Sociology of the new media environment in the western post-truth society*

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Abstract. The new media presents forms of communication that facilitate production, distribution and exchange of content on platforms and networks that enable interaction and collaboration. Over the past three decades, the new media has developed rapidly and continues to develop in new, previously unknown ways, providing greater opportunities for social governance and political practice. With their convergent properties, the new media has changed the ways in which government institutions operate and political leaders communicate. The new media environment has significantly transformed the system of social communications and changed the role of journalists in political processes. Today digital platforms used by the media provide the electoral system with new ways of interacting with the electorate, introducing new ways for holding elections and in general expanding mechanisms of civil participation. At the same time, the new media in the post-truth society has become the main source of information, which presents lies supplemented by individual facts as news. The dubious quality of such news creates serious problems for the democratic discourse. In the emerging era of post-truth, the new media strengthens negative trends in the changing media environment, which undermines both the goals of democratically oriented media and the foundations of social-cultural development. This situation determines the need to analyze new patterns of audience behavior in connection with the development of the new media environment. The increasing effect of media dependence in the post-truth society has turned the new media into the main source of fakes, which is typical mainly for the American post-truth society. Based on the analysis of the traditional and new media, the authors show the ways to block the free dissemination of truthful information by the so-called "megaphone press", serving as an advertising machine for politicians. The authors' methodological approach to the study of the media environment is based on the principle of convergence of technologies and created and consumed content in the developing "post-truth society of the contemporary western type". Convergence of the media environment, along with the positive trends, creates new opportunities and gives new impetus to the development of the post-truth society.

Key words: media environment; convergent media environment; new media; digital platforms; post-truth society; sociology of the media environment; patterns of the media audience behavior

The new media environment

"The media environment is social reality in which the mass media perform their functions and operate. By social reality we mean social-cultural, political and economic characteristics of the life of society at different stages of its development. This external environment of the mass media influences their content and state and sets their development trends. The media environment reflects social reality at all its levels (international, regional, national) and develops based on the features of the national media system and factors affecting it (including the state of the media economy, its typological structure, legal framework, etc.)" [14. P. 302–303]. The new media environment demands that sociologists systematically monitor its components [see, e.g.: 27; 28; 29], since social processes in this framework become more dynamic and increase the degree of uncertainty, leading to serious negative consequences for democratic governance and transformations of the democratic system, which often destroys the very basis for the development of civil society. "We witness essential changes of those social entities that we call the media: the traditional ones lose their former attractiveness for both consumers and advertisers; the new — digital — fill all communication niches, starting to determine the configuration of the media space and the whole media environment" [22. P. 5].

In general, all political consequences that the new media ultimately cause can be summarized as follows: "an unprecedented level of instability and distortion in the political communications system" [33. P. 22]. The new media has radically changed the work of government and local authorities, the ways in which political leaders interact with voters (often completely excluding people's opinions from decision-making), since the media space is a type of social space covered by the media. Therefore, it is necessary to create an effective system of legal protection and social guarantees so that any citizen would not only receive minimal social protection but also protection from the negative impact of the unfavorable media environment. Not everyone experiencing the intense media impact realizes its negative consequences, including 'fatigue syndrome' [38. P. 774].

In recent years, the above-mentioned processes have become especially evident in the western society. For instance, the new media has complicated the system of functioning of the political media. The old media — established institutions of the mass media — such as newspapers, radio and television that appeared before the Internet, coexist with the new media. While the old media maintains relatively stable formats, the new media, which includes websites, blogs, video platforms, digital apps and social networks, is constantly expanding [25. P. 21].

Almost all traditional media duplicates their content, posting it on their own and accessible sites. Moreover, with its convergent properties, digital platforms used by the new media provide the electoral system with new ways of interacting with the electorate, allow for the introduction of new methods of electoral development and, in general, for the expansion of mechanisms for civil participation in politics [26]. Thus, the evolution of the new media is associated not only with the expansion of communication capabilities but also with a significant change in social processes in the media space.

The sociocentric interpretation of the media functions in society "implies a reversal of the presented model, which comes from the social dominant that includes all spheres of social life, which to one degree or another influence communication technologies: moral, aesthetic and legal aspects of their functioning. Content is determined at least by the creative atmosphere and by the state of ideology and cultural traditions. And all this is influenced by the level of economic development and social well-being. The effect of communication dissolves in everyday social practices" [22. P. 65] in both Russian and foreign media environment. For instance, the media function of social control (the so-called watchdog role of the media) ensures revealing abuse by government officials and achieving transparency in their activities. For instance, according to the Pew Research Center, about 70 % of Americans believe that the media reports can "prevent leaders from doing what they should not do" [9].

This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that there is a kind of "revolving door" through which journalists move between positions in the media and government. Some sociologists argue that this situation threatens journalists' objectivity, since they consider their work just a source of current and future paychecks [45]. In this situation, the state of American journalism "reflects the state of post-truth America": objective facts are subordinated to emotional appeals and personal convictions in shaping public opinion; and it is difficult for the public to distinguish relevant news about important policy issues from the extraneous media noise; well-documented stories get lost due to the constant buzz of repetitive, sensationalist minutiae that dominates in the old and new media [13]. Nevertheless, many journalists try to conscientiously bring the truth to the public, but, given the reluctance of western leaders and political figures to hear what they do not like, the voice of journalists and the public ceases to have significance [see, e.g.: 4; 25; 33].

Transformation of the traditional media functions

With the rapid development and widespread popularization of Internet technologies, the new media based on digital technologies, wireless and satellite communications and other technical means spreads quickly [41. P. 22–24]. Today the typical new media includes social Internet platforms, media platforms and so on. Due to the advantages of Internet technologies, such as high openness, wide coverage and high efficiency, the new media gradually takes an increasingly

important place in the discourse influencing and guiding the field of information communication, which enters the era of the new media [18. P. 117–119]. So, the question is: if newspapers cease to perform the function of daily coverage of events, how are they going to invest in long-term, expensive journalistic investigations? [45]. In a sense, the media has turned from the so-called watchdog for the public into a mouthpiece for politicians: if we consider the press as a political watchdog, the media serves as a guardian of the public interest, and public support for the media's watchdog role is substantial; otherwise, working journalists turn into supporters of officials for money.

The roots of post-truth go deep into the history of western sociology and political science. Dating back to Plato, post-truth encompasses theology and philosophy, focusing on the Machiavellian tradition in classical sociology, an example of which is Vilfredo Pareto, who offered the original description of post-truth in terms of "circulation of elites". The defining feature of post-truth is a strong distinction between appearance and reality, which is never fully eliminated; thereby, the strongest and the most convincing appearance is ultimately mistaken for reality. In other words, post-truth creates a space for ideological conflicts, and the influence of post-truth on politics has become global due to the organization of political actions on social networks (which involve thousands of unsuspecting citizens).

Today there are many prime examples of 'harassment' campaigns on social networks that led to tragedies, thus demonstrating dangerous consequences of the global spread of disinformation and false information on the Internet [13]. In general, the concept of post-truth denotes circumstances in which objective facts have less influence on the public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs. Today post-truth means any 'fact' interpreted in a special way in the public value system, and the share of such interpretations occupies an ever-increasing part of the information space. This means that the subject (individual, group, community, society) is vulnerable to the targeted information influence, and his cognitive activity is redirected or suppressed under the influence of the media environment [17]. In the post-truth era, far-right politicians appeal to emotions and impose personal views; they hide the truth and convince people of what is not true; extremists use social networks as alternative communication channels for mainstream media organizations (which previously ignored them) to promote their extremism, and so on.

Most sociological studies examine one aspect of post-truth rather than all its directions: as a rule, communication researchers focus on the widespread relationship between post-truth and the corresponding growth of the social media (the decline of the traditional/mainstream media) [11], emphasizing the significance of the transforming communication technologies [7]. Technological developments have reduced the role of the classical media and made public communications more flexible, which determined a new chapter in the old struggle to define truth [1].

Some researchers argue that in essence post-truth questions journalists' claims to be reporters or arbiters of truth, which is how post-truth in some way discredits journalism and becomes an object of interest in epistemology of digital journalism and disinformation [51]. The so called "third wave" rejected anti-science/anti-expertise views and extreme forms of relativism, instead advocating for technical expertise in policymaking but without technocracy, especially in areas in which science should (or should not) prevail [23].

Today the social media has become a decisive factor in the development of the so called post-truth society. When anyone can post anything on the social media or on digital platforms, and algorithms spread this information/disinformation in ways that are independent of the truth of claims and that cannot be controlled by traditional means, we get a situation in which increasingly more people get their news (and other types of information) mainly from sources that cannot be considered reliable [19]. Therefore, in the current post-truth era, the mainstream media, especially TV channels, must present a clear perspective based on their experience and expertise rather than amateur experiments and imitation; must maintain the context of their core and original content, on which they have built their expertise and people's trust as their main asset (reputational capital).

The post-truth media in the post-truth society

In the post-truth society, the media, contrary to its primary purpose (to bring truthful information to the public), becomes the post-truth media. A very illustrative example is how the post-truth media worked during the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States [45]: the media coverage of the election was filled with disinformation, unsubstantiated rumors and outright lies. False stories and unverified facts were disseminated by fabricated news sites and social media accounts of candidates and their surrogates. As a result, sensational unverified claims dominated the news agenda, and such practices continued even after the president-elect took office. Moreover, false news infiltrated reports of some mainstream media organizations (like CNN and MSNBC) which disseminated and reinforced the new president's unsubstantiated claims, despite openly criticizing their veracity [33]. For instance, on the website of the American conservative online magazine covering politics, culture and religion, *Federalist*, in one article in the series "Here's the Full List of Every Lie Joe Biden Has Told as President" (from September 21, 2022), the Biden administrator repeated the fake story about Russia's bounty to justify sanctions. According to the news reports, the US intelligence had "low to moderate" confidence in the story that Russia offered bounties to members of the Taliban movement in exchange for killing American soldiers, but the Biden administration cited the story as one of the reasons Russia should be punished. This fake story was not only mentioned in the White House fact sheet with the detailed description of sanctions but also supported (legitimized) by the US government officials. Despite Donald Trump's insistence in 2020 that the whole story was "pure

fake news", the American corporate media immediately promoted this narrative as fact, and many news organizations that spread this fake story have not returned to its previous truthful coverage.

One possible and convincing explanation of this example (and the current situation in general) is that economic incentives behind the new media (social networks, digital platforms and so on) imply attracting larger audiences to get higher advertising revenues. Political content is used to attract consumers to the social media products rather than to perform a public service function of informing (and/or warning, educating, enlightening, increasing offline activities, etc.). In other words, commercial pressures make the new media organizations publish fascinating (In a positive or negative sense) stories that attract maximum attention and the largest possible audience. Furthermore, as digital platforms gain more popularity, such fictitious or fabricated content widely disseminates, since the media power is concentrated in a small number of the old and new media corporations [24].

Thus, the article provides a short overview of post-truth as a new problematic social, political and cultural phenomenon in the contemporary western society with evident global implications. The phenomenon of post-truth is rooted in the crisis of trust that today's liberal democracies and institutions face, especially in the fields of knowledge and civil participation. Sociological studies of different post-truth issues tend to focus on such subject fields as consumption and production of knowledge (news, assessments, claims, advertisement and so on) as to the greatest extent related to the dissemination of post-truth. In the post-truth era, the West seems to go backwards, abandoning values of liberalism, objectivity, honesty, human solidarity and humanistic globalization that were praised by many of its intellectuals for decades. In addition, there are tens of thousands of fake news sites (mainly the new media ones) that offer false information to the audience that had long ago got used to the fact that the media (In general) always checks information, which is the public believes everything posted on a more or less presentable media web pages. In the perspective of information-communication processes, today we live not even in the world of post-truth but in the world of fake news, since disinformation resources have already replaced the information ones [44].

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Социология новой медиасреды в западном обществе постправды*

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Аннотация. Новые медиа — это формы коммуникации, которые облегчают производство, распространение и обмен контентом на платформах и в сетях, обеспечивающих взаимодействие и сотрудничество. За последние три десятилетия они быстро развивались и продолжают развиваться новыми, неизвестными ранее путями. Новые медиа имеют широкое значение для социального управления и политической практики: обладая конвергентными свойствами, они радикально изменили способы работы государственных учреждений и коммуникации политических лидеров. Новая медиасреда существенно преобразовала систему социальных коммуникаций и изменила роль журналистов в политических процессах. Цифровые платформы, используемые в современных медиа, предоставляя электоральной системе новые способы взаимодействия с электоратом, позволяют внедрить новые способы проведения выборов и в целом расширить механизмы участия граждан в политике. В то же время новые медиа в обществе постправды превратились в основной источник информации, где ложь, приправленная отдельными фактами, выдается за новости. Сомнительное качество большей части таких новостей создает серьезные проблемы для функционирования демократического дискурса. В зарождающуюся эпоху постправды новые медиа усиливают негативные тенденции развития изменяющейся медиасреды, которые подрывают как цели демократически ориентированных медиа, так и основы социокультурного развития. Такая ситуация актуализирует необходимость анализа новых паттернов поведения аудитории в связи с развитием новой медиасреды. Возрастание эффекта медиазависимости в обществе постправды превращает новые медиа в основной источник фейковой информации, что характерно, прежде всего для американского общества постправды. На основе анализа особенностей традиционных и новых медиа в статье показаны способы блокирования свободного распространения правдивой информации так называемой «прессой-рупором», которая служит рекламной машиной для политиков. Методология авторского подхода к изучению медиасреды основана на принципе признания конвергенции технологий и создаваемого и потребляемого контента в контексте формирования «общества постправды современного западного типа». Конвергенция медиасреды, наряду с позитивными тенденциями современности, формирует новые возможности и дает новые импульсы для развития общества постправды.

Ключевые слова: медиасреда; конвергентная медиасреда; новые медиа; цифровые платформы; общество постправды; социология медиасреды; паттерны поведения аудитории медиа

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