



Strategic Concepts of Media Studies: from Marshall McLuhan to Manuel Castells

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Abstract

The research object is the evolution of the main strategic concepts that determine the impact of information technologies on the socio-cultural development of society at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries and lay the foundations of a new humanitarian science on the media, i.e. mediology. The study is relevant since globalization and digital revolutions change not only the reality and spiritual existence of a person but also the science that studies all these issues. Within the socio-cultural system of media civilization, there is an obvious integration of various humanities that study the role of the media in the formation of civil institutions and personality. The study considers different approaches of both foreign and Russian scholars (sociologists, philosophers, culture experts, philologists) to media science in its historical context and modern realities. The study results substantiate strategic concepts of media science, its issues, and development prospects as a factor in the formation of a citizen in the globalized world.

Keywords

Information Age; Media Science; Digital Revolution; Media Sphere; Strategic Concepts; Civil Society; Media Culture; Internet Culture; McLuhan; Castells



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Стратегические концепции медианауки: от Маршалла Маклюэна до Мануэля Кастельса

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Аннотация

Объект исследования – эволюция основных стратегических концепций, которые определяют степень воздействия информационных технологий на социально-культурное развитие общества на рубеже XX-XXI веков и являются платформой новой гуманитарной науки о медиа – медиалогии.

Актуальность исследования обусловлена тем, что процессы глобализации и цифровой революции меняют не только реальность и духовное бытие человека, но и науку, исследующую все эти вопросы. Неоспорим и тот факт, что в социально-культурной системе медийной цивилизации очевиден процесс интеграции разных гуманитарных наук, изучающих роль медиасферы в становлении институтов гражданского общества и в формировании личности.

Исследование базируется на анализе разных подходов зарубежных и российских ученых (социологов, философов, культурологов, филологов) к проблемам медианауки в ее историческом контексте и в современных реалиях. Результаты исследования связаны с обоснованием стратегических концепций медианауки, ее проблемных зон и перспектив развития как фактора формирования гражданина глобализованного мира.

Ключевые слова

информационная эпоха; медианаука; цифровая революция; медиасфера; стратегические концепции; гражданское общество; медиакультура; интернет-культура; Маклюэн; Кастельс



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Introduction

The information age in which humanity has been living for several decades, has radically changed our existence. The media civilization that has turned the planet into a “global village” (McLuhan, 2003, p. 7) affects the intelligence and life of a modern person. Thus, the media sphere becomes the research of many humanities. In this regard, we have to study those theoretical concepts of media science that united anthropologists and historians, sociologists and philosophers, culture experts and philologists at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Media science originated in the studies of the German philosopher and cultural historian Walter Benjamin conducted between the 1920s and 1930s and updated in the postwar period by representatives of the Frankfurt School. W. Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) provides a deep analysis of a new type of “reproduced” culture based on the synthesis of technology and creativity. According to the philosopher, “reproduction” contributes to the disappearance of ontological and social boundaries between the copy and the original, destroying the “aura” of the same work and devaluing such a concept as creativity (Benjamin, 1996, p. 5).

The intensive study of the media sphere took place in the second half of the 20th century thanks to the Canadian sociologist Herbert Marshall McLuhan, who introduced the term “media” (plural from Latin medium – means, mediator) and the new concept of “media culture” into the scientific vocabulary. The scholar wrote his main works on this topic: “The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man” (McLuhan, 2018) and “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man” (McLuhan, 2003).

The mediatization and formation of the information society became the research object in the works of famous American sociologists: D. Bell, A. Toffler, M. Castells, etc. The history of media science was influenced by the French works on semiotics (R. Barthes, J. Baudrillard, G. Deleuze, J. Kristeva), as well as those Russian scholars whose works analyze the language of media culture, primarily M. Bakhtin, Y. Lotman, and M. Yampolsky.

The information explosion at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries associated with the digital revolution led to the emergence of a different reality (virtual), which environment has become a new socio-cultural habitat. Understanding of “virtuality” as another form of existence as well as its comprehension was proposed in antiquity. In the late 1990s, such concepts as “virtual reality”, “cyberspace” and “virtualization of culture”, etc. became popular and formed the trends that were inseparable from the sociocultural sphere, whether it is theoretical research or real life.

Following the French post-structuralism, in particular Jean Baudrillard, many scholars began to write about new media as “simulacra” of physical reality (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 5–7), which have a negative impact on the life of an individual



or, in accordance with the theory of Roland Barthes, consider the media sphere as a “semiotic system of mythologizing reality” (Barthes, 2008, p. 271).

Manuel Castells contributed to the solution of this problem by devoting his main works to the study of virtual (digital) culture: the three-volume work “The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture” (Castells, 1996) and the monograph “The Internet Galaxy. Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society” published in 2001 (Castells, 2001) and translated into Russian in 2004 (Castells, 2004).

Thus, this study aims at conducting a conceptual analysis of media science, which underwent a complex evolution in the 20th and 21st centuries, formed its own methodology and language, and enriched the sphere of Humanities with new paradigms and meanings, thereby proving the key role of media culture in shaping public consciousness and socializing an individual.

Since this study is interdisciplinary, it combines general scientific, cultural, and sociological methods. At the same time, the integral (synergetic) approach served as the methodological basis for the analysis of this issue, thereby allowing considering the entire complex of relationships between the media sphere, society, and the individual, multiple trajectories of a person’s spiritual existence in the global media environment.

Results

The evolution of media science in the 20th and 21st centuries allows stating that it is concerned with a wide range of issues: these are the development of the media sphere and the creation of a virtual human environment; the formation of media culture, its sign system, and language; the specifics of functioning; media policy, the development of information society institutions, including the issues of managing the media sphere.

H.M. McLuhan’s cultural typology

Herbert Marshall McLuhan, as a like-minded and follower of the famous Canadian scientist Harold Adams Innis (1894–1952), is the creator of a unique cultural-historical typology and is regarded as one of the first media theorists. While analyzing communication channels in culture, the scholar considered the daily life of a person in the information society, i.e. in a world created by the latest media (although he did not use the term “information society” in his works). McLuhan perceived technical innovations as metaphors: “All media are active metaphors”; “Media language, like any other language, is a technology”; “Only an artist is given the right to be the nation’s antenna”; “Being an artist means to manage metaphors”. This is McLuhan’s manifesto, which became the core of the fundamental scientific work “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man” (McLuhan, 2003, p. 135–136).

The historical typology of culture proposed by McLuhan overturned the official theory. Many works of the 1950s and 1960s concerned with mass communication mentioned the loss of classical moral values by society. There are the works



prepared by representatives of the Frankfurt School: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer (Adorno, Horkheimer, 1944), Herbert Marcuse (1994), who recorded the formation of “mass consciousness” and conducted a critical analysis of the media, and their role in the cultural industry as a platform for “mass society”. In “One-Dimensional Man”, H. Marcuse reflected on the degradation of culture in the so-called “consumer society”, proved that media “harmoniously, often imperceptibly, mixes art, politics, philosophy, and religion with commerce”; as a result, “these spheres of culture lead to a common denominator, i.e. the commodity form” (Marcuse, 1994, p. 74). Thus, “high culture” is transformed into “pop culture”, and “one-dimensional thinking” begins to prevail in society (1994, p. 93).

Unlike his predecessors, H.M. McLuhan did not draw parallels between “traditional” and “new” (media) culture. He stated the loss of humanistic ideals and enlightenment illusions typical of the 20th century. In the history of human civilization and media communication, the scholar determined the following main periods: 1) Pre-literate barbarism; 2) Millennium of the alphabet and phonetic writing; 3) Written and printed culture (“the Gutenberg Galaxy”); 4) Electronic culture (“the Marconi Galaxy”). At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, they were replaced by the “Internet Galaxy” in the digital age (M. Castells).

According to M. McLuhan, the decisive factor in historical progress is the change of technology, which gives rise to a change in communication methods. This means that “the type of society is largely determined by the type of communication that dominates in this society, and human perception is determined by the speed of information transmission” (McLuhan, 2018, p. 13).

Thanks to McLuhan, media culture became the main concept of media science, the essence of which is “the totality of information and communication tools developed by humankind in the process of cultural and historical development, contributing to the formation of public consciousness and the socialization of the individual”. It includes “the culture of production, transmission of information and the culture of its perception; it also acts as an indicator of the development of a person who is able to perceive, analyze, evaluate media text, engage in media creativity, acquire new knowledge through the media” (Kirillova, 2016, p. 8). These aspects are highlighted in H.M. McLuhan’s “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man”.

Media culture, as a polyfunctional system, performs a number of important social functions: information, communication, normative (ideological), relaxation, creative, integration, and mediation. This proves that “we live today in the age of information and communication ... which create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate” (McLuhan, 2003, p. 282). Thus, information becomes a kind of “technological weapon” and reminds us that “politics and history must be translated into the concretized form of human brotherhood” (2003, p. 396–397).

Based on the cultural typology of H.M. McLuhan, one should also consider the evolution of media language as a sign system. From the information-semiotic



viewpoint, media culture exists in three main aspects: a system of artifacts – from Latin *arte* (artificial) and *factus* (made), symbols, and signs. “Any system that serves the purposes of communication can be defined as a language”, Yuri Lotman argued (Lotman, 2000, p. 19). While exploring the language of artworks, Lotman proved that any cultural phenomena “should be considered text containing information and meaning” (2000, p. 284). “Text” is a multi-valued concept, and it refers not only to a literary work or article but also to any information carrier, including modern electronic sources.

The evolution of media language as a sign system

Thus, the language of media culture is signs and sets of signs (“texts”) in which social information is “encrypted”, i.e. the content, idea, or meaning embedded in them. One of the “cross-cutting” issues is the connection between text and ideology. In accordance with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory, text is ideological if its idea is “an ongoing event that takes place at the point of a dialogical meeting of two or more minds” (Bakhtin, 2017, p. 130). Considering the ideas of F.M. Dostoevsky, Bakhtin introduced not only the concept of “dialogue” (“dialogism”) but also “polyphony” (“polylogue”) into media science.

This allowed Julia Kristeva, a follower of M. Bakhtin, to look “beyond the language”, to reveal the “pre-verbal” existence of a subject, where the “unconscious” dominates, and to destroy the priority of the sign, thereby moving from semiotics to “semantic analysis”. Kristeva differentiated the traditional structure of text, marking the boundaries between “hypertext” and “intertext”, “genotext” and “phenotext”, which correlate with each other like formula and symbolism, like surface and depth. Thus, the scholar proved that any text is polyphonic and a “special device or platform on which different ideologies come into a severe conflict” (Kristeva, 2004, p. 21).

There is a significant difference between the language of auditory and visual media. In the former systems, sign-related factors are sound, speech, music, and vocalism, as well as time in two dimensions: sequence and simultaneity. The structuring of the latter systems (visual) is connected with space. At the same time, iconic sign systems dominate in traditional visual arts (painting, graphics, or posters).

Technical media culture that reproduces reality is associated with “photogeny” (L. Delluc’s term), i.e. the aesthetics of the frame. Currently, this property is typical not only of cinema and television but also of other audiovisual (screen) means of communication (video, animation, computer graphics, instant messengers, social networks, and other screen technologies). In written culture, the basis of the sign system is a letter or a word. In audiovisual media, the “first brick” is laid by the frame.

A photograph conveying a direct impression of a real event is static. According to Sergey Eisenstein, cinema uses the frame as a “montage cell”, which allows not only to capture any movement but also the impression of some event, as well as



to reveal its meaning (Eisenstein, 1964, p. 290). The TV frame helps the viewer to be included in the “stream of events” and see it “from the inside”.

We can agree with the opinion of Gilles Deleuze that the screen frame gives “virtual visibility which is inhabited by “images-movements” opposite to fixed sections” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 20). In a globalized world, the language of new media transforms. Thus, the language of modern digital screen based on digital coding becomes a form of dialogue in the “man – machine” opposition (Manovich, 2001).

The evolution of media language as the sign system of media culture was analyzed by the author in one of his works (Kirillova, 2020).

Mediatization Theory and the Shaping of the Information Society

These global processes were considered by well-known US sociologists Daniel Bell and Alvin Toffler. In the 1970s, Bell’s book “The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture in Social Forecasting” made the headlines (Bell, 2000). It analyzes various social transformations associated with the technological revolution. Bell introduced the so-called “axial principle” into his scientific concept as a theoretical and methodological foundation. Its essence lies in the fact that different types of society develop in the context of a certain line that determines the social, cultural, political, and economic image of their understanding. Focusing on the post-industrial development of society, Bell proved that, unlike previous eras, the main source of wealth and power, and hence the means of control, are intellectual technologies, whose engine is the “telecommunications revolution” as the basis for organizing and processing information (2000). Bell also introduced the concept of “information society” that, due to the market system of the economy, faces the danger of a deep gap between cultural and social life (2000).

In the trilogy “Future Shock” (Toffler, 1970), “The Third Wave” (Toffler, 1980), and “Power Shift” (Toffler, 2003), Alvin Toffler presented his forecasts for the future in parallel with Bell. In those works, Toffler proved that humanity moved on to a new technological revolution that had changed the life of the entire planet. The sociologist addressed the issue of power and its transformation. Power is the ability and real possibility of rulers or people to impose a radical impact on the activities, consciousness, and thoughts of people, to control their destinies. The concept of power justified by Toffler is not violence and money but rather information, knowledge, and intelligence. Predicting the coming world, the scholar considered social transformations of power as a direct reflection of technological progress, including the ideology of globalism: “Globalism, or at least supranationalism, is a natural expression of new management that should function regardless of state borders. It is obvious that the spread of this ideology corresponds to the personal interests of those who manage the media today” (Toffler, 2003, p. 415). The transition to a knowledge-based economy dramatically increases the need for communication and contributes to the death of the old symbol system. “The new economy is closely connected not only with knowledge and technical skills; it cannot do without media culture and an ever-expanding market of



images...” (2003, p. 8-9). Such is globalization in Toffler’s interpretation, for whom it is the ambiguity of processes in which chance and necessity, chaos and order are combined.

The world that Toffler described in his books is harsh, full of anxiety and collisions. However, there is no exaggeration of those negative consequences of the information civilization mentioned by the Frankfurt School, in particular, Daniel Bell or Erich Fromm. In the late 1970s, these scholars announced the emergence of the so-called “information imperialism” in a technocratic society (Fromm, 2006). According to Toffler, modern civilization is truly democratic as it is based on the dominance of media technologies that can change the entire social life, proving that the real power in the age of computerization, changing human consciousness and transforming human nature, is the power of information, intelligence and knowledge.

The French scholar Roland Barthes provided his own interpretation of the role of media in society. Instead of the “media” term, Barthes used the concept of “modern myths”. In his viewpoint, “myth” and “media” are synonyms since both interpret reality in their own way. However, myths lose the function of interpretation and acquire the ability to disguise ideology. Barthes’ myths serve not to resolve or get rid of social contradictions but to “naturalize” them (Barthes, 2008, p. 233-234).

The internet culture strategy in Manuel Castells' concept

Manuel Castells’ monograph “The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society” immediately became a scientific bestseller, popular in many countries of the world. The scholar wrote his book in 2001 (the initial period of the Internet civilization), which caused tremendous changes in various spheres of society: politics, business, and culture. His analysis of the new socio-cultural environment was far from direct prophecies and forecasts but it remains relevant and in demand, logically continuing many fundamental studies of media communications and media culture of the information age, presented in the works of his predecessors.

While considering the specifics of the Internet, the sociologist emphasized that even at the initial stage it was not subject to strict censorship, being a closed network, communications in which were available only to a narrow circle of the military, students and teachers. In the new millennium, the Internet environment of each country is, to one degree or another, subject to its legislation, which includes control over the illegal distribution of prohibited goods. According to M. Castells, the Internet cannot be completely “controlled” by its technological nature. However, Clyde Wayne Crews, a researcher at the Cato Institute, coined the term “splinternet”, first using it in 2001 to describe his concept of “parallel internets that would be run as district, private and autonomous universes” (A virtual counter-revolution, 2010). The Chinese government erected the “Great Firewall” for



political reasons, and Russia has enacted the Sovereign Internet Law that allows it to partition itself from the rest of the Internet.

In the preface of the book “The Internet Galaxy. Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society” addressed to Russian readers, M. Castells called the Internet “a universal means of free global communication” (2004, p. 5), as well as “the key technology of the information age”, considering it an embodied metaphor of “freedom and creativity as a way of life” (2004, p. 9). How to use it or what content it has – it all depends on the will of users. In the culture of the Internet, Castells highlighted four equivalent subcultures: the techno-elite culture, the hacker culture, the inhabitant culture, and the entrepreneur culture. The “freest” is the techno-elite, i.e. developers (2001, p. 49–51). One can argue with the author’s opinion but it is obvious that the Internet as a “technology of free communication” requires special skills for its implementation. The wider their toolkit, the freer access to information is.

Following such scholars as R. Packer and K. Jordan (2001), Castells defined the specifics of Internet culture as a “new communication model” based on the simultaneous implementation of the following five processes: 1. *Integration*: the combination of art forms and technologies together with the formation of a hybrid form of expressiveness; 2. *Interactivity*: the user’s ability to manipulate and directly influence their perception of media, as well as communicate through media with other people; 3. *Hypermediality*: the connection of individual media elements to create a network of individual associations; 4. *Immersion*: the experience of simulating a 3D environment model; 5. *Narrative*: aesthetic and formal strategies for non-linear forms of narration and representation (Castells, 2001, p. 190–191).

Calling the culture of the Internet a “virtual reality culture,” Castells emphasized that it was virtual “because it was built on electronically driven virtual communication processes”. At the same time, “it is real (and not imaginary) because it is our fundamental reality, the physical basis on which we plan our lives, create our representation systems, participate in the labor process, find the necessary information, form our opinion... This virtuality is our reality. This is what characterizes the culture of the information age: we mainly produce meanings through virtuality” (2001, p. 192). Using the first sociological studies of the Internet, Castells questioned social reality in a virtual environment and argued that the Internet was “the material basis of network individualism” since “each person would be who or what they call themselves on the Internet because a network of social interaction was created over time on the basis of these expectations” (2001, p. 88–89). Furthermore, “network individualism is a social structure, not a collection of isolated individuals... Thanks to flexibility and communication capabilities of the Internet, online social interaction plays an ever-increasing role in social organization” (2001, p. 90). It is worth mentioning the sociologist’s attitude to the role of the Internet in terms of democracy and information policy, although a few years earlier, Castells had already given a negative answer to this question (1996, p. 195). His conclusion drawn



in “The Internet Galaxy” is even harsher: “...The use of the Internet leads to a deepening crisis of political legitimacy by providing a wider launching pad for the politics of scandal. The problem is not the Internet itself but the policy followed by our society” (2001, p. 102).

Defining a security strategy in the Internet age, Castells introduced the concept of “noopolitics” as opposed to “real politics”, the term proposed by J. Arkill and D. Ronfeldt (1999) in connection with the emergence of a global information environment (“noosphere”) covering cyberspace and all other media systems. According to Castells, strategic terms are also “swarming” and “cyber warfare” as the spectra of conflicts and contradictions in the era of globalization and digitalization.

The culture of the Internet as an integral part of the general media culture is multifunctional. As M. Castells proved, it is one of the foundations on which modern global culture is built: it is the fastest, most complete, and accessible means of production, exchange, and storage of information; it is a communicator and intermediary, a source of knowledge and relaxation surpassing printing, radio, and television. Internet is a “zone of freedom”, a tribune of public opinion, and a platform for creative self-expression, i.e. a tool of modern political and sociocultural activity.

The reality created by television differs from the Internet reality as the TV viewer deals with an “imitation” of reality and the Internet user faces its “simulation”. In accordance with the analysis conducted by M. Castells, “simulation” involves not just the image of a real-life object but also the creation of a new reality, i.e. “cyberreality”. Virtual reality has no certain pattern. Television, which is especially evident in the format of reality shows, strives to depict the real world as believably and convincingly as possible. In this regard, virtual reality is more independent and creatively accessible.

The assessment of the socio-cultural impact of the Internet on a modern person and society as a whole remains one of the most urgent challenges. On the one hand, the computer and the Internet open up new opportunities for communication, learning, and leisure activities. The use of Internet resources can significantly reduce physical and economic costs. On the other hand, the Internet immerses a person into a different reality and introduces them to other forms of communication, which often negatively affects their ability to establish contacts and interact with objects of the physical world.

Many technologically advanced countries have a special phenomenon – “*hikikomori*” in Japanese or “*neet*” in English. It stands for a generation of young people who use the Internet and manage to live their life without leaving their homes: they visit online stores, casinos, cinemas, and forums and live such an intense e-life that they physically become recluses (Teo, 2013, p. 339–341). This is one of the urgent issues that representatives of psychology and media pedagogy should solve.

Anticipating many problems associated with the development of the Internet, Manuel Castells emphasized the need to develop the ability to “process information



and generate knowledge in each of us, including every child". By this description, the scholar meant not "literacy in the use of the Internet in its evolving forms, which goes without saying". It is "about education in a broader and fundamental sense, i.e. to acquire the intellectual ability to be educated and learn throughout one's life" (Castells, 2001, p. 280).

By M. Castells' efforts, the emergence and study of the Internet culture led to the functioning and triumph of new media, which specifics were first described by L. Manovich, T. Nelson, N. Negroponte, I. Sutherland, W. Russell Neuman, E.L. Shapiro, etc. The development of new media based on the fusion of traditional media (the synthesis of screen visuals, and music, spoken and written language with the interactive power of computer technology) has caused an unprecedented effect. New media got the synonym "social media" because they began to integrate public and private information.

According to Lev Manovich, the emergence of new media is aimed at creating a new environment with new properties and forms of communication that would allow people to communicate, learn and create in a new way. Are there special forms used by the information society, given that computer networks redefine the very notion of form? We can agree with L. Manovich that "in the end, new forms are not stable, definite, finite and limited in space and time; they often vary, arise spontaneously, are blurred, and cannot be observed directly" (2013, p. 78). Moreover, human-computer interaction, information processing, and Internet communication are dynamic processes, indicating that the current information structures have reached such superhuman scales that an individual is not able to fully perceive and cognize.

Even earlier, Manovich's book "The Language of New Media" (2001) emphasized that computers "as new and universal media machines produced new discourses and new terms, therefore a new language" (Manovich, 2001).

Moreover, the emergence of a new media language due to the transformation of the information environment allowed scholars to create a modern information-semiotic theory of culture, which opens up new horizons for cultural studies and the philosophy of culture, as well as new practical and applied tools and socio-cultural mechanisms.

In a nutshell, Manuel Castells, in one way or another, launched the media science of the 21st century.

Conclusion

On the basis of the study, we have concluded that the conceptual aspects of media science that developed at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries provided certain results, thereby proving the formation and development prospects of a new science of the globalized world (medialogy), which is able to expand and combine the cognitive capabilities of various Humanities (Kirillova, 2015).



Many ideas of M. McLuhan, D. Bell, A. Toffler, and M. Castells are relevant for studying the strategy of modern Internet culture.

The virtual world of computer reality and the Internet has become the most important factor in the new millennium culture. Unlike traditional media, social networks contribute to the active and independent formation of an individual information and communication field, which makes it a universal platform for communication between people from different continents, thereby contributing to the socio-cultural and creative activities of the individual.

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