Mechanisms of “Moral Panic” Generation in Modern Media: Ukrainian Experience

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In this research, it considers the manipulative influence of mass communication on the society especially in the formation of moral panic in times of social-politics crisis—Revolution of Dignity (November 2013-February 2014) and during social-political stability. An attempt was made to determine the mechanism of implementation of this phenomenon in these periods the example of the news program “Facts” on ICTV channel and news on the TV channel “1+1”. The author makes two models of moral panic mechanism’s formation: during the period of sociopolitical stability and in the period of sociopolitical crisis. Furthermore, it identifies the comparative characteristics of moral panic formation during the period of the sociopolitical stability and sociopolitical crisis.

Keywords: mass communication, influence, moral panic, values, mass-media, information

Introduction

Modern mass media is perceived by the population as a powerful tool to influence political life and the situation in a country as a way to manipulate public awareness. Mass media accumulates the experience of millions and influences not only on the awareness but also on the actions of individuals as well as group actions of people. They do not just inform, but also promote certain ideas, attitudes, and thus participate in social management.

The aim of any mass media’s function is its impact on an audience—replenishing its knowledge, behavioral change, reinforcing or changing opinions, etc.. Among the directions of information influence, influence on emotions of a recipient takes a distinguished place. Indeed, the tendency to perceive information is a profound mind quality, which proves an early ability to think analytically. Emotions cause processes that form subjective images of the objective world. One of the emotional states is panic. It is a kind of moral panic, which technologically impacts on social communications.

The purpose of the study is to determine the mechanism of mass communication influence on the basis of which a moral panic was formed within the Ukrainian society during the period of the sociopolitical stability as well as during the period of the sociopolitical crisis in Ukraine.

The main objectives of the research are: (1) to ascertain the concept of “panic” as a socio-psychological phenomenon; (2) to describe the phenomenon of “moral panic” as a manipulative technique of influence in social communications; (3) to determine the mechanisms of “moral panic” during the sociopolitical stability as well as the sociopolitical crisis in a country.

Literature Review

The studies of panic were carried out and are being applied by scholars such as G. Andreev, D. Olshanskyy, A. Nazaretian, G. Lebon, B. Johnson, D. Myers, and others. In their studies, they identified the main characteristics of this phenomenon, peculiarities of its origin as well as possible mechanisms of working with it.

Very little attention except fragmented references in social and military psychology has been devoted to the phenomenon of “Panic” in national science as well as popular psychological literature.

In social psychology, panic is understood as a mental state of a person caused by a real or imaginary threat that captures a person or a group of people with an uncontrollable desire to avoid a dangerous situation.

In military psychology, panic is understood as a difficult, transitorily emotional and behavioral phenomenon that occurs as a result of lack of information about any unclear or confusing situation or excessive amounts of it.

G. Andreeva understood the definition of panic as a certain emotional state that is the result of either a lack of information of a dreadful or unclear news, or an excess of such information (Андреева, 2009).

By the definition of A. Nazaretian, panic is a state of terror, accompanied by a sharp weakening of volitional self-control (Назаретян, 2005).

In the author’s opinion, the most important characteristics of panic are as follows:

- (1) Panic occurs as well as any mass phenomenon in large groups of people (in a crowd, numerous diffuse groups, mass gathering of people).
- (2) Panic causes uncontrolled feeling of fear, due to real or imagined threats.
- (3) Panic is often a spontaneous, unorganized state and behavior of people.
- (4) The so-called behavioral uncertainty (a state of confusion, uncertainty on how to act, hence causing chaos in action and inadequate behavior in general to develop) is characteristic for people in a panic state.

Panic belongs to such phenomena which are extremely difficult to study. It can not be directly observed, firstly, because the time of its onset cannot be known beforehand and secondly, because it is very difficult to remain as an observer in a panic situation: Its strength lies in that any person who was “inside” the panic’s system is to some extent exposed to it.

Among the varieties of panic, moral panic is distinguished. The concept of “moral panic” in a scientific context was introduced by the English sociologist S. Cohen in the early 1970s in the context of the study of youthful subcultures. From that time, it is being actively used to refer to all kinds of anti-social or criminal behavior.

Although the concept of moral panic was developed in western sociology for already over 40 years, it has as of today a rather ambiguous interpretation as well as various approaches to its analysis among scholars.

According to Cohen (1972), moral panic is explained as follows:

It seems that societies fall into periods of moral panic from time to time. There are certain circumstances, episodes, person or groups of people who are beginning to be defined as a threat by social values and interests; mass media represents their stylized and stereotyped nature; editors, bishops, politicians, and other people full of common sense overlook the moral barricades; experts voice out their diagnosis and resolution; the methods are developed or (more often) used (already known) to rectify (this threat); circumstances then later disappear in general or from the spotlight or worsen and become more prominent. Sometimes, the subject of panic is something completely new and sometimes—something that has long existed, suddenly found itself in the spotlight. In some cases, panic passes and is forgotten, leaving behind

only a folklore and collective memory; in others it has serious and lasting effects and can cause changes, for example, in legal and social policy or even in the self-awareness of the society (p. 37).

Such an understanding is criticized by scientists due to its lack of theoretical justification, by simplifying the understanding of the complex processes of media representations and their public perception.

In turn, British researchers E. Goode and N. Ben Yehuda considered that moral panic is a mechanism for strengthening the moral boundaries of society—the line between moral and immoral, which upon violation moves a person from the kingdom of goodness in to the kingdom of evil and they emphasized that it is the mass media that really sets moral boundaries and because of them moral panic forms and develops (Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994).

According to the Russian researcher P. Meylahs, moral panic is a “moral or legal uncertainty, problematic in society, where traditional morality and law are in contradiction with reality” (Мейлахс, p. 304). The researcher defines moral panic as an “over-reaction of mass media, police, local community leaders to the actions of certain social groups that are quite trivial in terms of its nature and terms of the number of persons involved”.

Exploring moral panic in the context of the construction of social reality, A. Burego defines it as a “social construct in which separate political subjects and broadcasters of their opinions—the media—are able to form different social phobias and fears” (Бурега, http://otherreferats.allbest.ru/psychology/00080106_0.html).

In ethics, the term Moral Panic is understood as a “special state of mass awareness that acutely emotional responds to social tensions, during which occurs a threat to social and cultural values” (Малахов, 1996, p. 304).

A group of British socio-culturists of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, headed by Hall et al. (1978), appealed to the problems of moral panic in the late 70s. As a result of their research, it appears that some information in mass media texts automatically makes readers and viewers nervous.

By interpreting the definitions of “moral panic”, it will be assumed that it is the exaggerated reaction of mass media on deviant behavior of a specific person or groups of people, or unusual phenomena which violate the moral standards and destroy human values established by the society.

Theoretical Framework

Indeed, today, moral panic is primarily the center of focus of sociologists and psychologists who study components of this phenomenon, the mechanisms of its construction, psychological determinants, and others. However, under the conditions of the information society, the research of moral panic in a communication aspect is quite of obvious relevance. Indeed, among the main determinants of this phenomenon, mass media appears as the most powerful broadcaster of opinions of this or other social phenomenon and, therefore, they can cause the appearance of panic among the population.

When the masses feel threatened by a significant social phenomenon of social life (values), moral panic starts to form in the consciousness of masses.

S. Cohen described the typical mechanism of moral panic formation in the media through: (1) popularization of the problem, (2) provision of publicity, (3) creating the effect of an “infection” that promotes the spread of rumors, (4) promoting the duplication of deviants.

Among the general mechanisms of generating panic, Ukrainian psychologist W. Molyarko indicates the following:

- (1) the existence of “shocking stimulus”;

(2) deficit of information about the event (especially accurate information) and simultaneously an excess of unverified information from informal sources;

(3) creating an image of danger, which is superimposed by the overall psychological un-readiness to the adequate perception of what that has happened;

(4) activation of the defense system of the body at different levels of awareness and intense reactions (Молярко, 1992);

(5) during the study of mechanisms of moral panic formation by domestic mass media, we determined how it technically occurs during the socio-political stability in a country (moral panic surrounding the theme of the apocalypse, for example, the work of journalists of the TV channel “1 + 1”) and during the period of the socio-political crisis in Ukraine (moral panic during the Revolution of Dignity (for example, the work of journalists of the TV channel “ICTV”).

Results and Analysis

How the theme of “doomsday” in the media content regarding social problems became a problem around which “moral panic” was formed in the society, which had a wide resonance and negative consequences for the society.

At first appeared a *shocking stimulus* in the society. Through its information dated December, 21, 2012, it came forward about the doomsday. The next step was the *threat of values of the society*: The theme of “doomsday” in the society offended and made a threat to universal human values, mainly to the values of “life”, “health”, and the “future” etc.. Then the threat acquired a *wide reflection in mass-media*: An apocalypse actively began to exist in the outer and domestic informative space since 2007.

According to a study carried out by “Ashmatov & Partners Ukraine”, Ukrainian search request regarding “doomsday” are 98% while the “financial crisis” is only 2% (http://news.seo-smo.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15723:ykrancv-knec-svty-hvilu-y-desiati-ki-razv-blshe-za-krizy&catid=7:2012-06-27-23-12-27&Itemid=6).

Further, *Inflation of public danger* was discovered during a research of the domestic informative space that during five years (2007-2012), the TV channel “1+1” (160 journalistic materials) devoted more attention towards this theme. Besides that, the *government is actively attached towards the formation of anxiety*: Towards the formation of public opinion regarding this theme, the politicians was involved (in China a presidential decree of a six year prison term was approved regarding the spread of information about an apocalypse—“doomsday”. The Bolivian President banned Coca-cola and McDonald’s and postulated it as part of triumphs, devoted to the end of capitalism and the beginning of communitarianism; in Australia, the prime minister wrote down an appeal in case of the end of the world—“doomsday”, in Argentina, the government advised all habitants to carefully prepare for the end of the world) and others.

The last of stage is a *recession of “moral panic” or social changes*: The recession of “moral panic” surrounding the theme of “apocalypse” became evident immediately after the predicted December 21, 2012, when none of the predicted variants of “doomsday” occurred. However, for this time, there were social changes; Traced as positive (development of infrastructure, introduction of innovations, prevention of public panic, spread of a skeptical mood surrounding the theme of “doomsday”) as well as negative (intimidation of people, manipulation by choice, death, social exodus, strengthening of social tension, social deception on the basis of

aspiration to be enriched, spread of rumors, misinformation, results in the discharge of panic and total loss of morality).

Thus, to the author's opinion, the mechanisms of moral panic formation during the period of the socio-political stability could be formulated as such:

Figure 1. The mechanism of moral panic formation during the period of sociopolitical stability.

It is now considered with the help of which mechanisms did the domestic mass-media (for example, news program “Facts” broadcasted on TV channel “ICTV”) come running towards constructing moral panic during the period the sociopolitical crisis—during the period of the Revolution of Dignity from November 2013 to February, 2014.

According to G. Bloomer's opinion (p. 144), the influence of the mass-media is particularly heavily felt during the crisis period of the historical development of society, when people in a state of social uncertainty are particularly susceptible by easily responding to a variety of new stimuli, ideas, and are more susceptible to propaganda as well as various manipulations.

The most apparent influence of the mass-media on the development of the state is observed in a period of social upheaval, when a society is being destroyed (war, revolution, political revolutions or significant social reforms). The Revolution of Dignity had all characteristic features of a crowd—temporary existence, hazardous behavioral patterns of participants, identical reaction to stimuli. The latter is explained by the fact that emotional perception is increased in the masses, in the tendency towards suggestion and infection grows, and in the ability of critical treatment of information diminishes. Exactly, it is what that actually creates all necessary terms for manipulation by mass awareness and the formation of moral panic.

During the research, it was examined on a daily basis the news program “Facts” on the TV channel “ICTV”, which was broadcasted at 18:45 during the period from November 29th, 2013 till February, 22nd, 2014 (74 publications), and focused on themes which journalists uplifted, their frequency, periodicity, and with plot-filled, and also key speakers of basic themes.

As a result of their own monitoring, we created the mechanism of moral panic formation during the period of the sociopolitical crisis—the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. The following ones are included among its basic constituents:

- (1) presence of a shocking stimulus;
- (2) a hyperactive release of information regarding the set theme (frequency) in mass-media;

(3) the active engagement of state structures in discussions (maximal presence of comments, statements, appearances of key public figures and experts);

(4) formation of a swift stream of information on the corresponding subject (initiation of various media-measures, actions, etc.);

(5) hanging of tags to corresponding social groups or responsible individuals;

(6) the application of the technology of half-truths;

(7) wide discussion of a problem in the international arena;

(8) retaining the positions of a situation of uncertainty while exaggerating the problem;

(9) inflation of emotional tension or its regression.

For the society, the refusal of the President of Ukraine V. Yanukovich to sign the Agreement to join the EU on November 21, from one side became a *shocking stimulus*, and from the other side, the acceleration of students and activists on the Area of Independence on November 30, 2013. Both events made a threat towards European values, towards the possible loss of the vector of European development of a state, which woke up Ukrainians to go out to the Arena of Independence (threats towards values such as independence, safety, and universalism).

This threat appeared in *the hyperactive delivery of information in mass-media* during the broadcast of all 74 issues of the news program “Facts” and journalists constantly spoke of the theme of Maydan. Meanwhile, as a rule, the program’s representation made up to 13 news subjects in publications. Those of them, which addressed the theme of Maydan (up to seven on air) were made priority at the beginning or in a middle of the program.

Taking into account that in Ukraine there was a sociopolitical crisis, the active participants were made up of representatives of the *state* (the President of Ukraine, ministers, chairman of the Parliament of Ukraine, and others). They were almost daily commenting on the situation which unfolded, thus initiating appearances, appeals, and statements.

Public dissatisfaction towards the Government and panicky moods in relation to the future required the forming of swift stream of information on the corresponding subject:

Demonstration of students is on Arena of Independence (30/01/2013);

Assault on the Presidential Administration (01/12/2013);

Assault on journalist T. Chernovil (24/12/2013);

Assault on parliamentarian A. Ilenko and his advocate (03/01/2013);

Assault on the court, which declared the sentence “Vasilkovsk terrorists”, collisions with the militia, victims (10/01/2014);

Adoption of the “law of January 16” in the Parliament by vote of hands (16/01/2014);

Square clashes between the police and Maydan participants on the Str. Hrushevskoho using tear gases, and garnet (19/01/2014);

The “Law of January 16” came in to force, clashes in the center of Kyiv between activists and the police, two people died—Armenian Nihoyan S. and Belarusian M. Zhyznevsyy (01/22/2014);

Kidnapping of D. Bulatov (22/01/2014);

Negotiations between the government and the opposition (23/01/2014);

Building of new barricades and the capture of administrative buildings (24/01/2014);

Cancellation of 9 out of 11 “laws on January 16” (28/01/2014);

The adoption of the amnesty law for activists (29/01/2014);

Threat towards implementing a state of emergency (02/02/2014);

Opposition calls for amendment of the Constitution of Ukraine (03/02/2014);

Burning of cars in the capital city (06/02/2014);

The European Parliament threatens sanctions to Ukrainian officials (06/02/2014);

March to the Parliament of Ukraine, assault on Arena of Independence, House of Trade Unions (18/02/2014);

Murder at the October Palace, the execution of countermeasure operations (19/02/2014);

Counteroffensive action, dozen deaths on Str. Institutska, Resolution of the Parliament of Ukraine “On the condemnation of violence that led to the deaths of civilians in Ukraine”, expulsion of the chairman of KGGA V. Makayenko and 11 parliamentarians from the ranks of the pro-presidential party “Party of regions” (20/02/2014);

The return to the Constitution of 2004, the release of Y. Tymoshenko, and retirement of the Minister of internal affairs V. Zaharchenko (21/02/2014);

The resignation of the head of the Parliament V. Rybak, ousting of the President of Ukraine V. Yanukovich (22/02/2014).

Among the key “*hanging of tags*” on the community, deviants and individuals included: criminal power, dictatorial laws, mode, bloody regime, dictator, national enemy, and others.

Alongside the labeling tag, technology was applied the “*technology of half-truths*”. It concerned the obscurity of the involvement of participants of Maydan towards “*vasilkovsky terrorists*” regarding the events of 2011, concealment of facts related to the kidnapping of D. Bulatov, silence nature during the course of the negotiations between the government and opposition etc..

The events on Maydan had its echo in *the international arena*. Since February, the world’s media addressed the events in Ukraine in the first column. To actively comment on the events of Maydan, members of the European Parliament E. Brock, ex-president of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili, actor George Clooney, Deputy Secretary of State B. Nuland, EU Special Representative C. Ashton, US Senator John McCain and K. Murphy, Swedish Foreign Minister Karl Bildt, EU Commissioner Stefan Füle, and others were involved.

The problem surrounding the socio-political crisis in Ukraine (November 2013-February 2014) was just *exaggerating*. During this time we recorded 292 subjects concerning events on Maydan or provoked activist’s reactions.

Weekly (eight weeks) provocative events took place, which did not give in to public confusion. More active were the last two weeks of January (from 16.01 to 28.01) to the second to the last week of February (from 18.02 to 22.02). It testifies to *the inflation of emotional tension* among citizens, which resulted in an outpour of socio-political changes—overthrows of the government in place. As the “*enemy*” of public values, which compelled people to go out to the Maydan square that was overcome and no more threat existed, an *emotional regression* took place.

Based on our analysis, it was concluded that ICTV journalists were active participants in the formation of moral panic during the events of the Revolution of Dignity, as well as passive on the other hand. The activity of the mass media in this regard is confirmed by the frequency of feeds (292 subjects) as well as the intensity of embodied materials (up to seven stories on air), which in turn indicates the mass media exaggerated reaction towards the events of social deviation. But what the passivism involved is that journalists’ performing their duties covered substandard phenomena which took place in the country and violated the established social norms that were a threat to human values.

Consequently, the mechanism of moral panic formation during the sociopolitical crisis in the state looks as follows:

Figure 2. The mechanism of moral panic formation in the period of sociopolitical crisis.

Conclusion

Comparing two different mechanisms of moral panic formation by Ukrainian journalists during the socio-political stability and sociopolitical crisis, it came to the conclusion that they can be characterized as follows:

Table 1

Comparative Characteristics of Moral Panic Formation During the Period of the Sociopolitical Stability and Sociopolitical Crisis

Parameters	Social-political stability	Social-political crisis
the form of participation of the media in the formation of moral panic	active	active, passive
values which appear under the threat	personal (life, health, future)	public (safety, independence, universalism)
reasons for the formation of moral panic	distraction of society's attention from more important problems, moderate changes in the society	fundamental public changes
periodicity in actualizing the threat in the media	periodically (up to a few times per month)	systematic (almost daily)
average duration in forming moral panic	long-term (from half-year to a few years)	Short-term (to a few months)
public activity	a relatively small portion of society responds that divides threat to its own values	a major portion of society responds, since events around which moral panic is formed concerns virtually everyone
participation of the State	regulatory	regulatory, publicly

Thus, mass-media penetration into the life of the society is especially noticed in crisis periods of the historical development of the society, when people in a state of uncertainty fall under the influence, easily to respond to new stimuli as well as are more exposed to various manipulation. In turn, the media by means of influence generates moral panic in society. It is achieved due to the exaggerated reaction of the media on deviant behavior or unusual phenomena that violate moral norms and destroy human values.

During the research, it was found out the mechanisms of moral panic formation during socio-political stability (for example, the work of journalists of the TV channel “1+1”) and in the period a sociopolitical crisis

(for example, the work of journalists of the TV channel “ICTV”). As a result it was understood the technology of the generation of this phenomenon, the feature of formation in domestic media-content, and also made an attempt to trace its consequences for the society.

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