse are:

- A set of typical communication situations (speech events),
- Presentation of the typical patterns of speech behavior in the performance of certain social roles,

- Certain (limited) topics of communication, a specific set of intentions and related speech strategies (Sheigal, 2004).

The **convention** refers to the forms of interaction accepted by society (and regulated by a given society), including speech. Most communicative acts are regulated to some extent (Austin, 1999, 2004, 2006; Searle, 2004; Strawson, 2004).

If we bear in mind the social conventions regulating the initiation of communication, it will be convenient to consider the communicants as members (strictly and not as strictly) of social hierarchies, such as:

- boss / manager / employer – a subordinate;
- superior officer (for example, in the army) – inferior in rank;
- teacher / master / lecturer – student / apprentice / audience;
- parents / adults – children;
- leader – team;
- owner – tenant;
- host – guest.

Quite often in order to refer to the rules of communication, the term “code” is used. L. V. Umantseva writes the following about it: “In the dictionaries the word ‘code’ is defined as a set of laws. The Criminal Code, a set of rules, beliefs (fig., book.). In verbal communication, there are also rules, beliefs, i.e. communicative code’. According to her, ‘the basis of the communicative code is built of such basic categories as communicative (speech) purpose and communicative (verbal) intention. Communicants should comply with the criterion of truth (faithfulness to reality), the criterion of sincerity (faithfulness to you), the criterion of knowledge of the native Russian language and its literary norms (allegiance with the Motherland, and its heritage – Russian language), and the criterion of morality (trust your mind, your heart)”³.

Recently the concept “**Format**” has become extremely popular. In Latin, “format” means a “look, external appearance”. The term was used in the printing industry in the 18th century, and meant “the size of the printed edition, paper size”. Format was used as a term, plus

³ <http://www.t21.rgups.ru/doc2007/8/20.doc>.

printing names and nomenclature attached to it, meaning specific sizes of publications, say, the A4 format, A3 format, or A2 format. It is no longer just about appearance and size, but about quite a specified size, a benchmark, a standard in the printing industry. Then the concept was used by computer scientists to refer to some parameters, properties, and opportunities that allow for the operation of certain computer programmes. The derivative concept of “formatting” came from computer vocabulary: 1) erase the old data and install new software; 2) specify text’s appearance, for example, text to the centre, left, or right. Both meanings of the verb “format” regard the structure and the standard.

According to T. I. Surikova, “it was this actualized sema ‘standard’, ‘benchmark’ that lead to the use of the concept ‘format’ in theory and practice of mass communication when such notions as media type, genre, style, reflecting the systemic nature of this phenomenon, ceased to convey standard and benchmark notions. And the word became fashionable...

Such a set of linguistic and extra-linguistic circumstances, in our opinion, could lead to “format” replacing the other concepts or, at least, beginning to be used as a modern, trendy synonym matching the linguistic taste of the times. This is indicated by its contexts and compatibility”⁴.

We shall outline our position without analyzing these categories. It is that the most appropriate term for all possible regulators of communication is the concept “**matrix**”. This concept was used in the cult sci-fi movie, filmed by brothers Andy and Larry Wachowski, to indicate an interactive computer program simulating reality for billions of people connected to it forcefully by machines, so that they could obtain energy necessary for their continued existence.

Of course, this concept existed long before the movie *The Matrix*, and had a rather specific meaning. It comes from the Latin word, “matrix” (womb), and was used in metal processing to identify tools with cross-cutting holes or recesses, which were used in stamping and pressing, as well as in printing to identify metal plates with the intaglio of a letter or a character, which served as molds for literals.

⁴ <http://www.mediascope.ru/node/416>.

And this meaning – a form that sets parameters – provides ample opportunities for the use of this concept.

With regard to public processes, the concept of the “institutional matrix” was used by K. Polani and D. North. Douglass North defines the institutional matrix as a structure of institutions determining economic and political behavior of actors and their limits (North, 2010). S. Kirdina develops the idea of institutional matrices in more detail, originally she proposed a model of the institutional matrix to describe two types of economies (market and planned) (Kirdina, 2001).

The institutional matrix as a sociological concept is a stable, historically developed system of basic institutions, regulating the interconnected operation of the main social spheres: economic, political and ideological.

According to S. Kirdina, the institutional matrix is a triune social form; it is a system of economic, political and ideological institutions that are in constant accord. Or, in other words, the institutional matrix is a peculiar genotype of society – it forms when the state is born, and lasts throughout the state’s development. These matrices represent knowledge, values, and norms, adapting the environment to individuals in accordance with their needs, goals and ideas. They reflect the reality of ethnic and social groups who lived here before and effectively adapted⁵.

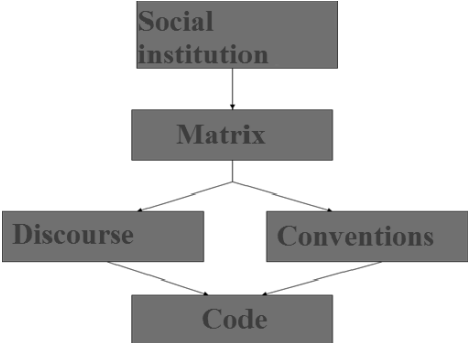
Institutional matrices are always bound to a particular social or geographical area, i.e. they have their own space with certain imperatives. In other words, we are talking about a real or virtual area, with a population that recognizes the authority of a certain matrix.

According to S. Kirdina, humanity has two basic matrices, which largely determine the lifestyle and social activities: the X and Y-matrices.

⁵ In a sense, defined term “institution” has something in common with the concept of “culture”, which is widely used in the Russian social science. Any culture is a set of programs that ensure the survival and development of the community, a group or an individual. Any culture emerges as a response to requests from people, who are seeking to survive and develop under the specified conditions in the most effective way.

Each of these matrices is based on specific economic, political and ideological institutions. All of the above allow us to formulate the thesis that the most appropriate term to refer to systems of knowledge, values and norms defining specifics of various subjects' communication in different situations and reconciling these systems with the general social situation, is the notion of the "communication matrix," manifestations of which are the discourses, conventions, codes. Schematically, this idea can be represented as (Figure 1):

Figure 1



Types of communications matrices

A variety of different communication matrices that determine the communicative behavior of individuals and social institutions can be sorted into three main groups: vertical, horizontal and diagonal matrices.

The vertical matrix:

- Vertical distribution of subjects of communication (parents – children, bosses – subordinates, the state – citizens);
- The state plays a dominant role in most communicative processes;

- Access to information is complicated due to a set of special regulations;
- Freedom of speech is not exercised.

The horizontal matrix:

- Partnerships between the subjects of communication;
- Established feedback loop;
- The right to free access to information, to expression of views, to personal choice of communication channels is legislatively enforced and exercised.

The Hybrid matrix:

- Allocates subjects of communication in classes with a horizontal and vertical relationships;
- Provides partial access to various information, however, access to a significant information resources requires special permission.

Today, in Russia all three communication matrices co-exist. The hybrid matrix is the base, with complementary vertical and horizontal matrices.

Media matrices

Functioning in the media space, communication matrix is realized in the form of a media matrix that is a set of more or less stringent standards and rules according to which, a mass-media product is created. The media matrix operates at all stages of journalistic and editorial activity, such as the selection of news, the definition of genres, etc.

The media matrix has different forms that realize different media goals. In its most general form, the following media matrices can be identified: journalism, advertising, promotion, and PR.

The fact that the media as a social institution and journalism, as a type of social activity, function in accordance with the norms and rules based on the specifics of a social system, was recognized by experts thanks to an old work of American sociologists Siebert, Peterson and

Schramm, “Four Theories of the Press”, published in America in 1956 (Siebert, Schramm, Peterson, 1998). Having named these norms and rules “theories of the press”, the authors identified four such theories: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet (communist).

McQuail added two more theories: the model of developing countries, and a model of democratic participation.

According to the Raymond Williams’ concept (Sparks, Reading, 1998) a mass media system may be authoritarian, paternalistic, commercial, or democratic. The authoritarian system is a mass media system, in which “the main task of communication is to convey instructions, ideas and attitudes of the ruling group”.

The paternalistic system is an authoritarian model, where, however, the ruling group retains social responsibility, i.e. “values and goals that go beyond the power retention”. Although the commercial system differs from the authoritarian or paternalistic by a greater degree of inner freedom, “it has its limitations arising from the difficulties to make profit from some form of communication:” “you can say whatever you want, provided that you can afford to say it, and say it with a profit”. Williams could not find an actual example of the democratic media model, that’s why for him it was rather a system of principles to be followed, rather than specific proposals on the basis of accumulated experience⁶.

In Russia, the problems of media typology are actively discussed by A. Akopov, L. Resnyanskaya, M. Shkondin and many other researchers. (Bakshin, 1984; Grabelnikov, 2001; Shkondin, 2002). However, they tried to find an effective formal classification for media, which would create a sort of media periodic table, and in its cells, all the possible types of media will be included.

My approach to analyze types of media and journalism was first formulated in 1988, in an article that was published in the now-forgotten magazine, “*Slovo lectora*” (*Word of Lecturer*). Afterwards I outlined it in some of my other publications during the perestroika era.

⁶ There are also other more emotional definitions of the social role of journalism: “Night Watchman”, “Watchdog of Democracy”, etc.

Later, these ideas were more or less clearly expressed in my book, *“The Russian Journalist in the Post-totalitarian Era”* and other publications (Dzyaloshinsky, 1996a, 1996b, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

The approach was to claim that within the framework of Russian professional journalistic culture, several alternative paradigms of professional activity co-exist, which differ from one another in all their components, including the moral and ethical ones. All of them are located in a peculiar “space” formed by three vectors, which are fundamental, social and professional settings that determine the general attitude of journalists to the audience.

The first settings puts the journalist above the audience determining his right to treat their readers as an object of management (training, development), and a journalist as the carrier or the translator of management programs of different types and levels. If we try to convey the ultimate meaning of activities of journalists professing this approach, it is exemplified by the word “impact”.

This kind of journalistic practice has a quite fundamental grounding in the work of many researchers and theorists who have created a complex of harmonious concepts of the control of action, based on the idea of the active role of mass media that act as a subject of propaganda, and the passive (despite numerous reservations) role of the audience that is regarded as a product of ideological and propaganda influence.

The second setting puts the journalist near the audience, and is focused on information relations. In this case, journalists consider that their primary professional responsibility is to provide the audience with a variety of interesting information, data, and materials, as well as to assist in the expression of popular opinion.

Both of these settings, despite the significant differences between them, alienate the audience from the mass media.

The third fundamental setting requires that journalists should be inside a particular human community, and consider themselves interested participants of a search, performed together with the audience, to find solutions to community problems. The main idea of such journalism is that

journalists should consider readers, viewers, listeners, not as a background or as passive observers, victims of various circumstances, but as participants of the problem solving process. This journalism defines itself in such terms as humanitarian, personal, communitarian, participatory, etc.⁷

The main function or role of journalism is understood as the “dialogue moderator”. It means that journalism can and should create an environment for equal dialogue between different social groups – no matter how great they are, and how different their ideas, goals and organizations are – in the course of which social contradictions and conflicts can be resolved. Journalism can and should promote conflicting opinions and attitudes within a single information space, which, upon presentation to the public, can find ways for rapprochement or, at least, or provoke arguments to prove their own consistency. This feature is especially important in a society torn by conflict and split into different camps, when a society lacks public reconciliation. This function that can convert the conflict, revealing the problem, and thus, brings it closer to resolution, but not at the level of a street brawl, through a reasonable and pragmatic public dialogue⁸.

What conclusions can we make if we apply the above classification to the Russian mass media?

The first group – “impact” mass media belonging to the state and corporations – their main task is to influence public opinion and behavioral stereotypes of the population, represents the most powerful and secured communication resources. Currently, most Russian regional newspapers and 80% of municipal are owned by state and municipal

⁷ In America, almost the same idea has been realized in the concept of civil (public) journalism. Civil journalism puts journalists’ duties to society to the forefront not the rights of journalists. In other words, this journalism requires from editors and news organizations to perform the journalistic work so, that it would help people to overcome a sense of apathy, powerlessness and alienation, galvanize them into action, turning them from passive viewers into active participants of civil actions. The American experience of the citizen journalism is presented in the book by Edward D. Miller (Miller, 1998).

⁸ Technology dialogue in the media is outlined in more details in the following papers: Resnyanskaya (2001), Grusha (2001), Prokhorov (2002).

authorities, which is reflected in their editorial policies⁹, as well as their economic independence, because all of them are subsidized by regional and local budgets in some way.

The second group of media, which are usually referred to as commercial, as they are focused on profit due to the interests and needs of the audience. Studies over the past ten years provide a basis for concluding that these media have favorable development opportunities. The advertising market is rapidly growing, and unpretentious mass audience gladly absorb low-quality content.

However, the commercialization of the media in a situation where other public institutions operate in the X-matrix, has led to the fact that many of them have ceased to meet their informational purposes, as well as to perform their inherent cultural, educational and other functions. Civil society has no traditions, and the population is excluded from the political process, thereby dictating that the media have to meet very narrow, mostly household and entertainment interests of their audience, which is very freely interpreted by managers of media companies.

The third group of media have positioned themselves as a social institution that protects the public from government and owners of capital; this is an insignificant, small group of media with an unsure future.

⁹ The results obtained in different studies indicate that the relationship between the government and the media in Russia define themselves whether in terms of submission and servitude, or in terms of war. Another option – that is a dialogue, partnership – is impossible. At the regional level, heads of any rank are characterized by an absolute unwillingness to consider the mass media as an independent social institution, by the desire to turn journalists into their henchmen, who are supposed to carry out instructions sent down. Heads of administrations see the local press primarily as a kind of additional information and analytical service, and a department of public relations, but never as a controller and a critic of their actions. With all the individual differences in age, education, life experience heads of regional and local governments consider the media as neither an independent institution of civil society nor special, relatively independent informational business, but only as an advocacy attachment to the administration. Many of them are originally convinced that journalists' duty is to help them, managers, to solve the problems they face.

What is the reason to choose a particular matrix?

The ratio of different types of media can hardly be called accidental, unlikely to be the result of someone's ill will or incompetence. Most likely, this ratio is determined by the characteristics of the social system, which media serve.

In order to understand the development and aims of the Russian media, we need to understand what has happened, is happening and will happen to the general public.

In Russia, forms of interaction between X- and Y-matrices have been developed over many years. They can be summarized in three basic models which, in one form or another, are represented in the works of modern scholars.

The Conservative-statist model. This model involves the work of Leontyev, and Eurasians (P. Savitsky, L. Karsavin, N. Alekseev, etc.). At the core of this model there is the paradigm of an updated ideocracy and Byzantinism. Civic consciousness is treated as national spirit, a single national will, and European liberalism, democracy and pluralism compose a hostile, sinful political environment, eating away at the roots of the Eurasian-Byzantine Russian society.

Today, the conservative-statist model is transformed into a fundamentalist (Conservative, Orthodox community) project, which focuses on the principled rejection of Western values, is based upon the idea of a "return to basics", "falling down before the deeper fundamentals of folk wisdom", "protection of national culture", etc.

The original principles of the fundamentalist project can be summarized as follows:

- society is understood as a sphere trying to realize the will of God in a sinful imperfect world, not as the embodiment of self-sufficient human desires;
- group and especially social interests primarily relate to the individual;
- the state in this value system is a universal organization, which can effectively develop society in support of wholesome traditions;

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