




МЕДИА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОГО КРИЗИСА MEDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL CRISIS

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Crisis of political communication: is there a silencing effect in Russian media?

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Abstract. The authors investigate the agenda of the so-called ‘big three’ TV channels and popular online media during the presidential elections 2018 in Russia. In the context of an election campaign, the significance of qualitative public awareness grows exponentially. The given research studies the agenda of those media, the coverage of the election campaign, and also the possible ‘silencing effect’. An unique research design that allowed the content comparison between evening TV news and online media is developed, and also the notion of ‘silencing effect’ is conceptualized. Online media are often considered more qualitative and full-fledged sources of information; nevertheless, the research demonstrates that information concerned the elections was published on the Internet on a smaller scale and irregularly. The study confirmed that television in Russia, first of all, was an assistant to the government, directing its efforts to inform citizens about authorities and their socially significant initiatives. Besides, television covered the presidential elections in a better extent. Online media devoted more attention to scandalous news, attempted to criticize the government; however, they overlooked significant social issues.

Keywords: television, online media, election covering, Russian Presidential election, inter-media agenda

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Кризис политической коммуникации: есть ли эффект умалчивания в российских медиа?

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Аннотация. Исследуется повестка дня телеканалов «большой тройки» и популярных онлайн-медиа в период перед президентскими выборами 2018 г. В условиях предвыборной кампании значение качественного информирования значительно возрастает. Изучены повестка дня выбранных медиа, освещение предвыборной кампании, а также возможный «эффект умалчивания». Предлагается уникальная методика сравнения контента вечерних телевизионных новостей и онлайн-медиа, а также концептуализируется понятие «эффект умалчивания». Онлайн-медиа часто воспринимаются как более качественные и полноценные источники информации, однако исследование показало, что сообщения о выборах в интернете появлялись в меньшем количестве и нерегулярно. Анализ подтвердил, что телевидение в России, прежде всего, выступало в качестве помощника правительства, направляя его усилия на информирование граждан о деятельности властей и их социально значимых инициативах. Именно телевидение лучше освещало предвыборную кампанию. Онлайн-медиа уделяли больше внимание скандальным новостям, пытались критиковать власть, однако упускали из внимания важные социальные темы.

Ключевые слова: телевидение, онлайн-медиа, освещение выборов, выборы президента России, повестка дня

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

At the times of crisis, one cannot underestimate the significance of information for the modern political system functioning. The process of obtaining social and political information by citizens as a major component of democratic processes and the formation of social power. In the modern multi-channel environment, the matter of parallel study of media agendas of various types of mass media entering competition for the consumer's attention and determining his picture of the world increases enormously.

In this article attention will be focused on the information agendas formed by Russian television and online media during the 2018 election campaign. The pre-election period (March, 2018) is one of the most interesting times for analysis, when the main trends of modern political communication emerge (Stromback,

Kaid, 2008). At that period television retained its leadership in Russia, however, only among the older audience, while simultaneously losing leading positions among young people¹ (Proskurnova et al., 2021). Besides, in our view, it is of particularly interesting to compare television and online media coverage during the election campaign using the case of Russia. This country embarked on the path of democratization in the early 1990s, however, according to researchers, it is not always successfully coping with it (Voltmer, 2004). Until recently independent online media being able to present alternative points of view were considered relatively free in Russia. The comparison of media agendas allowed us to discover the possible silencing effect which Russian media are often blamed for².

Literature review and conceptual development

The presidential campaign of 2018 in Russia remains the understudied issue in academics. At the same time, while some scholars assume the silencing effect to be an important measure when estimating the conditions of country's political system (Kellam, Stein, 2016), the number of empirical and theoretical research on the topic is still insufficient.

The concept of silencing developed in Communication studies initially related to discursive practices in interpersonal communication, while later its elements were adapted to media studies (e.g., Lumsden, Morgan, 2017). According to the discourse silencing theory, silencing is an active and socially constructed practice while being the result of personal choice (Abdulla, 2022). Simultaneously, it could be used in political communication through mass media and educational institutions to displace from the public sphere unacceptable ideas or to support dominant ideology (Thiesmeyer, 2003). For the purposes of our study, we apply the notion of silencing effect to the phenomenon that emerges when media intentionally avoid covering events or facts valuable for society.

It is evidently that main Russian TV channels provide predominantly a pro-government position (Gulenko, 2021; Gulenko, Dolgova, 2021; Dolgova, Pimenova, 2020). Television all over the world has been subjected to a high level of state control from the very beginning of its existence (McQuail, 2010). Moreover, in Russia television, as a type of media formed during the Soviet period of the country's history, was only the state-owned outlet until 1991. In addition, television was well integrated into the system of television political information and propaganda. Online media began to form in completely different conditions in Russia, initially as a commercial enterprise in the late of 1990s, early 2000s. Therefore, it is quite natural that we can expect different approaches to the coverage of events from these two types of media. Another important characteristic: Online sources have more bandwidth. Television channels of general interest offer newscasts every

¹ Krivobok, R. (2018, September 18). Research: Most Russians learn news from the Internet. *RIA News*. (In Russ.) Retrieved August 15, 2019, from <https://ria.ru/20180918/1528757085.html>

² Bogomolov, Yu. (2017, March 26). The silence of federal TV channels about mass actions in Russia is not a surprise. *Ekho Moskvу*. (In Russ.); Petrovskaya, I (2017, March 2). Shut up, you'll get into the first. What the viewers of the main federal TV channels did not find out about. *Novaya Gazeta*. (In Russ.) "Ekho Moskvу" and "Novaya Gazeta" were liquidated in 2022, and the former editors-in-chief were recognized as foreign agents in Russia.

three hours, online media update news constantly, which often leads to less demanding journalists on the quality and nature of the posted information (Williams, Delli Carpini, 2004). In addition, digital sources have to compete with other resources of the Internet environment: blogs of journalists, social networks that are less demanding of published information (Mancini, 2013). New communication technologies can increase the diversity of published information by expanding the information flow and giving the floor to people whose point of view is often ignored (Maier, 2010). Meanwhile studies of media agendas of various types of mass media, as a rule, demonstrate its similarity (Maier, 2010, Maier, Tucker, 2012; Cushion et al., 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2017).

Methodology

The information agendas of the leading online information sources and the main universal TV channels of Russia was analyzed during the weekdays of the three weeks preceding the presidential election 2018 in Russia (from 26.02.2018 to 16.03.2018). That year had not been complicated by significant foreign policy crises, and therefore it also seems essential to us.

Three most popular Russian TV channels (“Channel One”, “Russia-1” and NTV) were selected for the study, as well as three most popular online media: RBC (1534.5 thousand visitors per month), “Gazeta.ru” (1254.2 thousand people), “Lenta.ru” (1015.4 thousand people per month)³. We have abandoned the websites of print publications and news agencies. All three editions are private. “Lenta.ru” and “Gazeta.ru” were part of one media holding “Rambler & Co”. Until 2014 “Lenta.ru” was considered an oppositional media. RBC is an information portal that appeared as part of the development of the economic information agency RBC (today it is a large multimedia holding). In addition to economic information, the site issues current messages, not only related to the economy.

The information agenda of the TV channels was studied by evening information programs: “Vremya” (“Time”) at 21.00 (“Channel One”), “Vesti at 20.00” (“News in 20.00”) (“Russia-1”) and “Segodnya” (“Today”) at 19.00 (NTV).

Since the presentation of news in a television program and in online media is significantly different, we will separately focus on data collection technology. The news of online publications was investigated at 21.00 on weekdays, i.e. at the moment when all the newscasts on TV channels had already passed. “Lenta.ru” study included messages that were under the heading “Main News”, we also considered the main materials that were published on the first pages of the online media. The website of “Gazeta.ru” was considered on a similar principle. The sample included materials from the “News of the Hour” column, representing important news that was published during the day, and not necessarily for the last hour. On the Internet resource RBC, the study included the main news of the day published at the very top of the page, as well as the main materials for the past day.

During the study all publications were systematized according to two main thematic blocks: “domestic topics” and “international topics”, each of which was also divided into sections. Domestic topics included the following categories:

³ WEB-Index: Audience of Internet projects. Research results: Desktop. (2017, October). *Mediascop*.

“domestic political news”, “economic news”, “sports news”, “socio-cultural news”, “criminal news and news about emergencies”. The following categories were identified in international topics: “international political news” and “international non-political news”. In the course of qualitative analysis, the existence of a particular event in the agenda of both types of media were verified, and also size and format of the report.

Intermedia agenda

The study showed that TV channels paid considerable attention to news related to Russia. The leader in the category of “domestic news” turned out to be the TV channel “Russia-1”, where during the entire period Russian-related news occupied more than 60% of a broadcast, the “Channel One” lagged slightly behind. Television news featured more domestic political content. The leader here was also the TV channel “Russia-1” (Figure 1). The least interest in the domestic political agenda was shown by the online information website “Lenta.ru”.

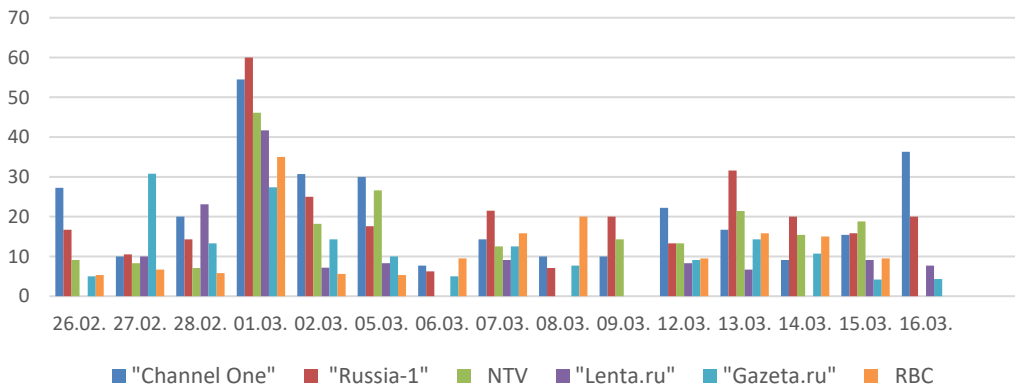


Figure 1. Domestic political topics

The domestic political agenda of TV channels and online media often did not coincide. For example, on March 5, 2018, there were reports in the television news about events with the participation of Russian President Vladimir Putin (the congress of transport workers of Russia, a meeting of the commission on military-technical cooperation), as well as reports on preparations for the election. Online media did not talk about these topics, but wrote about possible evidences of Russian interference in the US elections, and also talked about compromising information on Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska.

On TV channels about 8 minutes every day were allocated for materials about the presidential election (only the NTV twice did not include such news). Online sources did not post materials about the election regularly. Much attention in the Internet was paid to the scandal surrounding the deputy Leonid Slutsky who was accused of harassment. The only channel that casually mentioned this topic was the “Russia-1” TV channel, which in the plot about the election reported on the participation of presidential candidate, liberal politician Ksenia Sobchak in the action against deputy Slutsky (the essence of the protest was not explained).

In terms of the number of materials on economic topics the information resource RBC was naturally ahead (Figure 2). Among the TV channels high indicators, some days close to RBC, were observed on the NTV channel, which integrated a special heading into the structure of the news show. Economic stories on TV channels, as a rule, were associated with the figure of the president or the prime minister, as well as economic initiatives on the part of the authorities. Online media, mainly RBC, talked about the news of enterprises, including falling or rising profits, presented the floor to the owners of companies. Neither “Gazeta.ru” nor “Lenta.ru” were seriously interested in economic topics, for a third of the period these publications did not have such materials.

TV channels covered only major sporting events. In particular, the period of study coincided with the completion of the Olympic Games in Pyeongchang. In general, the share of sports materials in online media was slightly higher (Figure 3). To a greater extent, this topic was the characteristic of “Gazeta.ru” (the source publishes online reports from football matches, hockey and other sporting events), as well as of RBC. It is worth noting the difference in the frames of informational occasions, which we can observe in sports topics coverage. For example, on March 1, TV channels aired information about awarding of Russian winners and prize-winners of the Olympic Games with cars, the studied online media also reported this information, but focused on the fact that they did not give the cars that were promised. This detail was not reported by the TV channels.

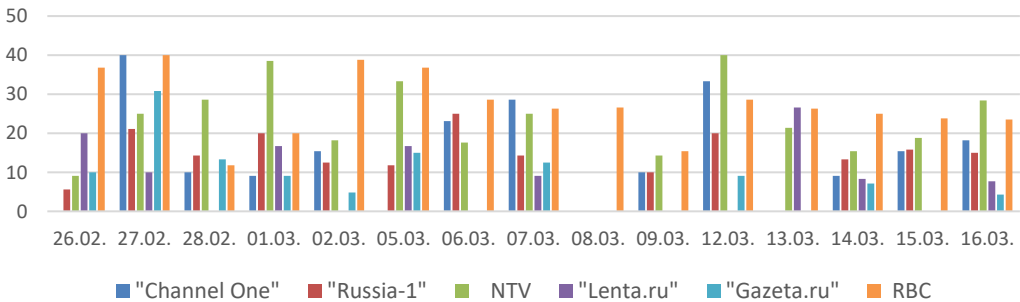


Figure 2. Economic news

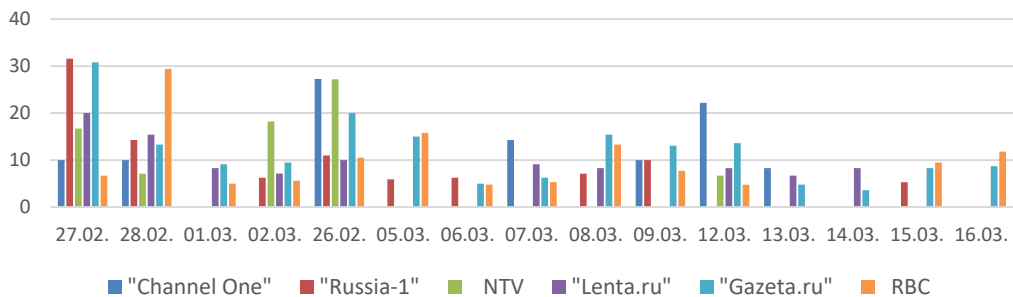


Figure 3. Sports news

Cultural and social topics occupied an insignificant place in the TV news shows (Figure 4). During the analyzed period, there were many days when this

type was absent at all. However, it was observed in considerable numbers of such stories on the pre-holiday and public holiday, March 7 and 8. As for online media, they repeatedly covered socio-cultural topics, often those that were not related to any event. Such stories can be described as entertaining, for example: ratings of the most beautiful actresses or, specially created for the day of cats, “the top-100 most beautiful cats of the Internet”. At the same time, implementing the function of a “watchdog”, online media covered in detail the problem with landfills in the Moscow region, which the Russians actively opposed. TV channels published materials on this topic only once, on April 6, with a positive connotation. TV preferred to cover social issues from a pro-government position (for example, they told about the meeting of V.V. Putin with medical workers).

The share of materials on criminal topics, as a rule, was small both on TV channels and on the studied online media (Figure 5). The interest in this type is higher among the Web sources. In the case of significant emergencies, they were on the agendas of both TV channels and online media, in other cases TV channels and the Internet paid attention to different information occasions. For example, TV have repeatedly talked about gangs of scammers, deceived shareholders a housing construction. Online media, in turn, did not post this news, paying closer attention to the conflict between Telegram and the FSB as well as some high-profile corruption cases. For example, on March 5 information about the total amount of bribes in Russia appeared in the Internet (only NTV mentioned this information in passing in its economic review and RBC wrote in detail).

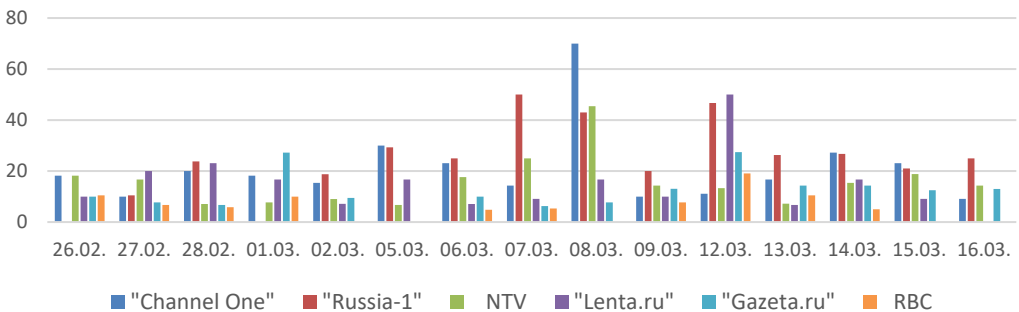


Figure 4. Socio-cultural news

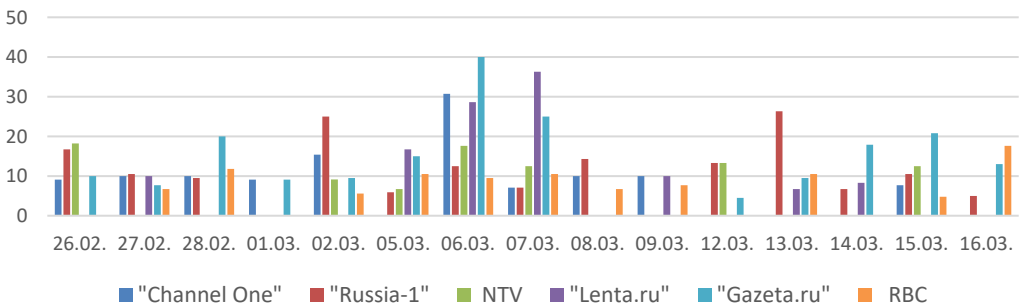


Figure 5. Criminal news and news about the state of emergency

In general, the share of international topics in the information agenda of Internet resources was higher than on TV channels (Figure 6). Nevertheless, international news coincided on television and online media in the case of significant events. There was also a difference in the choice of informational occasions, for example, on March 6, “Lenta.ru” and “Gazeta.ru” covered the accident with Skripals, while TV were silent on this topic, the information appeared in TV show the next day. Besides, TV channels devoted large materials to possible American interference in the Russian elections, while small notes – to possible Russian interference in the US elections. In contrast, online media wrote about the Russian interference in the American elections in detail.

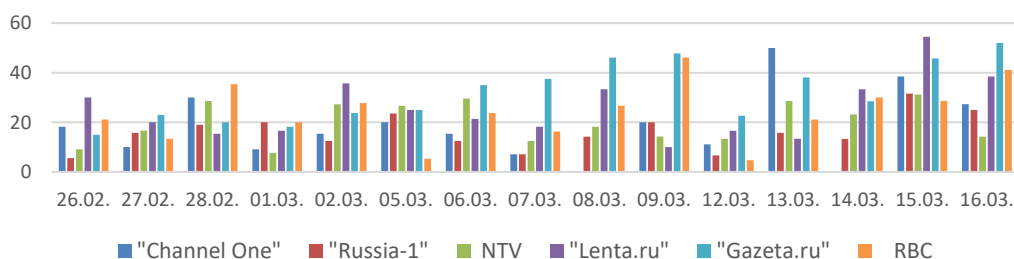


Figure 6. International politics

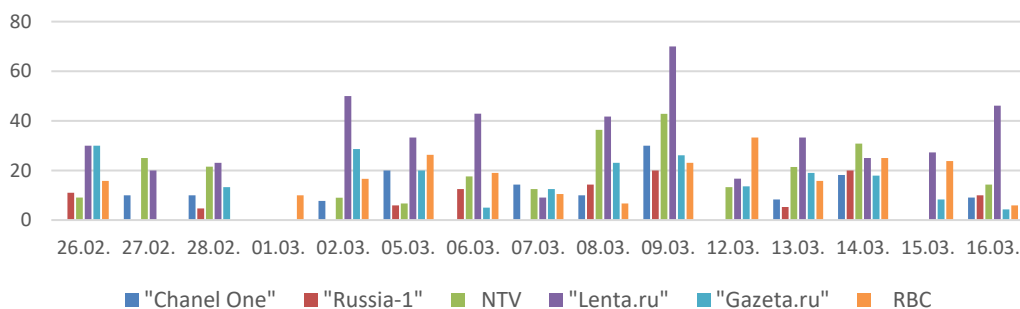


Figure 7. Non-political international information on television and in online media

Events in the Ukraine occupied an insignificant place in news broadcast and online media. The Internet covered the demand for compensation for the loss of Crimea and the investigation of the murder of former deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation Denis Voronenkov in Kiev. TV channels kept silence about that. They reported on the events on the territory of the LPR and DPR and the conflict between the Russian company “Gazprom” and the Ukrainian “Naftogaz”.

Interest in international topics unrelated to politics is noticeably higher among online media than among TV channels (Figure 7). Of particular note was the web source “Lenta.ru”. TV channels paid attention to this type of materials only on days of significant non-political events (for example, March 14, the day of the death of the great scientist Stephen Hawking).

Discussion

In discussion let's mention the history around compromising material on Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska. Online media wrote about him, but TV channels kept silence. However, we cannot talk about the silence about the event, but rather about the refusal to promote the topic of compromising material. Here it would be important to analyze the reasons for the appearance of such information in the pre-election period. Unfortunately, in modern media, when implementing the “watchdog” function, they are often limited to publishing scandalous information without trying to understand the causes and consequences. In this sense, television was either not involved in this game as a stricter gatekeeper or did not support the person who ordered compromising material on the businessman. Thus, we would not apply the silencing effect in this case.

Here we can also continue Entman's argument that the implementation of the “watchdog” function interferes with the maximum objectivity of the media, forcing journalists to look exclusively for negative information reasons in relation to the authorities (1990). It can be assumed that the function of reporting information about the activities of the current government and the control function contradict each other, but this requires further research.

Conclusion

In 2018, the media agenda in Russia functioned according to the principles of an open information space: neither TV channels nor web sources could not talk about the key news mentioned by other media. This is clearly seen in the coverage of the scandal surrounding the poisoning in London of a former GRU employee, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia. TV channels were late in covering this news, but, nevertheless, they could not completely keep silent about it, since the media in Russia and abroad wrote about the event. Nevertheless, media often do not inform about the events that do not conform their editorial policy. The agendas of television and online media coincided when key events took place. Meanwhile, the choice of smaller-scale topics, as a rule, differed. In addition, we can observe general trends among various types of media (television and web) and at the same time fix differences related to the individual information policy of a particular media.

The study once again confirmed that television in Russia, first of all, is seen as an assistant to the government, directing its efforts to inform citizens about the authorities and their socially significant initiatives. Online media paid more attention to scandalous topics, as well as news not related to any information occasion. They also performed the “watchdog” function better and showed themselves to be big, albeit rather soft, critics of the government. However, in an effort to become a controller of power, the online media often missed other important social problems that it would be important for Russians to know about (for example, the problem of deceived shareholders, reports about gangs of scammers), irregularly covered the election campaign.

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