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РИНЦ



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**Медиакультура
и доверие к медиа:
эмпирическое
исследование в Болгарии**

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**Media Culture
and Media Trust:
an Empirical Research
in Bulgaria**

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ОРИГИНАЛЬНЫЕ СТАТЬИ

Аннотация:

Автор определяет медиакультуру как сложный феномен, включающий в себя ценности, идеологии и мировоззренческие установки, специфику аудитории, а также доверие как основополагающий принцип функционирования публичной и массовой коммуникации. В статье представлены результаты эмпирического исследования, проведённого в Болгарии, в рамках которого с помощью онлайн-анкетирования было опрошено 1000 респондентов. Инструментарий исследования включал вопросы закрытого и полужакрытого типа; для оценки ответов использовалась шкала Лайкерта. Анализ полученных данных свидетельствует о существенных трансформациях в отношении к медиа, особенно среди представителей молодого поколения. Отмечается, что одним из таких сдвигов является предпочтение онлайн-новостных ресурсов и социальных сетей традиционным СМИ. Сообщается, что вместе с тем расхождения в ответах респондентов указывают на глубокий кризис доверия к медиа среди опрошенных. Кроме того, результаты исследования доказывают, что часть респондентов легко подвержена влиянию дезинформации. Автор приходит к выводу о необходимости повышения уровня медиаграмотности в цифровой среде.

Ключевые слова:

медиакультура; установки; доверие к медиа; медиаграмотность; болгарские медиа.

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Abstract:

Media culture is a complex phenomenon that includes values, ideologies and world-views, specificities of the audiences and trust as a basic principle of public and mass communication. The paper presents the results of an empirical study conducted in Bulgaria where 1000 informants have been interviewed by means of an online questionnaire with closed and semi-closed questions using the Likert scale in the designed answers. From the received data there are evidences about significant transformations of the attitudes to the media, especially among the younger generations. One such shift is related to the preference of online news media and social media for the sake of the traditional media. However, the discrepancies in the provided answers to the questionnaire show that there is a huge crisis of media trust among the informants. Moreover, the results prove that some of the respondents can easily be susceptible to disinformation. This means that there is a high necessity of raising the awareness in the digital environment.

Key words:

media culture; attitudes; media trust; media literacy; Bulgarian media.



Медиакультура и доверие к медиа: эмпирическое исследование в Болгарии

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1. Введение = Introduction

Media culture has become in postmodernity the foundation on which social psychological attitudes, values and worldviews are built. It also presupposes the development of civil awareness and the assertion of individual and collective identities as never before. The mediatization of society represents a complex interaction between the media, on the one hand, and the diverse social strata and fragments of society. This fragmentation and diversification deepens even further in the new digital environment, which naturally creates the conditions for the proliferation of virtual identities and communities. Digital and Internet culture is one of the main factors of globalization in postmodern society and is often defined as a prerequisite for the construction of a global society and global culture. The “global village” postulated by McLuhan, if it seems a revolutionary theory for the era of the electronic media and television in particular, in the era of Internet becomes an element of everyday life. However, the contemporary media-based society is much less built on the principles of universalization and unification, of erasing cultural, ethnic and national characteristics, as most authors in the late 20th and early 21st centuries argued. On the contrary, through the digitalization of the modern world and the strengthening of the influence of the social networks, national and ethnic communities, including minorities, can be in the center of the public attention and can maintain their own identities.

Some researchers equate media culture with mass culture and believe that mass culture has arisen and spread only after the emergence of the mass media [Morin, 1983]. Other scholars link media and mass culture to technology and even postulate a model of direct interdependence, which is called by them the “growth model” [Hodkinson, 2017]. In this model the modern technologies inevitably lead to media convergence. “Convergence” has become one of the most frequently used terms in the media studies today, illustrating the process, in which new technologies are adopted by the media culture industries. According to Dwyer [2010], this implies both structural and cultural transformations of the media industries themselves. For example, the unification of the Internet



and television on different platforms and electronic devices creatively diversifies the existing television formats and multiplies the possibilities for segmenting audiences, who are no longer passive receivers but have the opportunity to actively participate in mass communication. Simultaneously, authors, such as Powell [2013], emphasize that the most common misconception regarding media convergence is to believe that its end result is the synthesis of different media into a single communication channel, while it actually represents a mutual enrichment and diversification of different media forms, as well as the creation of a heterogeneous and pluralistic cultural environment. Thus, it is also believed that digital communication contributes not only to the transformations of the relations between media and society, but it requires contemporary scholars to rethink the very concept of public communication [Hepp et al., 2017].

Valkenburg et al. [2016] underline five media effects according to different media research theories: selectivity of media use (including psychological and other dispositions); content properties; indirectness of the media effects and transactionality (both interpersonal and intrapersonal). Although some authors like Valkenburgh claim that media do not influence human behavior directly and explicitly, other researchers, on the contrary, believe that media can affect behavior patterns, thoughts, tastes and worldviews. Slater [2015] proposes the “reinforcing spiral model” that provides a theoretical framework of the use of the media as a dynamic and endogenous process combining selective exposure and media effects. However, the contemporary theories of the media effects only outline new nuances of some well-known old media theories, such as “the cultivation theory” of Gerbner [1998], which was initially related to the electronic media and to the television in particular. According to Gerbner and his followers, the broadcast of violence on television is one of the main reasons for the development of violence and aggression in society [Hurley 2004].

In such a way, digital media culture emerges as a socially significant phenomenon that includes various aspects — from the development of technology, innovations and creative industries, to consumerism and marketing, human and cultural values, worldviews and tastes. Thus, several important elements can be underlined within the framework of the contemporary digital culture: the technology, the participative audience, the pluralization of the virtual communities and the selectivity of contents. This also means that in a pluralistic setting of various media, contents and audiences trust has become one of the most important pillars of media culture.

2. Материал, методы, обзор = Material, Methods, Review

Media culture in postmodern times practically encompasses all spheres of life, so the in-depth study of it requires an interdisciplinary approach. The in-



fluence of the digital media is far from being limited to the study of consumerism, creative industries, marketing or advertising in the Internet environment. The postmodern world is filled with digital media products related to industries that are traditionally not associated with the media, such as healthcare, government, education, ecology and nature saving, etc. In such a way, in order to study media culture in the digital environment, researchers may have to apply a variety of approaches — communicational, cultural, philosophical or marketing approaches. On the one hand, media culture today can be considered a global, worldwide phenomenon that has its own characteristics, values and norms and imposes new global standards for media literacy. On the other hand, digital media culture is so personalized and individualized that a wide variety of subcultures have been created within the global culture, each one imposing their own codes, symbols and norms. The fragmentation of the society leads to the fragmentation and segmentation of mass communication, where the characteristics of social and cultural groups have gained increasing importance — these are groups by gender, age, professional and educational communities, as well as groups by ethnicity, religion, national and linguistic affiliations. This fact implies the diversity of approaches and methods that can be applied to study the complexity of the digital communication in the postmodern world. The interdisciplinary approach should also include research in the values, attitudes and behaviors of individuals in the digital environment, personal and group identification of individuals, virtual self-concepts and social roles, as well as the formation of public opinion in the social networks.

This paper studies the attitudes of the Bulgarians towards both the traditional and the social media as carriers of social values. The main focus is on the possible shifts in the perceptions during the last decades. Despite the various possibilities the study is based on two basic approaches. First, it uses the value approach in the social sciences. The main belief underlying the choice of this approach is that values are deeply embedded in the collective cultural consciousness and that all the basic processes that take place in the political and social life of the country, can be explained with existing value models. This approach has also been defined by media researchers as the approach of media axiology. The search for the truth and the verification of truth in the media is determined as much by universal professional standards as by basic values instilled in the culture, thus creating the particular value model of the given culture.

Also, the research shares the approach of symbolic interactionism, which has become particularly popular in communication sciences at the end of the 20th century. It gives priority to the concept of "self" that develops in communication with "others". The symbols, adopted by culture, on which individuals build their views and perceptions of the world, are the primary focus of the research-



ers — interactionists [Gumperz, 1989; Carbaugh, 2006]. Although symbolic interactionism includes the sociolinguistic approach, it is much broader than it, as it unites the individual psyche, language and its symbols, and the cultural environment, understood as material-technical and technological development. The change of the characteristics of the media environment contributes to the transformations of the social interaction and gives rise to new symbols that transform the worldviews of the human beings. Thus, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, each era and each generation, depending on the social and technological development, has its own concepts and interpretations of media pluralism and democracy.

Following the value approach a questionnaire¹ with closed and semi-closed questions has been designed using the Google forms. 1000 Bulgarians were interviewed online from April to December 2025. In order to measure the attitudes and worldviews, the Likert scale has also been applied to the designed answers in the questionnaire.

A research with online questionnaire has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one side, it does not need all the paper work done and is thus, both efficient and time saving. On the other hand, such a study, despite its huge scope, cannot be representative for the Bulgarian citizens. From the analysis of the demographic data about the participants it is evident that mostly younger people participate in online surveys. The older age groups might not be so well represented by the online research. However, the data received from the online questionnaire can be used to outline some important transformations of the worldviews and social attitudes within the Bulgarian society. Moreover, as young adults are the future of any society, it is important to study the values of younger generations too.

Together with the investigation of the attitudes to the media the research focuses on the problem of media trust. In the recent years there have been several major studies in media trust. Tsfaty et al. [2022] investigate the news coverage in both general and topical media and find out proofs that the news coverage of some topics are trusted more than others. Moreover, according to the authors trust in the news coverage of a topic is a better predictor of the accuracy of perceptions in comparison to the general media trust. In another online survey conducted in Norway by Knudsen et al. [2022] the focus is put on how ordinary citizens define and understand media trust. According to the researchers the most important predictors of the levels of trust vary mainly by educa-

1 The questionnaire was developed by Prof. Dr. Diana Petkova and Prof. Dr.Sc. Andreana Eftimova from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria and by Prof. Dr. Slavomir Galik, Prof. Dr. Norbert Vrabc, Prof. Dr. Sabina Galikova Tolnaiova and Prof. Dr. Viera Kacinova from "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" University in Trnava, Slovakia.

tion and satisfaction with democracy but not by other known predictors, such as political preferences and ideology. In a third study conducted by Stromback et.al. [2020] the researchers come to the conclusion about the distrust that many people show to the traditional media. According to the authors although there may be differences across different countries and regions the non-mainstream media by producing fake news can significantly undermine trust in mainstream media.

Thus, the limits of the present research in Bulgaria are clearly visible — the study does not focus on topical trust but outlines general media trust only. Also, it does not investigate predictors of the levels of trust but studies general attitudes and predispositions to the media. However, despite these limitations, based on the received data it is possible to reach some conclusions about the media culture and media literacy in Bulgaria.

3. Результаты и обсуждение = Results and Discussion

3.1. Empirical Data

The data show that the majority of the interviewed people (651) belong to the age group “up to 25”, 123 informants are between 36 and 45 years old, 93 people are from 46 to 55 years old and almost similar number of people (92) belong to the age group 26—35. The two groups from 56 to 65 and over 65 years old are underrepresented in this study with respectively 25 and 16 informants only (Fig. 1). The majority of the respondents are female (738), while 255 are male. 7 people have not given answer about their sex (Fig. 2). More than half of the informants (517) have finished their high education, 245 claim to have Bachelor degree, 167 are Masters, 53 have defended PhD thesis and 18 have elementary education. (Fig. 3)

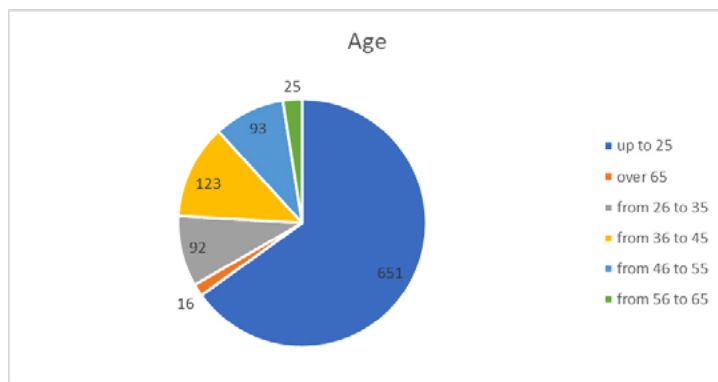


Fig. 1. Age of the respondents

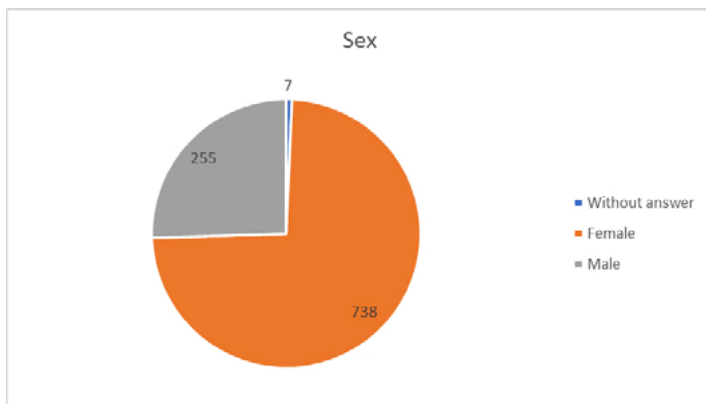


Fig 2. Sex of the respondents

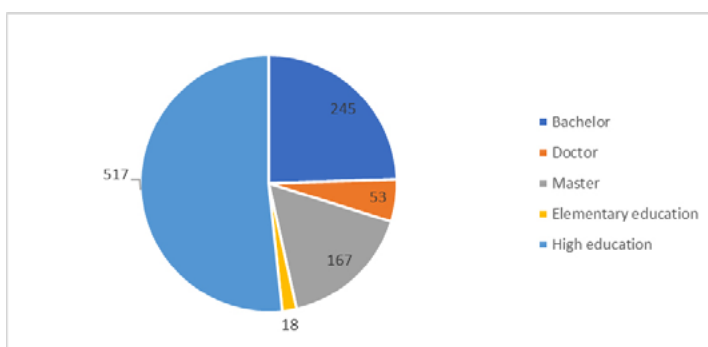


Fig. 3. Education of the respondents

The informants are asked what sources of information they usually refer to. The majority of the respondents (853) claim that they rely on news media on the web and 790 informants use social media (Facebook¹, Instagram¹, etc.) as a primary source of information. The electronic media (radio and television) is preferred by 642 people and 644 informants claim that they inform themselves from family and acquaintances. 344 participants prefer online blogs and forums and for 254 the state and the public institutions have become the primary source of information. Only 124 people inform themselves by the print media (Fig. 4).

¹ The social platform is owned by Meta Corporation, which is recognized as extremist and banned in the Russian Federation. // Социальная платформа принадлежит корпорации Meta, признанной экстремистской и запрещенной на территории Российской Федерации.

In this question the Likert scale is used as the informants are asked also to provide the frequency to which they rely on different sources of information.

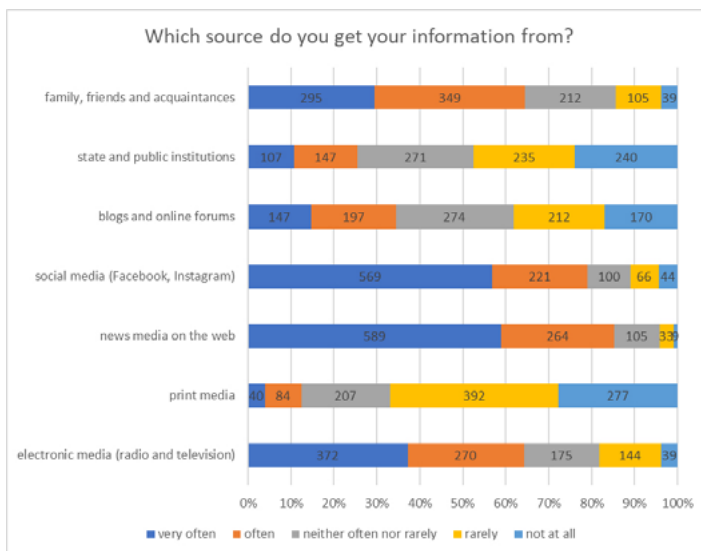


Fig. 4. Sources of information

The next question is again a Likert type one and the respondents are asked to what extent they trust different information sources. The same sources of information are given as an option for the answers as in the previous question. The highest trust is shown by the interviewees towards family, friends and acquaintances who are very often or often preferred sources of information (591) and towards the state and public institutions (491 respondents). Electronic media are trusted by 458 people and news media on the Internet by 373 people. Only 223 respondents think that social media can be trusted. Print media are trusted by 328 and blogs and online forums by 222 people. However, for all the sources of information there is a considerable lack of trust or uncertainty expressed (Fig. 5).

The respondents have also been asked what according to them the most important principles of media reporting are. The question is closed and they have to pick up between different options. These options are: truthfulness and objectivity; morality and ethics; legal norms and laws; respect and courtesy, politeness. All the above mentioned principles are considered “the most important” or “very important” by the majority of the respondents with a little priority given to “truthfulness and objectivity”. 981 people have chosen this principle as “the most important” or “very important” one. (Fig. 6).

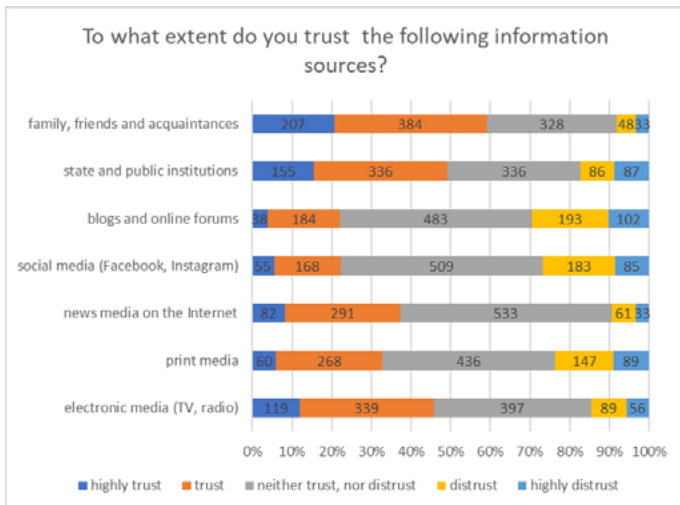


Fig. 5. Trust in different information sources

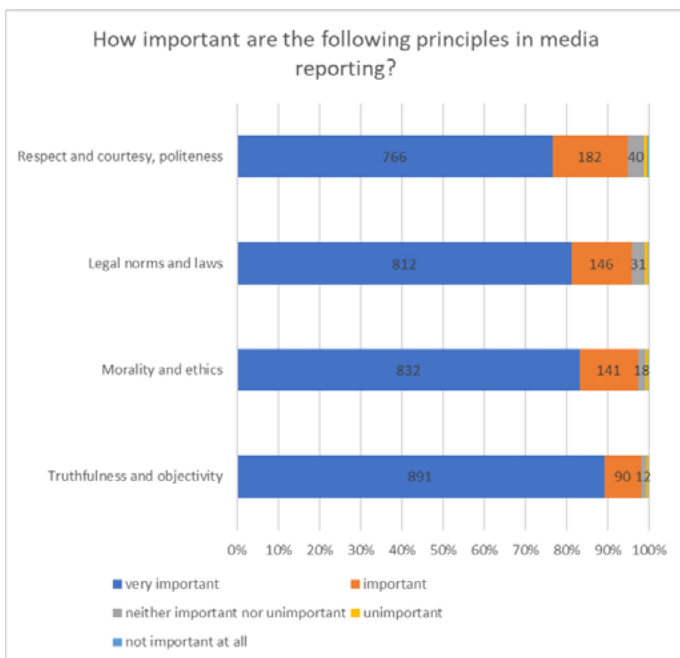


Fig. 6. The most important principles of Media Reporting

The next question in the questionnaire asks the participants what according to them the highest risks associated with the media are. The question is a closed one and the informants have to choose up to three different options.

The majority of the respondents (936 people) have answered that the biggest perceived threat by them is the possible manipulation of news. Providing erroneous and false information is perceived as “the biggest” or “big” risk by 922 informants. The fact that media can create unrealistic lifestyles and expectations is considered as a risk by 759 respondents. And on the fourth place of importance the participants have placed the possibility for the media to spread aggression and intolerance with 686 people considering it as the biggest or big risk. Out of the 1000 informants 659 claim that media can undermine education and culture, while 644 have chosen the option “they can threaten respect for human dignity, attack the integrity of a person, their personal, cultural, religious (etc.) identity”. Also, 570 informants believe that media can undermine feelings of happiness and security. Half of the respondents (541) have chosen the option “they can threaten health (physical and mental) / healthy lifestyle, lead to addictions, etc.” and 533 people believe that “they threaten good morals and decency”. Less accent is put by the informants on the limitations of the freedom of expression (498) and on the lack of support for individual and civic responsibility (456). (Fig. 7).

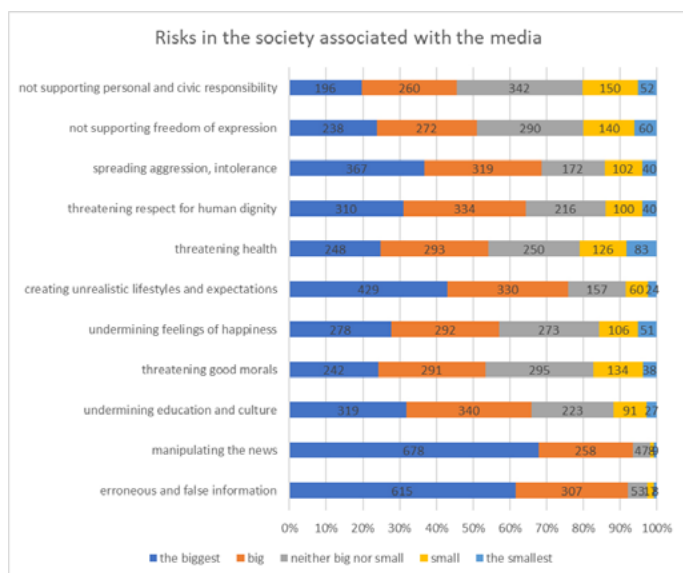


Fig. 7. The perceived risks in the society associated with the media

And finally the informants are asked how they check whether the information in the media is correct. This question tests the media literacy and the respondents can choose up to 3 options. The biggest number of interviewees (431) have answered that they check news media online, 306 people check in the social networks, 304 check whether the information sources are correctly sited, 303 ask family and friends and 284 refer to different websites to compare the data. Only 272 people rely on journalists whom they trust and 185 respondents check whether the sites provide contact data for feedbacks, 120 people look for controversies in the text and 65 informants do not check the information in the media at all. (Fig. 8).

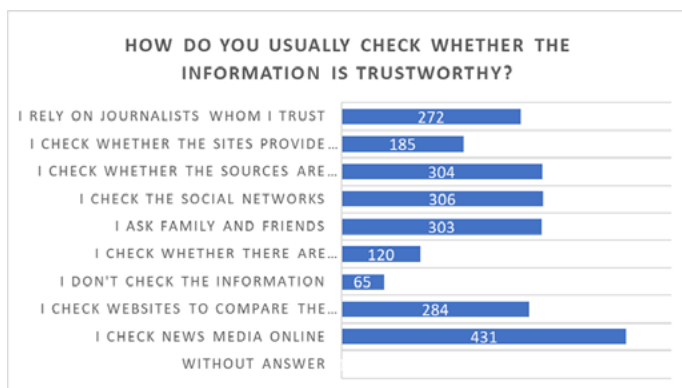


Fig. 8. Preferred methods to check the correctness of the information in the media

3.2. Media Trust and shifts in the attitudes towards the media

Based on the results received in the present research it is possible to outline some transformations of the social attitudes towards the media among the Bulgarians. In a previous representative survey conducted in 2016 by the Trend Agency the interviewed Bulgarians were asked which media they trust for providing the most accurate information. The majority of the informants at that time (54 %) have answered that they trusted the private televisions and 46 % relied on the public television (the Bulgarian national television). 37 % of the respondents preferred the social networks and 31 % prioritized the online news media [Marginalia 2016]. When these results from 2016 are compared with the data received in the present study it becomes obvious that there is a considerable shift in the perceptions of the media, especially among the younger generations. Although the present research is not representative, the results clearly indicate that contemporary audiences favor the digital mass communication for the sake of the traditional media, such as television and radio. In such a way, news me-



dia online and social media are considered primary sources of information by the majority of the respondents in the present study.

However, there are many discrepancies when the answers to the different questions in the questionnaire are compared. First, the most trusted information sources by the informants are family, friends and acquaintances but in fact these are secondary sources of information and they can rarely be reliable. Second, the state and public institutions, as well as the electronic media, are more trusted by the respondents but they are less often used as sources of information than the online news media and the social networks. Simultaneously there is a considerable distrust shown towards all the media in general. Also, while in the past journalists may have had more power to form the public opinion, nowadays fewer people rely on trustworthy professionals.

The informants underline that the biggest risks related to the media are the manipulation of news and creating a content with erroneous and false information and that the most important principle of reporting is truthfulness and objectivity. At the same time, a considerable number of the interviewed Bulgarians check the accuracy of the information in the social media or ask family and friends. It is a well-known fact that fake news and rumours are mostly spread by the social media. Thus, by using the social media or family and acquaintances as primary sources of information, there is a strong probability for the individuals to be misled by disinformation. In Bulgaria during the pandemic of COVID-19 rumours and conspiracy theories have predominated. The influence of the digital and social media has been so strong that the traditional media have failed in providing reliable news and opposing the mass disinformation. Only about 30 % of the Bulgarians have taken COVID-19 vaccines, while the majority of the population has remained unvaccinated due to the beliefs in conspiracy theories, spread by the digital and the social media. As a result according to the reports provided by the World Health Organization and EUROSTAT Bulgaria has recorded one of the highest excess mortality rate per population in the world during the pandemic of COVID-19 [Rangachev, Marinov, Mladenov 2022].

So, there are big controversies in the answers to the questions in the questionnaire. On the one hand, the respondents are aware of the risks that online news media and social media can present and they are considered by them as less reliable than the traditional media. On the other hand, the online media and the social media are the preferred sources of information. The lack of trust to the media in general in Bulgaria can be sustained because of cultural reasons too. It seems that societies that have been under authoritative regimes may show lack of trust in the official institutions, authorities and media. Simultaneously the new media cannot really fill the gaps in the knowledge of the audiences. Thus, it is possible that these gaps will be filled with inaccurate information.



All these results point to the conclusion that there is a crisis of values both in the society and in the media in Bulgaria.

The controversial answers to the questionnaire also show that there is, at least to some extent, lack of clarity and confusion among the respondents. In such a way, they can easily be influenced by disinformation and manipulation spread on the social media. Thus, the received data confirm that many participants in the media audience nowadays are not enough conscientious recipients of information. This fact underlines the strong necessity for media education and raising the awareness of the audiences about possible pitfalls of information.

4. Заключение = Conclusions

Mediatized society nowadays is represented by diverse social strata where there is a proliferation of virtual communities and identities. Media culture includes various aspects of human lives — from the technologies and creative industries, to the social and cultural values, ideologies and worldviews. Some of its most important contemporary transformations are related to the technological innovations, the participative audiences and the selectivity of contents. In a media environment where pluralism and variety have become its basic characteristics, media trust is one of the most important principles in mass communication. The research presented in this paper confirms the suggestions of the symbolic interactionism in the communication sciences that major technological changes lead to the rise of new symbols, meanings and worldviews. When compared to previous studies the data received show that there are obvious shifts in the perceptions of the Bulgarians about the media, especially among the younger generations. If in the past the most preferred sources of information have been the traditional media, in the era of digital communication the prioritized sources have become the online news media and the social media. This fact has led to many controversies. The more trusted media, such as the electronic media, are less used as sources of information and vice versa, although the social media are preferred, they are less trusted. Thus, it becomes clear that the informants may easily be misled by fake news and erroneous information. All these results are also proof of the crises of media values and media awareness in the Bulgarian society.

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