

Media constructivism and social significance: how do Belarusian media create senses?

Andrei Yahorau

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Media constructivism and social significance: how do Belarusian media create senses?

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Plato wrote: "It ain't whatcha do, it's the way thatcha do it." Then, deciding that the world was not yet ready for this, he scrubbed it out.

Robert Sheckley, Mindswap (1966)

Media and public change

In the modern world, media in all their diversity, from traditional media to online media, blogs and social networks are actively involved in the public changes processes. The exceptional role of the media is due to the fact that they work as a sort of "screen" for social consciousness or, in other words, a site where the society itself is being reflected; where it could see itself, reveal significant negative or positive development trends. Social and political actors are guided in their actions and policies by an image, a picture of the situation, which is created by the media. Radical variants of this thesis create two extreme oppositions. The first one argues that the media deal with objective reflection of real trends in the society, transformed (distorted) by a media-mediator to a greater or lesser extent. The alternative pole of the thesis represents the idea that the media themselves actively construct the reality, and a fact, a person or an opinion exists only to the extent to what it is reflected in the media.

In both first and second statements, the "screen" is an important part of social reality while the media, to a greater or lesser extent, are responsible for its content. Consequently, social actors seeking to make change are oriented to work not only with the very public issues, but with the image of social issues, as well, created on the "screen". Public communications' strategies when dealing with social change necessarily include a component of media-accompaniment. Society and media guidelines ultimately determine the success of the proposed change. For all that, while the problem of communication, collaboration and support by larger groups of population of the actors' actions often gets in the focus of attention, their interaction with the media, for the most part, is located on the periphery of the issues discussed. As a rule, the failure of any NGOs' actions in Belarus is due to their weak society support and weak links with the target groups. From our point of view, this is only a half of the problem, another one is the way that the media form (construct or reflect) alternatives of social development, and the actors themselves, offering and conducting social transformations.

Media represent, show, and make clear to the mass consciousness both current situation and existing in society different development trends. The absence on the "screen" of alternatives of social development makes it therefore unlikely or impossible for these trends to be chosen by the society. Media can help transform as well as conserve the situation, maintaining the existing mainstream and concealing possible alternatives and activities of

their bearers. The “stabilizing”, or “developing” functions’ prevalence depends on the guidelines of media, and on their method of communication and interaction with the actors of social change.

In the current situation, these issues take on added meaning against the background of the information war launched in 2013-2014, with the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Many of the media issues existed before in Belarus, have aggravated and manifested more dramatically. The need to confront “the machine of alternate reality” of the Russian media have problematized the whole set of ideas about the role, place and functions of the media. The expansion of the brave new “Russian World” to the space of public opinion in Belarus requires active forms of counteraction from the Belarusian media community, while encountering traditional guidelines of ideological neutrality, non-commitment and objectivism of independent media. The situation of information war and radical confrontation undermines the grounds and the very possibility of existence of an objective position “beyond” and “above the battle”. The choice of a party to the conflict of ideologies is inevitable, but, at the same time, requires journalists searching for other grounds for saving critical thinking and the norms of journalism ethics.

The purpose of this analytical review stands, firstly, in the progress in understanding the guidelines of the Belarusian media and some aspects of their work, which perform a stabilizing function for the socio-political system of Belarus. Secondly, it is to suggest possible interaction approaches of the Belarusian media and public structures, which allow passing on to the situation of development. Thirdly, it is to identify strategies of analysis of the existing media situation in the current context of the regional information war.

The results of the analysis are based on aggregate data studies of the Centre for European Transformation “Environment in the mirror of media: the practice of Belarusian mass media on the reflection of environmental issues and activities of environmental organizations” (June-November, 2014)¹, as well as on materials of reports and discussions of science-fiction conference “Are media able to perform miracles, or Welcome to NIICHAVO” (December 19-21, 2014)².

The guidelines of the Belarusian media: between objectivity and constructivism

At the base of the understanding, how do the Belarusian media³ create senses and images of social situation, lie basic guidelines that can be placed on two poles: 1) active creation of senses, and 2) reflection of the objective

¹ See (in Russian): *Andrei Yahorau, Alena Zuikova, Andrei Shutau. Environment in the mirror of media. Practice of Belarusian mass media on the reflection of environmental issues and activities of environmental organizations. Research report* [Electronic resource] // Centre for European Transformation. — Website of CET. — 26.01.2015. — Access date: 01.15.2015. — Access mode: http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014_Ecology_Media_RU.pdf, free. — Title screen.

² See video conference materials (in Russian and Belarusian): https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxcX_uRkERMZ0gg_HKOnIza3aPwhQrW8t.

³ Hereinafter, we are mainly talking about independent online news resources.

situation. For the most part, Belarusian news media are placed on the second pole, sharing the guidelines for objectivity and non-commitment of media.

In the course of the study “Environment in the mirror of media ...”, we have seen that at describing the mission and goals of their resources, editors and journalists of the Belarusian media more often speak of providing objective, reliable, unbiased, honest information to readers. Also, the guideline of informing, highlighting the most important and interesting events, prevails. Such understanding of the media mission, widespread in the Belarusian media environment, is related to broadcasting of Western journalism standards back in the 1990s. Let’s quote one of the media experts who participated in the study, *“Irex” has taught that journalism is a fact, and two opinions, and so few people think about what are these two opinions, i.e., roughly speaking, there must be someone like pro-government and someone like opposition one. Herewith, both can talk utter nonsense, but as there are two different opinions, it is journalism*⁴. In some cases, a number of respondents manifested reflexive attitude to the possibility of absolute objectivity in journalistic work. However, clear declaration and recognition of his/her own ideological grounds were rare: in one case, an appeal was clearly voiced as to the “democratic values”, in other — a reference to ideological foundations of a newspaper’s founder, in the third case — to the national foundations which the editorial policy of a publication was grounded on (*“extension of the Belarusian culture and language”, “Belarusian language”, “national culture”*).

Constructive attitude to creating senses is a fairly marginal set within the Belarusian media community. Rather, it is believed that the media act as an objective and impartial information retransmitter, present different points of view and polar opinions. According to this set, a journalist should strive to reflect facts in various interpretations and look for the *“mean”, “cross”* opinions and even, despite the fact that complete objectivity is virtually impossible, he/she should ideally seek for it. Domination of the objectivist position is manifested in the expressions of editors and journalists about editorial policy. As a rule, the editorial policy is understood as *“honesty and objectivity”*, absence of ideology, taking into account different opinions. Thus, most of the media refuse to substantially formulate value and ideological bases of their policy, and the very Belarusian journalism turns into a kind of refraction of the independent journalism’s general ethics.

As a result, the Belarusian media increasingly become passive observers and a “mirror image” of the current situation, rather than active participants in the situation of change. For the latter, it would be necessary to formulate their own goals and principles of social change, their own image of the future of the country. That occurs only in individual cases. Problematization of such understanding takes place only when notes of social responsibility of the media penetrate into the discussion on extended interpretation of the journalism mission. Here, an aspect of presenting socially important issues within the space of public discussion is added to the characterization of the mission. So, the media do not simply reflect the facts, but also raise important issues that need to be addressed. The need of active civic stand and creative journalist position arises, and in this sense, a journalist *“advocates”, “imposes”* his/her opinion to an audience; his/her *“personal interest”* is manifested in this case.

⁴ Hereinafter, quotes and italics designate quotes from respondents’ statements made during the study “Environment in the mirror of media. Practice of Belarusian mass media on the reflection of environmental issues and activities of environmental organizations”. — *Editor’s note*.

But then such a proactive and constructivist guideline of the journalistic community is suppressed by the existing understanding of what is socially significant. The socially significant issue is almost explicitly associated with the interests of a consumer of information; moreover, of a consumer perceived in his/her individual and personal qualities. A significant issue is an issue that can evoke personal emotional response of a reader, affecting his/her private living space, happening geographically close to him/her (*“what's going on near his/her home, next to his/her porch”*) or subjectively close (*“it happens with people like me, with people who are like acquaintances of mine”*). As noted by a respondent from journalists' environment in the course of the study, *“readers are interested in what is happening around them. This is the law of journalism, it is immutable. Readers are not interested in fundamental and global things that they can not feel and touch.”*

The task of bringing socially significant issues to the “screen” falls into a trap of the orientation to the benefit of readers, which is dominant in the Belarusian media environment. Topics that rise above individual requests (eg, environment, national culture or public organizations' activities) are unclaimed, and hence do not possess a sign of public concern. This guideline largely affects the hierarchy of topics and the selection of those issues, which will be brought up by the Belarusian media. This is a sort of “invisible hand” of the media market, the desire of editorial staff and journalists to present a proposal that will be “bought” by the largest possible number of readers.

In the environment of electronic news sources the hierarchy of topics is easily revealed through monitoring of the amount of publications' views. During the years of such monitoring, a stable opinion has been formed in the journalist environment, regarding the potential importance and interest of topics for readers. The priorities are ranked in such a way that issues of domestic politics and economics take largely the lead over all the other topics. The media coverage slips into the space of consumer issues, entertainment and stories submitted through the prism of a singular person (moreover, narrated in a way so that to evoke emotional connection of a reader with a character of a plot). Editors and journalists are aware that complete indulgence to the needs of mass audience can reduce the overall substantive level of plots. Actually, exactly such awareness of social responsibility and unwillingness of the media to slip into the format of “yellow press” and entertainment “gloss”, forces them to refer to unpopular topics or search for ways of presenting such topics in a popular format for readers.

Such a situation is not all in all surprising, and our study results are empirical confirmation of the theoretical statements of Pierre Bourdieu on functioning of the media field and the logic of struggle for the media rating⁵. An alarming symptom is the borrowing of such logic of rating by the Belarusian non-profit media, which, according to their mission, should have adhered to other aims. Besides, all this is of little service to public actors oriented on the production of changes in achieving positive results of such changes, in the situation of transformations and challenges of the information war.

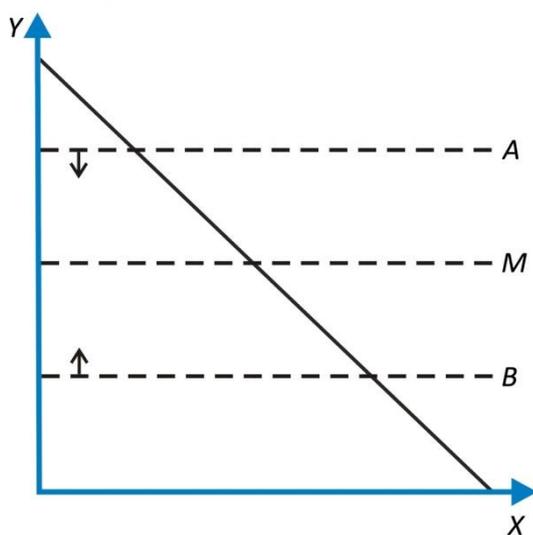
⁵ See (in Russian): *Bourdieu P. On television and journalism* / Trans. from French by *T. Anisimova, Y. Markova*. — Moscow, 2002.

The median reader theorem and the paradox of social significance

Focus of the Belarusian news media on meeting demands of the highest possible number of information consumers allows drawing analogies with some theoretical schemes and models. Pierre Bourdieu when describing the consequences of impersonal logic of rating (“no one is the subject of this activity in the literal sense of the word”, “it is not recognized as such and is not the realization of anyone's will”⁶), says that this logic leads “to uniformity and trivialization, to conformism and depoliticization” of the main media content: “... the information supplied by such media becomes the information omnibus, without any “roughness”, uniform information; one can imagine the possible political and cultural consequences. It is a well-known rule: the more a particular media or means of creative expression seeks to conquer public at large, the more it loses its “roughness”, everything that may divide or exclude <...>, the more it should endeavor “not to shock anybody”, not to raise other issues than those that do not cause the consequences”⁷.

I.e., generally, averaging and simplification of the messages' content takes place. Thus, if to place in the Y-axis direction number of readers of certain material, and in the X-axis direction — complexity of the content of the material (its knowledge-based character, originality, conceptual richness of the message), the number of readers will decrease with increasing complexity of the material. Accordingly, news media oriented to the number of readers, but not willing to slip into absolute populism will tend to some average value of “complexity of content — number of views” (see Chart 1).

Chart 1. “Complexity of content — number of views”

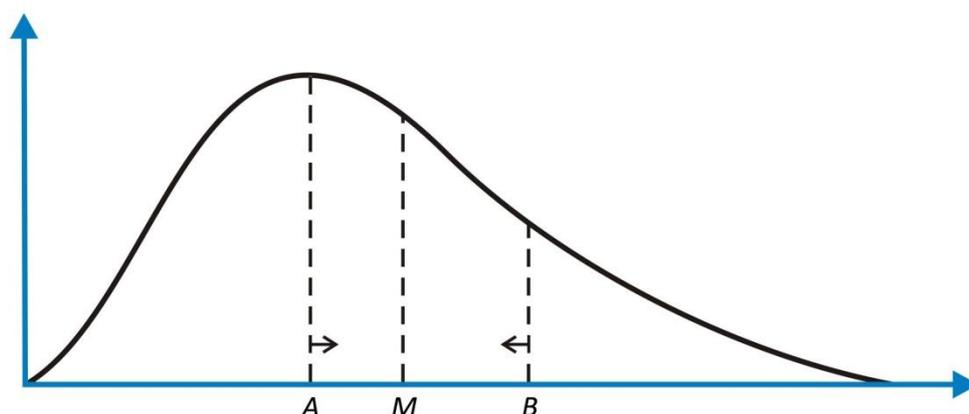


⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Similar conclusions follow from applying for the analysis of the well-known political theory “median voter theorem” (Duncan Black, 1948; Anthony Downs, 1957), which can be called by analogy “the median reader theorem”. “Median reader” is the reader, whose preferences are the most typical and spread among the total sum of readers. Then, out of two competing media (*A* and *B*) more popular will be the one whose content is closer to the preferences of the “median reader” (*M*). The content of media competing for the “median reader” will shift from the extreme poles interesting to small number of readers, to the center (see Chart 2).

Chart 2. “Median reader”



Theoretical consequences of this model are:

- 1) **Assimilation (“similarity”)** of various media content (averaging of thematic variety, similar headings, similar hierarchy of topics and shares of similar topics in total number of materials). Willing to win the majority, media will adapt the content to the interests of the “median reader”;
- 2) **Enlargement of the media.** Willing to win the majority, the major media will co-opt and absorb smaller resources working for narrow audiences, or involve their thematic findings;
- 3) **Emergence of “niche” media.** Smaller media, refusing to compete with the big media for the “median reader” will seek to single out their own segment of readers in areas remote from the “median reader” preferences.

Thus, the Belarusian Internet news media should become larger, more similar to each other in content, average in terms of complexity of materials; herewith, in the presence of niche resources with specific content for narrow audiences in the periphery of media field. To make the empirical analysis of the Belarusian situation complete, there is a lack of data, but we can observe in our media field some of the trends that correspond to theoretical consequences, described above:

- 1) The main content of the Internet news media is tied to the two major news providers: BelTA and BelPAN (**convergence of content and enlargement**);

- 2) The structure of Internet news media is dominated by large news aggregators and news agencies, Charter'97, TUT.BY, "Nasha Niva" (*Our grain field*), "Belaruski partisan" (*Belarusan partisan*), BelTA, Naviny.by (**enlargement**);
- 3) From 50% to 90% of the popular news aggregators' content are the borrowed materials from other media, largely tied to the newslines of BelTA and BelaPAN (**convergence of content**);
- 4) News aggregators borrow materials from "niche" resources, such as reprinting materials of "Yezhednevnik" (*Diary*), CityDog.by, kyky.org (**absorption of "niche" media content**);
- 5) Emergence of new media and progress of existing "niche" media: "Ezhednevnik" (*Diary*), CityDog.by, kyky.org, "Belaruski zhurnal" (*Belarusan magazine*), and others.

To a large extent, such a structure becomes rigid to penetration of new topics and subjects in the media. In turn, this limits its capacity to support proactive strategies of actors of social change, who effectually are the bearers of new ideas and topics. In a sense, it creates a paradox of impossibility to promote within the Belarusian society topics that can be understood as significant by social activists and by the journalistic community, but that are not reducible to individual interests of readers, that go beyond preferences of the "median reader". These topics include, for example, the environment, democratic values, activities of non-governmental organizations, problems of higher education, science and many other "complicated" and "abstract" issues. The specified paradox works as follows on the example of the environmental subject: the environment is important for everyone in principle, but "everyone" is not interested in the environment, media will not write about it because it does not directly address everyone, and therefore, the subject will not acquire popularity and social significance. This vicious circle can be broken either by mass education efforts (for example, through the efforts of state), or by long and consistent work to promote new values in society (*praca organiczna*, organic work⁸).

Media and social change

If one doesn't take the concept of omnipotence of the media as its surface value, then the one responsible for the production of social change becomes not only media, but also actors of social change ("people who want the strange" (Arkady and Boris Strugatsky), the "superfluous men" (Mikhail Petrov), "newsmakers" (Uladzimir Matskevich), as well as society as a whole. That is, changes are possible when the relationship is changing between these elements of the whole system.

Let's formulate a hypothesis: in the Belarusian society, such relationship has established between the actors of change, the media and the public that they mutually support the existing system of political and social relations. Third sector (NGOs, civil society organizations) has been considered as one of the main actors of transformation and democratic reforms, the site of appearance and place of living of "newsmakers" (and so it was until recently). However, in our socio-political situation the organized civil society is rather incorporated in the whole system, and

⁸ See: **Organic work** [Electronic resource] // Wikipedia. — The Free Encyclopedia. — 22.11.2006. — Access date: 15.01.2015. — Access mode: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organic_work, free. — Title Screen.

supports its stability. NGOs largely function as social actors, providing additional services in relation to the government and commercial sector (social assistance, informal education, etc.)⁹. I.e. “newsmakers” exist today rather outside the organized civil society¹⁰. I.e. “newsmakers” exist today rather outside the organized civil society. For the media that tend to ignore the topics of civil society activities, agents of social change are marginalized twice: both as being localized inside the Third sector, and, moreover, as new type agents that are situated outside of the Third sector.

Belarusan society in its value priorities is neither a bearer of the values that contribute to change (at least, to the changes in the direction of expansion of democratic rights and freedoms). According to the World Values Survey, Belarusians are focused on secular-rational values and survival values. Secular-rational values have the opposite preferences to the traditional values and, to a lesser extent, place less emphasis on religion, traditional family values and authority. Secular-rational societies are characterized by the relative acceptance of divorce, euthanasia, abortion, and suicide. Survival values place emphasis on economical and physical security. Societies that adhere to the values of survival put security above freedom, do not accept homosexuality, refrain from political activities, do not trust “outsiders”, have a low level of happiness, a low level of public trust and tolerance¹¹ (see Chart 3).

Such kind of value paradigms, from the point of view of Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, is not conducive to democratic change. The latter are initiated by societies, where the values opposing to survival begin to dominate, such as self-expression values; or, more specifically, a special subtype of self-expression values - values of emancipation. The latter combine emphasis on freedom of choice and equality of opportunity; they include priority of lifestyles’ freedom, gender equality, and personal autonomy, “provide for the primacy of individual liberty over collective discipline, diversity over compliance to the group norm and independence of citizens over the state power”¹².

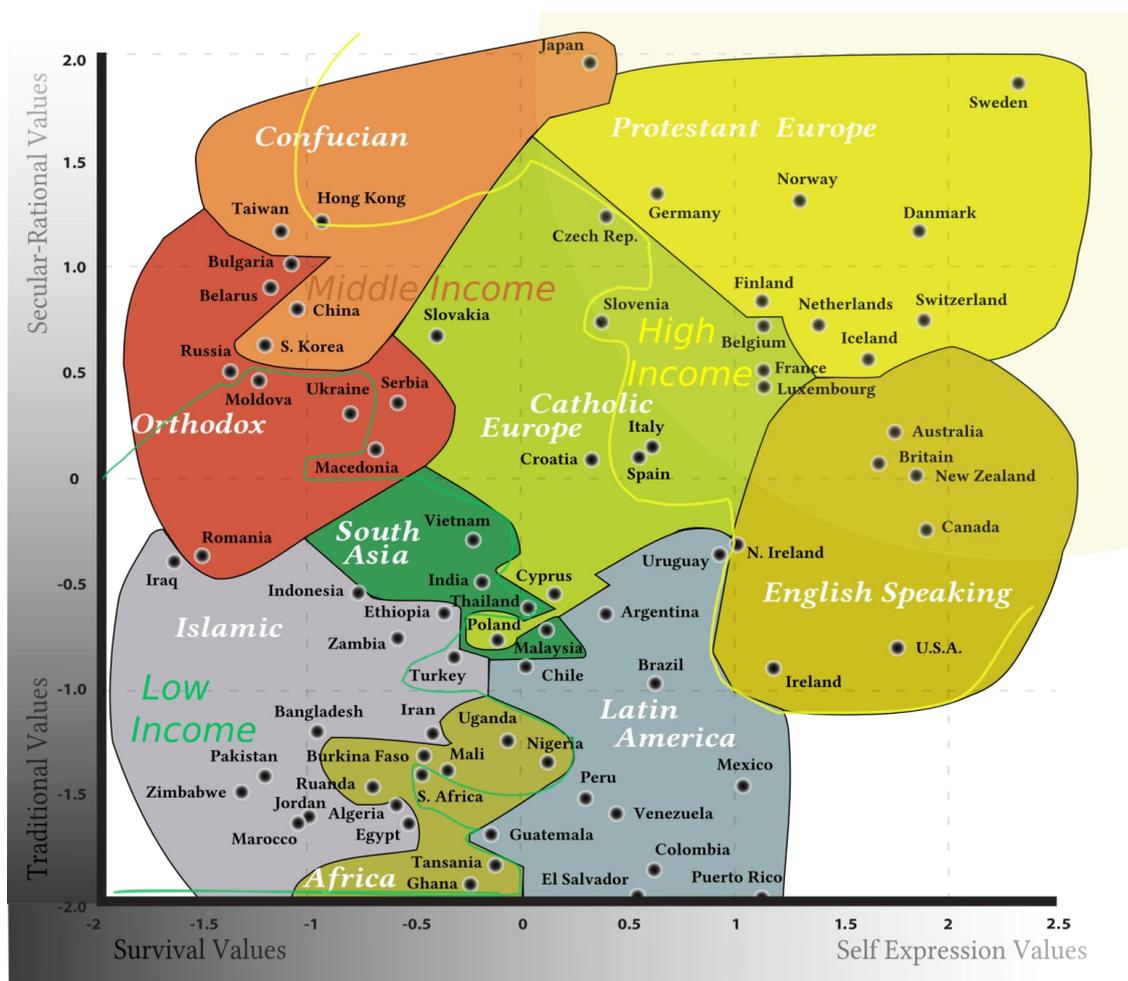
⁹ See (in Russian): *Tatiana Vadalazhskaya, Aksana Shelest, Andrei Yahorau, Alena Artsiomenka. Study of the potential of solidarity in the Belarusian organized civil society. Research report* [Electronic resource] // Centre for European Transformation. — Website CET. — 17.11.2014. — Access date: 15.01.2015. — Access mode: http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2014_Solidarity_NGOs_Belarus.pdf, free. — Title Screen.

¹⁰ See (in Belarusian): *Serhiy Datsyuk. Fourth sector* / Trans. from Ukrainian by *Andrei Shutau* [Electronic resource] // Centre for European Transformation. — Website CET. — 25.12.2014. — Access date: 15.01.2015. — Access mode: <http://cet.eurobelarus.info/by/news/2014/12/25/chatsverty-sektar.html>, free. — Title Screen.

¹¹ See: World Values Survey: www.worldvaluessurvey.org; (in Russian) *Ronald Inglehart, Christian Welzel. Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy. The Human Development Sequence*. — Moscow, 2011; *Welzel, Christian* (2013), *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹² See (in Russian): *Ronald Inglehart, Christian Welzel. Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy. The Human Development Sequence*. — Moscow, 2011.

Chart 3. The Inglehart–Welzel cultural map of the world (2010)



The study “Belarus and Eastern Partnership: National and European Values”¹³ reveals value priorities of the Belarusian population, similar to the World Values Survey. According to the study, Belarusians put the values of peace and stability, economic prosperity, health and social protection higher than the values of human rights, personal freedom and self-realization, democracy (see Table 1).

¹³ See (in Russian): **Public Opinion Poll. Belarus and Eastern Partnership: National and European Values** [Electronic resource] // The Office for European Expertise and Communication — OEEC website — 30.10.2013. — Access date: 15.01.2015. — Access mode: <http://oeec.by/story/opros-obshchestvennogo-mneniia-belarus-i-vostochnoe-partnerstvo-nacionalnye-i-evropejskie-cennosti>, free. — Title Screen.

Table 1. Distribution of answers to the question: “Please match in this list the values that you consider the most important for you personally”, %

| | |
|---|------|
| Peace and stability | 66,8 |
| Economic prosperity | 59,9 |
| Health and social protection | 54,3 |
| Security | 43,9 |
| Human rights | 40,9 |
| Personal freedom and self-actualization | 32,8 |
| Absence of corruption | 26,9 |
| Democracy | 25,4 |
| Justice and openness | 18,0 |
| Market economy | 16,8 |
| Respect for other cultures | 11,8 |
| Preservation of cultural heritage | 11,5 |
| Freedom of media | 10,6 |
| Difficult to answer | 9,0 |
| Respect for other religions | 7,7 |
| Tolerance | 6,1 |
| Solidarity | 5,8 |
| Gender equality | 4,3 |
| None of the above mentioned | 3,0 |
| Other | 2,0 |

Such a structure of values of the Belarusian population, presumably, should have an impact on the structure and hierarchy of the readership preferences. In other words, the values most spread in society form the requests of the “median reader”. And if the media adapt their content to the needs of the “median reader”, then they should also have a similar structure and hierarchy¹⁴. This issue requires special studies, but in the first approximation, we can say that the structure and thematic hierarchy of the news media content meets the needs of the “median reader”, which, in turn, reflect the value priorities of the Belarusian population. The averaging of the entire system “media-reader-society” occurs to a segment of the secular-rational values and the values of survival. That is not conducive to social change.

Media strategies of the changes’ actors

The above-drawn picture gives more questions than answers, but the obvious is the need to change traditional forms of interaction between the actors of change (both living within the NGO sector and outside of it) with the media. In the first approximation, we can identify several areas of work with the media field:

¹⁴ See, for example, ranking of preferences of the print media readership (in Russian): *Pravdivets V., Rothman D., Rusakevich B. Information field of the Republic of Belarus. Structure and approaches to the study. Formation and development.* — Minsk, 2009.

Firstly, the formation of proactive media strategies by social actors:

- 1) It is necessary to organize the work of own press services, press secretaries, PR managers responsible for communication with the media. With all the banality of such a recommendation, lack of professionalism of social activists in dealing with the media is a very common phenomenon;
- 2) Formulating own information policy (ie an actor needs to decide what exactly he/she wants from the media). Such a strategy, in addition to the standard elements could include:
 - a) description of the Belarusian media field which to build relations with; in particular, describing (for themselves) the significance of individual media, their influence, detecting their editorial guidelines, goals, audience, the degree of familiarity;
 - b) description of the forms of relations with the media (in relation to specific resources). This may include partnership projects and thematic editions, training courses for journalists, press tours, help to distribute publications, etc. Specific attention should also be paid to the establishment of relations with the state media;
 - c) editors and journalists' contacts database with reflection of spectrum of interest and history of relations.
- 3) Expansion of the forms of interaction with the media. In addition to traditional presentation of press releases, many journalists expect more active contacts: calls, proposals of interesting topics, briefings, press tours to the regions, constant informing through social networks, providing contacts of press services and experts — social activists;
- 4) Many media expect to receive exclusive, relevant, prompt information. It is obvious that such kind of information can not be provided to all resources, so there's need to build relations with each resource individually;
- 5) Involvement of media-persons in one's activity or "raising" them in one's environment. Let's quote one of journalists who participated in this study: *"For example, if Darya Domracheva¹⁵ became the honorary chairman of any organization, then everybody would write about it"*;
- 6) Providing regular and various information, not only about events, promotions and campaigns, but also about problems; providing monitoring data, research results presented in a popular way, with a variety of facts and figures;

¹⁵ Darya Domracheva is a Belarusian biathlete who won three gold medals in the pursuit, individual, and mass start competitions at the 2014 Winter Olympics and became very popular figure within the Belarusian society. — *Editor's note.*

7) Presenting social problems in a more “human spirit”: in a less specialized language, through the stories of people, both geographically and emotionally close to an individual, approximate to the consumed media format.

Secondly, drawing representatives of the media community into the activities and club forms of communication of actors of change. Here, relationships both with editorial offices and editors, and individual journalists are important:

- 1) Building relationships with editorial offices and editors. First, one needs to make a list of editorial offices that might be useful. With this list, one can imagine what do the media write about and whether they write on the useful topics (it’s necessary to clear up what is interesting to particular edition, particular editorial office);
- 2) Establishing primarily informal contacts with editors. One must make acquaintances with them and maintain more or less regular contacts, draw into club formats of communication;
- 3) Active offers of joint projects and cooperation. Many editorial offices will be interested in cooperation, if they are offered co-financing of projects, additional bonuses for journalists (advanced trainings, travels, internships, workshops), or assistance in distributing the edition materials. Herewith, it is important to reach editors with a ready-made concept of cooperation;
- 4) Formation of one’s own pool of journalists interested in the topics, useful for actors of change. Informal contacts and communication, drawing journalists both into working relationships and in the living environment of social activism also play a large role here.

Thirdly, expansion of one’s own information promotion channels and forming one’s own readership. If the media write on interesting topics to the audience, it will be necessary to build and numerically expand specific audience of interested readers. This problem can be solved not only in terms of the broad mass education, but also through gathering people focused on certain subcultures. For example, media will write for noticeable in town audiences of people with ecological lifestyle. This can be done through creating and expanding eco-life-style fashion in social networks and real-town communities.

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