

СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ СТРУКТУРА И СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ИНСТИТУТЫ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ

УДК 316.4

DOI 10.18522/2227-8656.2021.6.5

Тип статьи в журнале – научная

DIGITALIZATION OF NEWS CONSUMPTION AND TRUST TOWARDS THE MEDIA

ЦИФРОВИЗАЦИЯ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЯ НОВОСТЕЙ И ДОВЕРИЕ К СМИ

© 2021

*A. M. Hakobyan**

© 2021 г.

*A. M. Акопян**

** Brusov State University,
Yerevan, Armenia*

** Государственный университет имени
В. Я. Брюсова, г. Ереван, Армения*

Objective of the study is to analyze interconnection between the digitalization of media news consumption and trust towards the media.

Цель исследования – проанализировать взаимосвязь между цифровизацией потребления новостей и доверием к СМИ.

The methodology of the research is based on a secondary analysis of previous research on trends in news consumption in the world, as well as on the systems theory of N. Luhmann.

Методология исследования основана на вторичном анализе предыдущих исследований тенденций потребления новостей в мире, а также на системной теории Н. Лумана.

Research results. The main factors of digital transformation of news consumption and its current trends are identified and analyzed in the light of the systems approach proposed by Luhmann. In particular, the link between the logic of social networking platforms and their effects on news production and distribution are analyzed.

Результаты исследования. Определены и проанализированы основные факторы цифровой трансформации потребления новостей и ее текущие тенденции в свете системного подхода, предложенного Луманом. В частности, проанализирована взаимосвязь между логикой социальных сетей и их влиянием на производство и распространение новостей.

Prospects of the study examination of the factors determining the process of news consumption digitalization is vital in scope of developing new approaches to solve the issues of fake news and polarization in modern digital spaces. Analyzes of these processes in frames of system approach will contribute not only development of practical solutions, but also new theoretical approaches of understanding contemporary digital transformations in society.

Перспективы исследования: изучение факторов, определяющих процесс цифровизации потребления новостей, актуально в контексте разработки новых подходов к решению проблем фейковых новостей и поляризации в современных цифровых платформах. Анализ этих процессов в рамках системного подхода будет способствовать выработке не только практических решений, но и новых теоретических подходов к пониманию современных

Keywords: mass media; digital communication; social media; news; system theory; trust

цифровых трансформаций в обществе.
Ключевые слова: СМИ; цифровые коммуникации; социальные медиа; новости; системная теория; доверие

Introduction

Development of digital technologies through last decades caused transformations in different spheres of modern societies. These changes first affected on the sphere of media communications, as technologies transformed significantly the ways of communication in both micro and macro levels. The media shifted to digital platforms, the architecture of which not only are shaping the logic of the news producing, distribution and consumption, but also the content. In parallel with these transformations, the level of trust towards the media has been declining globally. Considering the importance of the role of trust in society, this trend raises necessity to understand the relation between these two processes in a systematic level.

This article aims to analyze the link between digitalization of news consumption and trust towards the media in a systematic level, using Niklas Luhmann's system theory and secondary analyses of the data obtained through recent researches on news consumption trends worldwide.

Materials and methods

Digitalization of media

Digital transformation of the media has brought radical changes in the sphere of media and communications. One of the most discussed topics in this scope is the digitalization of news consumption. The way people get, perceive and share news turned out to be as important, as the way media produces and delivers it. Besides a massive shift from offline to online news consumption, traditional media also transformed a lot through shifting to digital platforms and social media in particular. The process of delivery and consumption of news includes not only media organizations, but also technological companies and users of their platforms. One of the core issues in scope of the digitalization of news consumption is the decline of trust towards the media in general. This process is determined by a few factors, which we'll discuss further.

Aral defines social media by the following trends (Aral, 2020):

- Personalized mass persuasion, which creates a new wave of targeted, individual tailored persuasive messaging designed to influence how people behave.
- Hyper socialization, when people are wired into a staggering amount of new digital social signals from friends, families and the crowd, connecting

their thoughts, behaviors and actions with those of over 3 billion people in a new hive mind.

- Attention economy, which keeps people engaged long enough to monetize their attention and create a tyranny of trends.

Digital transformation of the media and news consumption was tremendously determined by abovementioned features of social networking platforms. Online spaces enhanced in a way that gave media agencies opportunity to spread news regularly and present it in innovative formats (Fenton, 2009. P. 7). The Web also increased the diversity of news channels, making the users newsmakers or prosumers, who simultaneously produce and consume news. However, these transformations did not ensure equality for everyone to raise a voice on digital spaces and to be heard, as commercialization of social media and its logic based on attention economy created non equal opportunities for all news providers. This affected the content and quality of the news itself, as regular updates and the necessity to get attention made newsmakers to fit the content to make it more visible, as well as get income through advertising, which depends on the views.

Media environment has also transformed: people are multitasking while using media by simultaneously performing other actions, for example, reading or writing messages (Ahlers, 2006). This affects their perception of information in cognitive level. A research by Nielsen-Norman has revealed that through 23 years people consume digital content in the same way: they rather scan it than read like on printed materials (Moran, 2020). Social media algorithms also determine the way users get news. The news selection process in these platforms is now more based on the user's interests (Tewksbury, 2006). The algorithms tend to show them posts by pages they are most likely to be interested in. Some researches point on the phenomenon of selective exposure, when people tend to search or believe information confirming their own beliefs (Cinelli, 2020).

On social media people get information in incidental way, sometimes more than they expect or want to get, and may be exposed to information or news they did not seek out. In this, social media resembles low-control news environments such as television news. The customising feature of social media networks, however, rather makes them a hybrid "somewhere between the extremes of selective exposure and incidental exposure" (Bergström, 2018). Interestingly, incidental news consumption is not perceived as something negative by the users themselves. Some researchers have discovered that the main motivation for using Facebook for getting news is seeing it incidentally (Newman, 2021). In this regard we can assume that ritualized and entertaining

functions of the media are more vital in online environment, where its instrumental purposes become secondary (Chyi, 2012).

The role of trust in society

Trust has a key importance for all social spheres: economic development, democracy, state administration, etc. Trust is important not only in interpersonal, but also in societal level. It is considered as a key component of social capital, which hinders civic participation in communities, public solidarity and inclusion. In social sciences, trust is broadly defined as “expectation regarding regular, honest, cooperative behavior that is developed within a community and is based on common norms accepted by its members” (Fukuyama, 1995). Trust plays a fundamental role in any society in terms of building and developing relationships between individuals and groups. It is not only an attitude or psychological state, but also a decisive factor that makes social interactions and processes possible. At psychological level, trust performs the function of reducing uncertainty. It makes the future clear by defining only the probability of specific scenarios (Luhmann, 1982). Without minimum level of mutual trust, reality is too unpredictable and uncertain in terms of taking action towards other people and cooperating with them. Trust is manifested on cognitive, emotional-behavioral levels, which are closely interrelated. Trust in an individual or organization is based on information, emotions and experience.

Theoretical literature distinguishes two levels of trust: interpersonal (trust between individuals) and institutional (trust in public institutions and structures) (Yul Kwon, 2019). These two are closely interconnected. A number of studies have even found a positive correlation between them: the higher the level of interpersonal trust, the higher the institutional level, and vice versa. The level of interpersonal trust in society is determined both by individual (personal and socio-demographic characteristics), and social factors - history, culture, economy, geography, public policy, etc. Some researchers argue that countries with a history of conflict and concussions, deep social inequality, collectivist values, authoritarian political system, and a mono-ethnic population tend to have low levels of interpersonal trust. Polish sociologist Sztompka separates the following factors determining the formation of an atmosphere of trust in society: stable system of values and norms, stable environment, transparent operation of public structures, natural environment, distribution of responsibility (Sztompka, 2012).

This article will use Luhmann's system theory and his analyzes of mass media from its perspective. Secondary analyses of data collected in frames of recent media research globally is also applied.

In his classic work, “The reality of mass media”, Luhmann describes the mass media as a self-referential and autopoietic functional system, which operates through information/non-information code (Luhmann, 2005). The function of the mass media system is to create a second reality shared by everyone, a basic knowledge that can be taken for granted. Mass media system is differentiated through three program areas - news, in-depth reporting and advertising, which deal with information with their own specific ways.

Luhmann emphasizes the role of technology in mass media communications, comparing it with the role of money in economy (Luhmann, 2005). Activity of mass media is conducting observations. Topics are organizing separate acts of communications into a whole and construct its memory. Mass media uses topics to penetrate into different spheres of society. Politics benefits from publications through mass media, but, at the same time, it irritates from them. So in the field of mass media, autopoietic, self-replicating system is constructed, no longer dependent from transmission in the process of interactions between present people. Only thanks to this operational closure is developed, due to which the system reproduces its own operations from itself and orients to self-differentiation (Luhmann, 2005). Mass media requires continuous replacement of old information with the fresh one. After publication the information constantly loses its value of unexpectedness and transforms into non-information. Mass media selects the news, frames it as interesting, unexpected and ongoing event for the audience and a promise that it will continue. This means that the function of mass media is continuous creation and processing of irritations, not the multiplication of knowledge, socialization or instilling of normative conformism. So, truthfulness of information interests mass media very little. Media prefers conflicts, quantitative indicators, local orientation, norm violations. The function of mass media is creation and processing of irritations caused by the code of information. Therefore, mass media keeps society in a state of vigor. They generate in him a constant readiness to consider possible surprises and even hindrances. Observation of events becomes an event itself, and time flows faster, as a result.

Mass media creates noise. The function of mass media is to shape memory, which is reflected in all other systems and communications. So, the mass media are means (mediums) not in the sense that they transmit information from informed to uninformed. They are the means (mediums) to the extent that prepare and somehow develop the background knowledge from which it is possible to proceed into communication. Mass media does not aim to shape reality based on truth or consensus: it produces difference of opinions. Mass media always - and without exception - works on its own discrediting. They themselves comment, dispute, correct themselves. The more in-

formation, the greater uncertainty and the temptation to assert their own opinion, to identify yourself with it and leave it unchanged.

Results

Latest studies of media and news consumption have globally revealed further digitalization of news consumption and decline of trust towards specific news sources.

Smartphones have overtaken computers as a primary access point for news. Their share has been continuously growing through years and reached 73% in 2020. This can be considered as one of the main factors hindering incidental news consumption. Meanwhile, getting news directly through websites and search engines is equal to social media (Newman, 2021). A research conducted by the Reuters Institute has revealed that Facebook and YouTube are the most popular news sources globally (Newman, 2021). This means that the news content people get is significantly determined by newsfeed and recommendation algorithms of these platforms. Considering news polarization and selective exposure effects on social media, we can assume that news distribution is also fragmented and polarized. It is remarkable that the use of Facebook to get news has decreased slightly in the last seven years. According to the authors, this trend may be related to the decline of trust towards social media as a news source.

A study examining perspectives on the news media from 40 countries has revealed that levels of trust differed notably around the world, although on the most part trust in European media was highest. Western Europeans, in particular, had greater trust in the news media than citizens from other parts of the world, with 65% of Finns trusting the news. France was placed among the lowest in the world when it came to how much consumers trusted the news media, alongside Hungary, Slovakia and the United States (Watson, 2021).

Edelman trust barometer has registered record decline to all information sources globally (Edelman trust barometer, 2021). However, trust towards both traditional and social media has declined significantly since 2019: traditional decreased from 65 to 53 points and social media decreased from 3 to 35 points. It is remarkable, that not only trustworthiness affects the level of trust towards the news, but also such emotional factors, as the appearance of a website, style of information representation and familiarity with the news media.

It is worth to highlight the role of COVID-19 pandemic, often called infodemic, described with raise of fake news and conspiracy theories. However, qualitative research by the Reuters Institute has revealed that people don't consider the pandemic as a significant factor shaping their general distrust towards the media (Newman, 2021). Accordingly, we can state that the

decline of trust towards the media was simultaneous through last decades and the pandemic just hindered the tendency. At the same time, journalists and news organizations are still globally perceived to be biased and supporting certain political forces or ideologies. Nevertheless, while people expect professionalism and in-depth reporting of news, they continue to consume news content not related to these characteristics (Newman, 2021). This is an important point considering that news brands and journalists attract most attention around news in both Facebook and Twitter.

Media consumption and trust in Armenian society

The results of Caucasus barometer survey show that the media has been one of the least trusted institutions in Armenian society through 2010-2020. Overall trust has decreased and fluctuates between 3-8%. As for specific media channels, online channels have also registered declining low level of trust. Media consumption researches in 2013 have revealed that 19% of Armenians completely trust Internet resources and social networks and 47% trust them somewhat (Please assess the level of your trust towards each of information sources). As for the independence of news sources, only 26% think that Internet resources and social media are completely independent from the government, political parties or business control. The results of further research show decline in the trust towards online new sources. In 2017 Internet sources and social networks are considered very reliable only by 7% of population (46% - rather reliable), while in 2019 this indicator dropped to 4% (43% - rather reliable). Meanwhile, perception on the independence of online sources has increased in 2 years, from 7% in 2017 to 13% in 2019. Latest research has shown that social media is the least trusted source of information on COVID-19. 39% find it somewhat untrustworthy and only 4% find it trustworthy (Public opinion survey, 2021). Meanwhile, World Values Survey 2021 has revealed that more than half of Armenians (52%) totally don't trust the media (World Values Survey in Armenia, 2021).

It is worth to note that distrust towards the media should be viewed within the context of general low level of trust in Armenian society. Like other post-Soviet countries, Armenia in recent decades had a stable low level of social trust (Paturyan, 2011). Comparison of the data of "World value survey 97" and "Caucasus Barometer 2010" shows that in this period the low level of trust in Armenia almost has not changed. According to the Caucasus Barometer survey, from 2010 to 2019 the level of trust in the Armenian society has been low, fluctuating in the range of 10-20%. As for institutional trust, the army and the church were the most reliable institutions for the same period and maintained significant advantage over other institutions. One of the systemic factors conditioning the low level of trust is the history full of

conflicts and instability, economic inequality, value system, “imitative” democracy. It is noteworthy that the Armenian society is mono-ethnic, which allows to claim that culture and nationality do not guarantee necessary level of interpersonal or institutional trust.

Daily consumption of Internet sources and social networks among Armenians has increased from 32% in 2013 to 57% in 2019 (Media for informed civic engagement, 2015-2019). It is notable that social media remains the most popular channel for news consumption. In 2017 only 12% of Armenians reported accessing online news websites every day directly (not via social networks). In 2019 this indicator increased by 2%, but still remains very low.

Discussion

What we see globally and locally is that people distrust social media as a news source the most, but, at the same time, they continue to get news mainly by this channel. This situation can be determined by psychological, social and technological factors. Technology makes social media the most convenient way to get news, culture of connectivity drives them to network with others through these channels and simultaneously get news, the raise infotainment makes news consumption deprives the news from its informative function, and news consumption has become a daily ritual performed simultaneously with other actions.

In macro level, if we look at social media as a part of mass media system, the analyses become more captivating. As a part of the mass media system, social media platforms keep communications turnover in the society and construct its memory. Truthfulness of information becomes non important as the speed of its creation and distribution has been increasing enormously. Coding of information/non-information has also transformed. In order to satisfy the need for more and more information, the system continuously processes the same news, creating and spreading opinions on it. Thus, opinions themselves become news and fill the necessity of unexpectedness. The same news recirculates after a new opinion or interpretation appears on it. These processes increase irritations in the mass media system as a whole and make it more interrelated to other social systems. On the other hand, uncertainty in the media environment increases as well, declining the trust towards the news. However, the system itself continues operating and processing information having low level of trust towards itself, as its main function is not limited by spreading knowledge and trustworthy information. It forms the memory of society and provides background knowledge to ensure continuity of communication, which is now being processed in a very limited and squeezed timing.

Conclusion

Summing up the results of previous studies, we can state an obvious contradiction: despite the low level of trust towards social media, it still remains the most preferable medium of getting news globally. In order to understand such contradictory results, we will analyze transformation of the media in the light of Luhmann's system analyses of the mass media.

The logic of Web 2.0 has made the mass media system even more complex. Some authors distinguish digital media from traditional mass media channels, pointing on mass personal communication and specific logic of web platforms. However, digital and traditional media are interconnected: the latter are now operating through web platforms and social networking sites, which means that the system of mass media has transformed and enhanced, obtaining new features which relate to general features of the system pointed by Luhmann. Mass media system has become more complex due to the following transformations:

- User generated content creates more irritations, as each user registered on the web platforms becomes a media and has ability to set agendas. They get information not only from media organizations, but also the network of online friends. Unlike traditional media channels, where a news is delivered base on the schedule and frequency set by media organizations, on social media it is replicated by thousands and millions of times and spread across networks, thus, irritating the media system more intensively.

- Social media algorithms become the main gatekeepers in news selection process. On the one hand, this creates a fragmented realty, where the newsfeed of each user is personified and reflects his/her interests. On the other hand, the logic of social media is based on popularity. The more reactions a post gets the more reach it will have. This means that the information shared by popular pages and influencers will get more engagement. Information gathering on social media is a two-step flow process, which relates to Katz and Lazarsfeld communication model, according to which people get information through opinion leaders (Mcquail, 1993). Thus, common background knowledge on social media is shaped by users and pages satisfying criteria of popularity of the network.

- Infotainment format of the news distribution makes the informative function of the media secondary, thus decreasing the value of the truthfulness of the information. Meanwhile, personal opinions become a part of the news content, making the system to produce opinions diversity continually. Opinions provide the news necessary to satisfy the need for constant news creation and become the news themselves, as the information/non-information code

requires processing of news within lesser and lesser amount of time. At the same time, this creates noise, hindering uncertainty and creating a media space filled more and more with personal opinions and less and less with meaning and valuable information.

Although abovementioned points show that distrust towards the media fits in the logic of mass media system operating, the raising fluctuation of the system, distrust and uncertainty create potential risks for the functioning of society as a whole. The main question that arises in this respect is whether the whole social system and other systems will continue functioning properly under increasing volume of noise and irritations caused by accelerating speed of communications. Further research should concentrate on these questions in order to reveal potential risks and offer solutions for the issues caused by such transformations and their effects on different spheres of society.

References / Литература

Ahlers, D. (2006). News consumption and the new electronic media. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 11(1), 29-52.

Aral, S. (2020). *The hype machine: how social media disrupts our elections, our economy, and our health-and how we must adapt*. New York, Currency.

Bergström, A., Belfrage, M. (2018). News in social media. *Digital Journalism*, 6:5, 583-598. DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2018.1423625.

Caucasus Barometer (2017). Available at: https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/themes/crrc/barometer_files_hy/%D5%B6%D5%A5%D6%80%D5%AF%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%A1%D6%81%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B4%D5%B6%D5%A5%D6%80-2017.pdf.

Chyi, H. I. (2012). Theorizing online news consumption: a structural model linking preference, use, and paying intent. Paper presented at the 13th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, Texas, April 20-21, 2012.

Cinelli, M., Brugnoli, E., Schmidt, A.L., Zollo, F., Quattrocioni, W., Scala, A. (2020). Selective exposure shapes the Facebook news diet. *PLoS ONE*, 15(3): e0229129. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0229129>.

Digital Journalism, 6:5, 583-598. DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2018.1423625.

Edelman trust barometer (2021). Available at: <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>.

Fenton, N. (2009). *New media, old news: Journalism and democracy in the digital age*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. Free Press.

Giray, G. A (2017). Critical review of Luhmann's social systems theory's perspective on mass media and social media. *The Journal of Humanity and Society*, 7(2), 141-154.

Hakobyan, A. (2020). Civic participation practices of Armenians during Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020: analyses in the context of civic society development and national security. *Materials of the scientific conference "Media and information in the 21st century wars"*. Available at: https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CB_2019_PPT_30.07.2020.pdf.

Luhmann, N. (1982). *Trust and Power*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Luhmann, N. (2005). *The reality of mass media*. Moscow, Praksis Publ. (In Russian).

Mcquail, D., Windahl, S. (1993). Communication models for the study of mass communications. Routledge.

Media for informed civic engagement. 2015-2019. Available at: <https://www.crrc.am/en/research/the-media-for-informed-civic-engagement-mice/>.

Moran, K. How people read online: new and old findings. Available at: <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-people-read-online/>.

Newman, N. (2021). Digital News Report 2021, 10th edition. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf.

Paturyan, Y. (2011). (Dis)trusting people and political institutions in Armenia. *CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST*, 31, 21st November 2011.

Public opinion survey: residents of Armenia, July 2021. Available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_for_publication_armenia_electoral_reform_march_8_2021.pdf.

Sztompka, P. (2012). Trust is the foundation of society. Moscow, Logos Publ. (In Russian).

Tewksbury, D. (2006). What Do Americans Really Want to Know? Tracking the Behavior of News Readers on the Internet. *Journal of Communication*, 53(4), 694-710. DOI: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb02918.x.

Watson, A. (2021). Trustworthiness of news media worldwide 2021. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/308468/importance-brand-journalist-creating-trust-news/>.

World values survey in Armenia, 2021. Available at: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

Yul Kwon, O. (2019). Social trust and economic development, the case of South Korea. Available at: <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781784719593/chapter01.xhtml>.

Для цитирования: *Hakobyan A.M.* Digitalization of News Consumption and Trust Towards the Media // Гуманитарий Юга России. 2021.6 (52). С. 66–76. DOI 10.18522/2227-8656.2021.6.5

История статьи:
Поступила в редакцию – 25.09.2021 г.
Получена в доработанном виде – 29.10.2021 г.
Одобрена – 12.11.2021 г.

Information about author

Anahit Migranovna Hakobyan

Lecturer,
Brusov State University

42 Tumanyan St., Yerevan,
0001, Republic of Armenia,
e-mail: anahit1989@gmail.com

Сведения об авторе

Акопян Анаит Миграновна

Преподаватель,
Государственный университет
имени В. Я. Брюсова

0001, Республика Армения,
г. Ереван, ул. Туманяна, 42,
e-mail: anahit1989@gmail.com