ЖУРНАЛИСТИКА

КОНФЛИКТ И МЕДИА В НОВОЙ РЕАЛЬНОСТИ: ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ ПРОРЫВЫ

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Media conflictology as a field of research: working out theoretical approaches

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Abstract. The authors discuss both the main approaches in existing media and conflict studies that examine the relationship and interaction between media and conflict, and using theoretical mapping construct the media conflictology as a field of knowledge. The conceptual blocks of media conflictology as an integral field of research are defined and its structure is proposed. Thus, media conflictology as an emerging field of research includes the study of groups involved in media conflict, counting various Internet communities and other subjects of media communication; the stages of conflict represented in the media and the influence of media communication on the "life cycle" of conflict; the totality of the causes of media representation of conflict, with political, ideological and ethno-cultural factors; the analysis of the external context of conflict representation in the media, as well as the national media system, politics and regulation, communication culture and axiological aspects of conflict. A key feature of media conflict studies is the focus of academic attention on media representations and media effects of conflicts, rather than on the conflicts themselves.

Keywords: conflict, crisis, media studies, research field

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Медиаконфликтология как область исследований: выработка теоретических подходов

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Аннотация. Рассматриваются основные подходы к медиаконфликтологии в исследованиях, изучающих взаимосвязи и взаимодействия медиа и конфликта, и предпринимается попытка «теоретического картирования» медиаконфликтологии как области знания. Определены концептуальные блоки медиаконфликтологии как целостного поля исследований и предложена ее структура. Так, медиаконфликтология как формирующаяся область исследований включает изучение групп, вовлеченных в медиаконфликт, в том числе различных интернет-сообществ и других субъектов медиакоммуникации; стадий конфликта, представленных в СМИ, и влияния медиакоммуникации на «жизненный цикл» конфликта; совокупности причин медиарепрезентации конфликта, включая политические, идеологические и этнокультурные факторы; анализ внешнего контекста репрезентации конфликта в СМИ, в том числе национальной медиасистемы, политики и регулирования СМИ, коммуникативной культуры общества, а также аксиологического аспекта конфликта. Ключевой особенностью медиаконфликтологии является то, что, в отличие от конфликтологии, в центре академического внимания находятся медиарепрезентации и медиаэффекты конфликтов, а не сами конфликты.

Ключевые слова: конфликты, кризисы, медиаисследования, конфликтология, исследовательское поле

Introduction

Conflicts, crises, and confrontations of various kinds are traditionally key events in media news agendas attracting much interest of media audiences. In 2023, the audience interest to conflicts covered by media appeared as a top priority in 67 countries around the world, which might be explained by numerous confrontations, wars, and crises of different levels in these or neighboring states together with many countries' involvement in conflict resolution in regions of the world. In addition, the dynamics of web activity throughout the year remained unchanged, confirming the stability and resilience of users' interest in media representations of conflict[1].

In today's digital communication environment, the nature of media and conflict interactions and interrelations is complex and diverse, since media as a social space, public sphere and powerful industry could simultaneously act as a part of the conflict, its initiator, a collaborator, a mediator in the conflict, its organizer, and even a conflict booster (Budka, Brauchler, 2020).

The study of media and conflict mutual influences and interrelations were primarily based on the analysis of media impact on international armed conflicts, which in the digital era might result into a hybrid nature of information and psychological wars, complication of the conflict and its multi-level interaction with legacy and digital media (Bodrunova et al., 2019). Nowadays the scope of research has been broadened and analyses the variety of conflict types, their levels, formats and duration of their representations (Labush, Puyu, 2019; Baychik, 2020).

During the period from 2014 to 2021, 128 articles in 19 top Russian academic journals included into High Attestation Commission and the core of Russian Citation index were directly related to this subject area, and this confirms the emergence of an independent academic discourse. Although it was less than 2 per cent of articles published, the number proves to be visible. The structure of the discourse might be described by several variables including types of conflicts represented, common themes of conflict and methodological approaches used by media scholars (Vartanova et al., 2022).

The research questions of the article are the following:

Q1: What are the main approaches in existing research to interrelations and interactions of media and conflict?

Q2: What conceptual blocks of media studies can be included in the structure of theoretical knowledge in media conflictology and vice versa?

Interaction of conflicts and media: a media-centric perspective

The theoretical study of conflict in the contemporary science is based on the assumption that conflict is an integral part of social development (Dahrendorf, 1994). In recent decades the emergence, development, regulation and resolution of social conflicts have been strongly affected by mass media and new social media that through conflict representations are growingly changing its course, scope, social effects and even its nature.

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[1] Google Trends. (2023). *Conflict*. Retrieved June 26, 2023, from https://trends.google.ru/trends/explore?q=conflict&hl=ru

The rise of social media has led to a complication of media systems and dramatically changed the nature of public communication. Diversification of non-institutionalized media structures, an increase in the number of producers and distributors of content, emergence of active audiences, complication of social media effects upon societies – these are numerous consequences of the rise of social media as a new domain of public life (Vartanova, 2022).

This results in a new social, cultural and generational dynamics, which reflects contemporary social and technological complexity, leading to clashes of norms and values of different audience groups in the modern media environment. Media communications are becoming a new space for the generating and functioning of conflicts, and more subjects than ever are being involved simultaneously including:

1) institutionally organized legacy media who set the news agenda for a society according to their professional mission;

2) new social media companies/actors which appear in the social media as 'new professionals' producing content in traditional journalistic and new multimedia formats with no clear ethical standards;

3) social media audience, e.g. citizens who suffered in conflicts or were witnesses, observers of the conflict.

Studies of multidimensional and multifaceted interactions of media and conflict are conducted in three main areas. The first area is the analysis of information provision role traditionally played by media. The media inform society (and its audience) about the conflict in the process of its mediation by implementing a socially oriented normative approach (McQuail, 2013). Ethical norms and professional codes remain an invariable social obligation in media conflict studies.

The second area involves the research in the mediatization theory framework. In the context of the increasing mediatization of society, both the traditional and social media, are acquiring an increasingly independent role, turning into full-fledged accomplices, co-designers, co-organizers, even instigators of the conflict, becoming the environment of its existence. This feature of modern media communication, which itself becomes a space of conflict, turns the media not just into an information tool, but into a full-fledged subject of conflict, capable of strengthening or weakening its development (Smirnova, Shkondin, 2021; Couldry, Hepp, 2017).

Following the critical tradition, some media researchers describe the media as an instrument for suppressing or catalyzing social conflicts, and the representation of social conflicts arises as a result of power relations, since the media influence how resources are distributed in society (Entman, 1993). Thus, the media can be seen as agents acting in the interests of certain beneficiaries, and various biases or distortions observed in the content do not stem from the commitment of journalists to different political ideologies, but result from the fact that media could be used to control the political narrative. Under certain circumstances, using a specific set of rhetorical and expressive means, the media turn into initiators of conflict, intentionally portraying some events as conflicts, using the so-called frame of the conflict (Ndinojuo et al., 2020).

On the contrary, in the normative theories there is a clear need for media acting in the conflict as a moderator and "therapist". Such approaches represent a logic according to which media, citizens, and authorities should not act as par-

ticipants in the conflict, but contribute to its settlement (Baychik, 2020). This is consistent with the approach to mass media as a platform for public discussion, aimed to highlight and harmonize different opinions and interests in accordance with moral principles (Habermas, 2006).

Developing analysis of media participation in conflict in a normative way, some theories suggest that media not only perform the function of mediation and harmonization, but also take a more active position, being directly engaged in the resolution of social contradictions. Thus, the media might promote harmonization during the pandemic and the social conflicts generated by it (Jamil et al., 2022). Ideas of this kind have taken shape in the concepts of constructive journalism and decision/solution journalism (Aitamurto, Varma, 2018).

The third area represents the complex field of new media research characterized by its own dynamics. The digital media have turned into an independent environment of generating those conflicts that were initially absent or latently present in the social environment, but as a result of changes in media consumption/media activity of the audience have acquired new manifestations, status and subjectivity (Vartanova et al., 2022). This is due to specific ability of social media to form environmental and spatial characteristics in the virtual space according to the type of social system. As a result, the virtual space generates self-referential entities, among which might be distinguished as conflicts born in a virtual mediatized environment, extrapolated at the same time into the physical space of a real society.

The identification of the interrelationships of media and conflict gives reason to talk about such an important dimension of conflict as its multilevel and multidimensional nature. Conflict in modern society is not only a war or an armed confrontation covered in the media, but also conflicts between opposing political and social groups and individuals, their interests and values, which find a very different understanding in the communication system of modern society (Vartanova, 2022; Ugwoke, Erubami, 2021).Various types of media communications often, if not always, act as a connecting static element or dynamic driver of a social conflict, its escalation or/and regulation, resolution, performing an intermediary role inherent in their nature.

The significance of roles played by media in the development of conflicts is directly related to the structure and nature of the media itself. The role of the media in covering a conflict is an integral concept that involves a number of external and internal factors as well as conflict variables. Following Lasswell's classic communication model, one might try to describe the role of different elements of the communication chain in a conflict representation. Elements of communication model chain, e.g. "message sender", "mediation channel", "message", "message recipient", and "effect", in the context of conflict representation acquire a certain specificity. They might be used to analyze how conflicts' representations are created and by whom, which interests they represent, how they are disseminated and perceived by different social groups. In addition, this model needs to pay a particular attention to a specificity of a national media system, since conflict is usually a rather contextual phenomenon, existing in certain geopolitical and cultural circumstances.

For the Russian media system, the following variables and factors are of a particular importance:

– the type of medium (print, broadcasting including TV or radio, online);

– its legal and industrial state (institutionalized as mass medium, e.g. registered by authorities or as media company or not);

– its ownership status (state-owned, private or public);

– content quality (quality, popular, niche, etc.);

– the linguistic peculiarities of language in creating the media representation;

– its major audience targeting (mass interest, elite oriented, special interest, B2B, etc.).

As a result, media representations of a conflict generate the public knowledge about the conflict, especially for those not involved into it, defining further communication and public consequences of a conflict. As many scholars argue, audience effects are related to media representations, and the study of audiences and their reactions are directly related to the study of media representations (Yakova, 2021).

Towards a frame of media conflictology

Interrelations and interactions of media and conflict have emerged as a new multidisciplinary junction in the contemporary humanitarian research to analyze broad and diverse social and personal consequences that are produced by conflict media coverage. The new field of research is arising from the monitoring and analysis of media content representing and analyzing conflicts, but beyond this there appear studies of forms, instruments, factors, roles, social and individual effects of conflict media coverage. The development of the structure and basic approaches to conflict media representations might allow to systematize the knowledge accumulated in such fields of research as conflictology, media studies, political science, sociology, history, linguistics, etc. and to develop a unified methodological approach to the analysis of media conflicts.

Studying mediatization of conflicts might help to understand how media influence public opinion, political processes and social phenomena, public and private communication through mediatization of the most difficult issues of the social life.
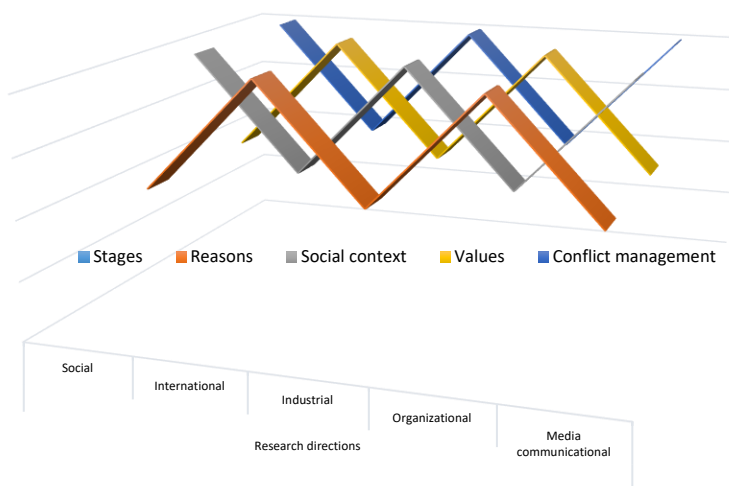
Mapping research directions of conflict studies

Conflict studies initially had not implemented the media communication perspective. However, it came clear that together with the growth of conflict media representations it is precisely 'media and conflict' perspective that qualitatively differently reveals the involvement of different audience groups in the development and resolution of conflict, and influences the stages of escalation in the media space, including the reasons determined by media factors, mediated social contexts, media audiences polarized values, and ways of managing the conflict, taking into account its life cycle in the media environment. Thus, a full-scale media communication analysis of conflicts appears to be an important component of modern social conflicts. Based of broad sociological perspectives, it might be possible to identify several basic reasons to formulate theoretical grounds of media conflictology (Figure).

Firstly, it is the study of groups involved in media conflict. These include all types of mediatized groups and communities, such as the audience of institutionalized and non-institutionalized media, various online communities, users of social networks, and other media communication agents.

Secondly, it is the study of the stages of media conflict. The effects of media communication are manifested at different stages of the "life cycle" of the conflict (origin, escalation, development, de-escalation, re-escalation, regulation, resolution), and the very concept of the "life cycle" can be considered the subject of media conflict studies. We propose to consider media representations of conflict as the object of study in media conflict.

Thirdly, it is the complexity of the conflict media representation as a research subject in which media content is studied through the lenses of acting factors, context and consequences of the conflict. The political, ideological and ethnocultural "parallelism" of media (mass media, journalism) and conflict have a potential impact on the emergence and development of conflicts, explaining its causes, as well as the advertising business model of media, which contributes to the development of the conflict.

Fourth, it is needed to analyze the context of the conflict representation in the media, which includes current contexts of the national media system, media policy and regulation as well as traditions of the communication culture of society, especially in the context of global media environments and geopolitical trends in the development of blocks of countries and their information and communication space.

Fifth, the axiological aspect of media conflict is becoming more important, especially from the point of interaction of professional journalistic ethics, social responsibility of journalism, the values of freedom of speech and respect for the audience as key aspects, as well as their interaction with traditional values for the nation and culture.

Sixth, the knowledge of conflict management and forecasting should become a structural component of theoretical knowledge about the conflict media representation. The system of media regulation, including legislative regulation, self- and co-regulation of media, as well as editorial standards are of great importance for the regulation of conflicts in the information space. Understanding the content strategies of media representations of the conflict will help to predict its further development.

Accordingly, the media are included in all stages of the "life cycle" of the conflict, and digital media communications become a space and a form of conflict existence due to the tools of its media representation, causing either new rounds or resolution of the conflict. Analysis of the media, their strategies, functions/roles, discourse and effects might become a new field of knowledge about conflict itself.

Conclusion

The research of interactions and interferences of media and conflict, the roles of media played in the representation of social conflicts, the nature, meanings, values and more broadly the effects of media representations of conflict upon the society are nowadays a growing and broadening multidisciplinary area. Though it does not yet have systemic characteristics and is limited to the analysis of individual sides of the phenomenon and to particular methodologies and research procedures, it is evident that the research of conflict representation, conflict mediatization and effects of these processes on the functioning of society and audience behavior has a potential to become a separate field, integrating traditional conflict studies, journalism theory and media studies.

Responding to research questions, it might be concluded that while media scholars still view media roles from traditional angles, their understanding in the conflict coverage needs more detail and precise knowledge of the media communication chain, its specificity and complexity when representations of conflict are perceived. Moreover, the impact of contexts and external factors coming from macro- (society) and meso – (media system) levels on media coverage of conflict might define the nature and stages of conflict life cycle in a greater degree that it was done before.

The area of media conflictology might integrate the study of: 1) groups involved in media conflict and affecting media message production; 2) the position and status of media channels in the structure of the media system; 3) reasons and factors of conflict media representations, including political, ideological, and ethnocultural ones; 4) language of conflict representations explored through the lenses of national media systems, media policy and regulation, and communicative culture of society; 5) the axiology of media conflict from the perspective of both the professional journalist corporation and the audience values; 6) the perspective of managing conflict in the media environment.

Digitalization of media would definitely broaden the space of conflicts representations and expand the emerging research area.

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