



## Media as an innovative fourth institution of power in the era of mass media development

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**Abstract:** In modern social knowledge, the idea of the role of the media in the self-regulation of society is urgent. There are various paradigms for considering the social significance of the media, within which they are viewed as an instrument of purposeful power influence on the social worldview, as an independent civil institution focused on the social cognition of society members, and, finally, as a mechanism for representing stable sociocultural concepts in the system of social communication. All of these approaches are united by consideration of the fundamental importance of the sphere of information relations as a factor in building social interaction. The article examines the social significance of key mass media, as well as the nature of their functioning in the context of modern technological development of communication media. The ratio of “natural” processes in the media space and the practice of targeted impact on public consciousness through key mass media is analyzed. The phenomenon of network media is investigated in the context of the general trend of shifting communication processes towards network interaction.

**Keywords:** society, mass-media, self-regulation of society, power, fourth institution of power, social worldview, information relations, information processes

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## СМИ как инновационный четвертый институт власти в эпоху развития масс-медиа

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**Аннотация.** В современном социальном знании активное отражение получает идея роли средств массовой информации в саморегуляции общества. Существуют различные парадигмы рассмотрения социального значения СМИ, в рамках которых они рассматриваются как инструмент целенаправленного властного воздействия на социальное мировоззрение, как самостоятельный гражданский институт, ориентированный на социальное познание членов общества и, наконец, как механизм репрезентации устойчивых социокультурных концептов в системе социальной коммуникации.

Все перечисленные подходы объединяет рассмотрение фундаментального значения сферы информационных отношений как фактора выстраивания социального взаимодействия. В статье рассматривается социальное значение ключевых медиа, а также характер их функционирования в условиях современного технологического развития средств коммуникации. Анализируется соотношение «естественных» процессов в медиaprостранстве и практик целенаправленного воздействия на общественное сознание посредством ключевых масс-медиа. Исследуется феномен сетевых медиа в контексте общей тенденции смещения коммуникативных процессов в сторону сетевого взаимодействия.

**Ключевые слова:** общество, масс-медиа, средства массовой информации, саморегуляция общества, власть, четвертый институт власти, социальное мировоззрение, информационные отношения, информационные процессы

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**Introduction.** In addition to the three basic branches of government - judicial, executive and legislative, researchers often speak of the "fourth power", meaning the impact of media on society. The concept of the decisive importance of information processes, placing various media on the same level with key government institutions, has a long history dating back to works devoted to the influence of worldview factors on the life of society. Back in the first half of the 20th century, a number of studies were formed on the importance of the worldview as a factor of social activity having an alternative character in relation to the main spectrum of regulatory institutions influencing the social subject from the outside.

The motives of the acting subject, his value orientations, the way of perceiving the surrounding reality, target attitudes that are summed up in a life strategy, the means and ways of achieving the set goals acceptable from the point of view of the subject were subjected to serious analysis and, in particular, determined the ideological content of a number of sociological theories. It is quite natural that the statement of the social significance of the worldview factors was followed by an analysis of the sources of the formation of the worldview. As a result, the value of the general cultural context (as a relatively stable set of ideas, perceptions, value orientations, etc.) and the high importance of information relations continuously flowing in society, having increased dynamics and contributing to active filling and, including transformation of social worldview, were determined. This is where the study of the social significance of media processes begins, which determines at a deep level the formation (and, in particular, the transformation) of the worldview of society members.

With the development of information technologies, there is a gradual change in ideas about the nature of information relations and their significance in the life of society [1, 2]. The formation of numerous theories of post-industrial society contains, among other things, a stable tendency to consider the increasing social significance of knowledge, the production and consumption of which researchers pay significant attention to. Moreover, despite the fact that many long-term forecasts of theorists of post-industrial society came true, it should be noted that the intensive development of communication technologies was not fully predicted, which determines the need to fix the current trends in the development of the modern sphere of information relations and, in particular, to determine the social significance of those processes and trends that are taking place at the moment.

The point is that in modern social knowledge the problem of intensifying the influence of information processes on the life and social well-being of society is becoming increasingly important [3]. In this context, on the one hand, the question arises whether the modern sphere of mass media is one of the varieties of power institutions that exert a governing influence on the field of public relations, in other words, is it possible to consider modern media as a "fourth power". On the other hand, we should consider in detail the question of what form modern information processes take and, therefore, whether in this case we are talking about a controlling influence on the mass consciousness, or there are mechanisms for the representation of social reality, within the framework of which information relations act as one of the mechanisms of self-regulation.

The subject of serious debate in this case is whether modern media are one of the tools for purposeful impact on mass consciousness within a specific state system, or is it an independent area of relations, within which natural processes of social regulation are implemented, based on already existing worldview attitudes of society members. Depending on the choice of position, the authors interpret the very idea of the media as a "fourth power" [4], and defend the idea of spontaneity or, on the contrary, the purposeful nature of the implementation of information processes in the public environment.

In our opinion, the presented discussion is based on the not entirely correct premise of considering media processes as a kind of homogeneous phenomenon about which one can form general judgments, while in practice there are media processes that are different in their social nature, corresponding to both theoretical approaches presented above. In this case, it is not the question of whether the field of media communication is an instrument of centralized power (and other social actors interested in influencing society, including representatives of the interests of foreign states), or whether it is an independent, "natural" development of information services arising in reliance on information needs and taste preferences of the audience. The idea of the heterogeneity of the media sphere allows for the possibility of considering subjects of media activity that are different in their institutional determination and target orientation.

The relevance of research in this area is fully determined by the significance of the subject being studied and, which is natural given the continuous development of the information sphere, its insufficient knowledge. It is also important that the area of information relations is one of the key factors that determine the state of society.

**Theoretical and methodological justification.** The study of the transformation of the social representation of the key media in the context of the development of modern communication technologies is multifaceted due to the fact that we are talking about a complex phenomenon related to the subject area of research in various humanitarian disciplines. On the one hand, we are talking about social processes, which presupposes an appeal to the theoretical foundations of sociological discourse. In this case, developments in the field of theoretical sociology can help clarify a number of aspects of the problem under study, which include: ideological foundations of the social behavior of the acting subject; conditionality of key public institutions by information factors; internal structure and functional orientation of the main mass media (their institutional aspect); external institutional factors for the implementation of information activities; social factors of demand for media resources.

Taking into account the fact that the main aspect of the social significance of information processes is associated with their formative influence on the field of social worldview, it is expedient to consistently develop the question of the essence and specifics of the social worldview, as well as the question of its dynamic factors. In this context, on the one hand, general theoretical studies devoted to the structure and dynamics of the worldview are of interest, on the other, works that reveal the features of the process of social cognition. These include research in the field of social phenomenology, as well as the theory of social constructivism.

Another important area that needs to be touched upon in the research process is the general specificity of socio-communicative processes and, in particular, their institutional, cultural and technological conditioning. This determines the advisability of referring to the developments in communication science, within which this range of issues is being developed.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the research includes classical methods of scientific cognition (analysis, abstraction, comparison, deduction, generalization), structural-functionalist, socio-phenomenological, historical and systems approaches.

The main sources used in the study are divided into several groups. The first group includes classical studies in the field of theoretical sociology, presented in the works of such authors as T. Parsons, R. Merton [5, 6]. Within their framework, a general understanding of social action, social structure and processes unfolding at various levels of social organization is set. It is also important to comprehend the socio-cultural factors of social activity, realized in the framework of the works of these authors. The second group of works on which this study is based is the research of such authors as A. Schutz [7], O.A. Sychev [8], S.P. Myakinnikov [9].

In addition to studies that reveal the structural and dynamic aspects of the social worldview, as well as its importance for society, works devoted to the topic of the functionality of the media, as well as the change in their social meaning as new media emerge, are of no small importance. The third group of works on which this research is based includes the works of such authors as M. McLuhan [10], E.A. Zueva [11], E.A. Baranova [12].

**Research results and their discussion.** The mass media are one of the key instruments of social cognition of society members, which determines their important role as an element of the social mechanism of self-regulation of society, based on the interaction of the population and political power. Knowledge about the state of society is one of the key factors for the formation of citizenship. In addition, at the level of the mass media, the formation of value attitudes is carried out, through various media, value attitudes are instilled and behavioral models are formed. All this together determines the high degree of importance of the media and, in particular, the legitimacy of the point of view that considers the media as one of the key factors in the existence of society. Hence, the idea of the role of the media as a "fourth power" arises, at the level of which several significant social functions are realized at once:

- control over various areas of public life through their public coverage;
- impact on key goals and patterns of behavior of members of society;
- coordination and redirection of vectors of social activity of members of society (implemented within the framework of ideological influence, as well as within the framework of updating certain problems and issues in the information and communication space).

The implementation of these social functions can be both purposeful and a concomitant result of the activities of the subjects of media activity, determined by their professional interests. In other words, informational activity can have an independent character, in which information itself takes place, or can act as a tool for a certain targeted impact. In the first case, information activity is subject to the general institutional factors of the functioning of the media, in the second, individual factors of media activity can be ignored. In particular, we are talking about the economic factor of recoupment of information activities by the audience in the presence of a certain "political order" for the publication of specific information products, within which the priority point is not so much the payback of information activities, but its ultimate impact on the audience.

It should be noted that the opposition of the instrumental nature of media activity to the natural functioning of media organizations does not at all mean that media developing independently and, accordingly, being subject to the mechanisms of competition and, in general, self-regulation of the information and communication environment, cannot be politically engaged. However, in this case, the presence of a certain position among the authors of media products is a concomitant factor, and not an initial target setting that determines the direction of information activity.

As noted above, there are two fundamentally different approaches to considering the social meaning of media – as an independent institution that implements the information functions inherent in it, or as an instrument of influencing public consciousness, which always presupposes the presence of a subject external to media institutions (in the role of which both an individual person and an institutional structure not directly related to the field of information activity can act).

In the first case, consideration of the social-regulatory significance of the media is associated with the moment of informing the population and, therefore, giving publicity to certain facts, events and phenomena. In this sense, the media act as one of the controlling bodies that actualize social problems and make possible a dialogue between the population and the state. It should be emphasized that this kind of independent media realizes in this case, foremost the interests of the "lower classes" associated with obtaining comprehensive information about the state of the social system and the most significant processes taking place in it. One way or another, the mass media, focused on fulfilling their main institutionally defined function, are one of the key aspects of building adequate relations between society and political power. The social function of the press in this case is extremely useful for the state, while the main media can exist separately from the political sphere, which is guaranteed at the constitutional level of a number of states.

The existence of media as an instrument of social, political, economic and cultural influence, presupposes the subject of socio-cultural interests, as well as the presence of a certain centralized system within which they are realized at the macro level. In other words, it is of great importance in this case that an attempt to purposefully influence the mass consciousness presupposes the presence of a certain ramified social structure, which can be centrally influenced. It is no coincidence that media giants with a developed structure, but characterized by the controlled nature of all information processes occurring at their level, are considered as one of the key mechanisms of information (including ideological) processing.

Thus, we come to the understanding that the media can realize multidirectional social interests, acting as a mediator of one of the parties in the dialogue between the population and the government. At the same time, in a number of cases it can be judged about the discrepancy and even contradiction of approaches based on these two attitudes (on the observance of the audience's information requests and on the observance of the interests of certain social structures and institutions), which, as a result, leads to contradictions in the assessment of the social role and the significance of a number of media processes in society.

One of the key factors that determine the specifics of the influence of mass media on the field of public relations is the technological basis on which the process of capturing, replicating and disseminating information is based. Improving the mechanisms for storing, replicating and transmitting information determines the emergence of new communication channels, which, in turn, have a specific (largely determined by the format of the transmitted product) nature of the impact on society. It is no coincidence that M. McLuhan argued that the emergence of each subsequent communication channel has a revolutionary significance for society. In this context, the technological development of communication means is, foremost, a qualitative transformation of the media system as a whole. Moreover, in this case, two points are important - the format of the information product being created and the internal institutional factors of information activity. The first does not require any serious explanation, since we are talking about what kind of information is to be disseminated, while the second moment needs to be analyzed to understand what social determinants define the content and nature of information activity.

The development of digital technologies has determined a significant reduction in the cost of mechanisms for creating and distributing information products, which has reached a qualitatively new level within the framework of the extensive spread of Internet communication.

With regard to the field of Internet communication, due to the colossal number of subjects of information activity, most of them are unknown to the mass audience. At the same time, the criterion of the influence of a particular information source, in many respects, is how many people learn about its existence. Under these conditions, a self-regulation mechanism was formed in the information environment that implements the principle of user assessment of perceived information products and the formation of information products published in the network space based on the ratings obtained. As a result, the most demanded content is being promoted by users.

This mechanism is a self-regulation of information relations based on the moment of user approval according to the formal criterion of the number of positive ratings. It demonstrates a significant share of efficiency as a means of promoting promising information products, however, culturally, the implementation of a mechanistic quantitative assessment of the quality of information by the number of "likes" contributes to the consolidation of mainstream trends (with all the social risks associated with them) and, in general, serves more as a representation and consolidation of existing socio-cultural attitudes, rather than changing them, due to the fact that the greatest promotion is received by those products that were initially demanded by the masses.

One of the controversial issues related to the problem in question is the understanding of the media as a "fourth power". In the research environment, there are different ways of interpreting the concept of "power", in connection with which the question of the correctness of considering the mass media as one of the forms of power is controversial. Critics of this approach emphasize that one of the key aspects of power is coercion (violence), while there is no coercive aspect of influence at the mass media level. Another argument against considering the media sphere as one of the institutions of power is that it acts as a means of influencing the worldview of members of society, while the subjects of power, taken by themselves,

have the ability to make decisions, the results of which affect society. In contrast to this position, supporters of considering the media as a form of power note a high level of regulatory influence of information, the presence of the phenomenon of "informational violence", as well as the subordination of the main forms of power (judicial, legislative, executive), as well as the media to the so-called conceptual power, reflecting the paradigm of building social relations, present at the level of local society.

Another controversial issue is the nature of modern media and their determination. In this case, points of view differ from considering the media as an independent institution aimed to inform members of society about the state of key spheres of public life, to a "weak-willed instrument" of existing power structures focused on information and ideological processing of the population. Special attention should be paid to the position according to which the moment of "social order" from consumers of information products acquires dominant importance in modern information processes, within which the moment of demand for information agencies is largely determined by the correspondence of the content and form of published information to the initial attitudes of the audience's worldview and their needs. Proceeding from this point of view, any purposeful influence on the worldview of members of society [13] through the mass media is limited, since it depends on what information members of society are ready to perceive, and what, on the contrary, they tend to reject.

**Conclusion.** The development of Internet technologies has determined a radical change in the nature of modern media, which is associated with the involvement of ordinary users in information activities [13]. The introduction of this kind of self-regulation mechanisms has determined the predominant importance of social approval in the digital environment as a key indicator of the success and relevance of information products. This leads to the conclusion that modern information processes, implemented within the framework of automated self-regulation mechanisms, are associated with the consolidation and representation of already existing sociocultural trends, since the taste and information needs of the majority are of decisive importance in this case. This, in turn, determines the fact that within the framework of natural processes of self-regulation in the information environment, based on the institutionalization of social approval, the prerequisites for a serious change in the cultural situation are poorly expressed. At the same time, the potential for changing the socio-cultural environment is possessed by just the target mechanisms of information impact, implemented at the level of large organizations participating in the modern media process.

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