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The Specifics of Forming the Image of Municipal Employees in the Media Space

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the specifics of forming the image of municipal employees in the modern media space. To achieve the goal, qualitative research methods were used, namely, a focus group interview with student youth. The negative impact of the media on the formation of the image of municipal employees, the replication of such negative traits as a tendency to corruption, bureaucracy, greed, irresponsibility, and selfishness were established. The results of the study showed a selective approach of young people to choosing information channels. According to students, official information channels provide less interesting content, which is impersonal and declarative. Among young people, the request for targeted information that would reflect the specific results of the activities of government representatives, their personal contribution to solving socially significant problems is relevant. Representation in the media space of everyday practices of "public service", maintaining collectively shared values to the greatest extent ensures the formation of a positive image of municipal employees. The article concludes that it is necessary to develop media competence of municipal employees, allowing them to form and maintain a positive image of the municipal service. In particular, it is necessary to develop such skills as self-presentation in social networks, creation of meaningful media content, including techniques of individual narration and reflection of socially significant experience in solving problems of local communities.

Keywords: image, media image of a municipal employee, social networks, local government, stereotypes, youth, media literacy education.

1. Introduction

Information presented in the modern media space has a significant impact on both the perception of objective reality and subjective assessments of changes taking place in society. Digitalization has become an additional driver of information scaling, the formation of chaotic information flows, often containing contradictory data. Scientists note such negative consequences of digitalization as the spread of fake news, manipulation of public consciousness, drawing attention to non-trivial topics, conspiracy theories (Borkhsenius, 2021). The phenomenon of virtuality turned out to be a factor that directly and indirectly affects not only the personal worldviews of information consumers, but also determines the trajectory of social development.

Mass media play a special role in the practice of forming the image of political institutions and leaders. The analysis of media images of subjects of political space is one of the current areas of scientific discourse. The media image representatively reflects a systemic idea of the specifics of the activity, degree of influence and reputation of a socio-political subject. The media image allows us to analyze the expectations and assessments of the population in relation to this subject

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(Zelyanskaya, 2014). The role of the media image seems to be especially significant in the process of forming public trust in political institutions and professional groups.

Thus, the modern media space acts as a kind of influential arena for shaping the image of professional groups, demonstrating their socially significant qualities, dominant ethical standards and areas of activity. In this context, the study of the media image of municipal employees as a special professional group is of particular relevance. Municipal employees in modern conditions are at the forefront of working with the population, ensuring the solution of immediate problems of its life support. The scientific discourse emphasizes the relevance of research of the image of municipal employees in the media space. The scientific relevance of this topic is due to the growing influence of modern media on the perception of social phenomena and processes (Ardashev, 2021). In this context, special attention should be paid to the media competence of municipal employees, who are the main subjects of broadcasting positive characteristics of their image in the media. Deficits in the media competence of municipal employees become a barrier to the development of their media subjectivity, limit the effectiveness of their self-presentation practices in the public space. It seems necessary to update the system of training and advanced training of municipal employees, supplementing it with media literacy education courses.

In modern conditions, the objectivity of perception can be distorted under the pressure of scalable information in the media, the stability of social stereotypes. The low level of media competence of young people becomes an additional risk factor that complicates an objective assessment of the situation. The key problems in modern conditions are the following: the lack of skills among young people to assess the reliability of information, an insufficiently formed level of awareness in the information process. These trends have predetermined the need to develop media literacy education, which is becoming an integral part of student training programs in most countries of the world. The key task of media literacy education is to develop critical thinking skills in young people, assess the veracity of information, and the reliability of data sources (Lau et al., 2024).

The proximity of local governments to local residents, in contrast to regional authorities, initiates their special status. A positive image of the municipal service is the foundation for building public trust in the authorities, constructing sustainable social ties in the local community, and solidarity in the face of external challenges and risks (Makusheva, Nestik, 2020). It is trust based on information that determines the high probability that citizens will invest their resources, time, and knowledge in the development of the territory (Bonsón et al., 2014).

Thus, the image of municipal employees can be considered as social capital, as well as an effective management resource that allows for communication with local residents based on trust and partnership.

The social significance of municipal service in solving problems of life support for the population, the need to strengthen trust between local governments and residents to consolidate social resources actualizes the issues of forming a positive image of municipal employees. In this context, of particular interest is the analysis of the specifics of forming the image of this professional group in the media space, the subjective perception of information materials characterizing the activities of modern municipal employees.

2. Materials and methods

In the presented article, the author set the goal of studying, through students' assessments, the features of the reflection of the image of municipal employees in the media space, as well as determining the prospects for the development of media education for the formation of successful practices in this area. Objectives:

1. Study of the needs of young people studying in the specialty "state and municipal administration" for information characterizing the activities of this professional group;
2. Study the perception of student youth of the image of municipal employees, as well as the influence of the media on their evaluative judgments;
3. Identify subjective assessments of information sources characterizing the activities and image of a municipal employee;
4. Analysis of the role of media literacy education in shaping the image of municipal employees.

The specificity of the tasks set, the need to understand the processes of forming the image of municipal employees in the subjective assessments of young people determined the choice of

research methods based on neopositivist theory. To achieve this goal, qualitative methods were used, namely focus group interviews ($n_1 = 6$ и $n_2 = 8$).

The informants in the focus group were students studying in the profile of training "State and municipal administration" in the Kursk region. The choice of this category of informants, on the one hand, is an advantage of the study, and, on the other hand, its limitation. The advantages are associated with a deeper immersion in the topic of the study of informants, interest in media materials on the activities of municipal employees, their personal involvement in this professional group. In addition, the territorial affiliation of students to the Kursk region becomes an additional factor in increasing the attention of informants to the activities of government bodies, whose tasks include ensuring the safety of local residents, preventing terrorist threats. The choice of students from the Kursk region as informants excludes their superficial view of the research problem, allows representing a meaningful reflection of media content and its influence on the image of municipal employees.

3. Discussion

The specificity of the modern media space is the emphasis on negative information, shock content, which allows attracting a wide mass of readers. According to N.K. Prigarina, the actualization of media discourse illustrating criminal incidents involving teachers, cases of violations of ethical standards, strengthens negative stereotypes and ideas about this professional group in the long term (Prigarina, 2022).

A similar situation is developing around the image of state and municipal employees. Negative stereotypes of public consciousness are supported by such characteristics of the media image of a modern official as distance from the population, misunderstanding of the problems of local residents. The image of insufficiently competent and corrupt government officials is replicated in the media space (Buryak, 2023). Thus, in society, under the influence of established stereotypes and information aimed at attracting shock attention, a negative image of a municipal employee is formed. These trends reduce the efficiency of local government bodies and increase alienation between the authorities and the population.

In this context, the functional role of media literacy education is to develop the skills of the younger generation, allowing them to see interpretative shifts in the media image of socially significant professions, track the dynamics of changes in public opinion, and the influence of falsified content on the consolidation of stereotypes and false beliefs. Modern research confirms a stable relationship between the effectiveness of media literacy education and the presence of critical thinking skills. Living conditions in the era of "post-truth" actualize such elements of media literacy education as digital citizenship, reflection of ethical behavior in the media space (Gálik et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2022). According to Russian scientists, media literacy has not only a narrowly applied meaning in the education system, but should also be understood in a broad context, as a tool for reproducing the intellectual and cultural potential of social subjects and the nation as a whole (Kamenev et al., 2019).

A.S. Nikitina and V.S. Kyazimova, in their analysis of the causes of the deformation of the image of municipal employees, point to the lack of attention to the formation of the media image in social networks. In particular, modern municipal employees separate "their own status and social networks as a personal space" (Nikitina, Kyazimova, 2018), which increases the intensity of the impact of informal channels of information dissemination. In modern conditions, influencers in social networks, who have a significant number of subscribers and enjoy their trust, act as legislators of public opinion, conductors of the formation of ideas and assessments of the population (Coates et al., 2019). In this context, the interest of local residents in the municipal agenda can be converted into the formation of a positive media environment, in which representatives of local governments will act as influencers of opinions. The contradiction between the need for more active inclusion of municipal employees in digital interactions and their insufficient readiness for these practices increases the risks of forming a negative image of local authorities.

Insufficient personal contribution, unclear subjective position of municipal employees in the media space leads to the blurring of the image of this professional group, focusing the public on its negative characteristics replicated in the media. In the current conditions of dynamic development of local digital communities, it seems necessary to use these platforms to articulate the positions of local governments, establish dialogue interactions with local residents. Empirical studies in Germany confirm the effectiveness of digital interactions between politicians and the population to build trust and increase the reputational capital of the authorities (Starke et al., 2020). Information

openness of government bodies, readiness for dialogue and partnership not only forms a positive image of municipal leaders, but also contributes to the development of trust, the willingness of residents to participate in the socio-economic development of territories (Rogach, Frolova, 2023).

In this context, it seems necessary to teach students studying in the field of "State and municipal administration" the skills of creating media texts and self-presentation of professional achievements. State and municipal employees, as agents of social change, must have a high level of media literacy, allowing them to form a collective experience of media consumption, in the process of which local communities can gain access to objective, targeted information.

Foreign studies emphasize the need to use social networks to create a positive image of socially significant professions. In particular, police services have social media accounts to create and strengthen a positive image of the police, represent its effectiveness and openness to interaction with the public (O'Connor, Zaidi, 2020). It can be assumed with a high degree of probability that these practices will have a similarly positive impact on the image of local authorities. Representation of municipal leaders in digital communities, their openness in matters of budget policy and financial expenditures is the most effective tool for increasing trust and breaking stereotypes about corruption in government. However, studies conducted in Turkish municipalities have shown that officials are not fully aware of the instrumental potential of personal social media accounts and do not use platforms in digital communities to increase the level of openness and ensure transparency of their activities (Calhan et al., 2021).

4. Results

The study found that students are interested in information about the profession of a state and municipal employee. Informants said that they read and listen to the news, and are involved in the modern media agenda.

Informant A (young men): "First of all, I want to say that when you are in society, you cannot exist in some kind of bubble and somehow separate yourself from the media. One way or another, you see them on a daily basis, even if you don't specifically watch them, you somehow perceive information from there from different sources..."

This opinion of the informant most vividly characterizes the presence of media in various aspects of the life of modern youth. The scaling of information flows, the differentiation of channels for receiving it impose special demands on the media competence of the younger generation. The use of a limited range of sources in the process of searching for information, an insufficient level of reflection and criticality in assessing data, a lack of analytical skills, and the ability to work with big data serve as a risk factor for distorting the real situation characterizing the activities of a municipal employee.

The role of media literacy education in this context is seen in the formation of skills for critical assessment of disinformation, resistance to information manipulation. It seems extremely important to create a foundation for understanding the nature of the formation of stereotypes, prejudices, and expand the boundaries of open thinking among young people.

Living in a border region actualizes the involvement of informants in media analysis, searching for information about the territorial situation and the activities of government bodies.

Informant T (girl): "Yes, of course, I read the media, I especially closely follow the activities of Alexander Khinshtein, since he currently holds the position of acting governor of the Kursk region. He is a keen fighter against corruption, he is honest, he always gets in touch with people, meets with them, that is, he does not sit in his office, but communicates with people. Especially with those who need it most - these are the residents of the border area of the Kursk region, he has met with them more than once, talked and resolved issues directly..."

It is interesting that personal information characterizing the activities of a politician evokes the strongest emotional response. Representation in the media space of the everyday practices of "public service" ("always in touch", "talks and solves residents' issues") of municipal employees becomes the most effective tool for shaping their image. It is noteworthy that information that illustrates the specific activities of municipal officials, their everyday practices, is especially in demand.

In this context, it seems necessary to include media literacy courses in the system of professional education and advanced training of municipal employees. The specifics of media literacy education for this professional group should include the following elements:

- applied skills of positioning oneself in online communities (presentation);

- skills of creating media content that weaves positive experience of solving socially significant problems of local communities into narratives of everyday life;
- ability to reflect on the experience of public interactions in the media space, including on the basis of an analysis of the ethical principles of media communication;
- skills of broadcasting a proactive position in the media space that supports socially significant values of municipal service.

Media literacy education of municipal employees should not be limited to the formation of skills of critical assessment of information, the main tasks are related to the activation of creative potential, the ability to analyze the situation, create resonant content, replicate successful practices in the media space. In this context, it seems appropriate in the process of media literacy education of state and municipal employees to pay attention to the formation of such skills as content visualization, justification and argumentation of one's own position, focusing attention, and selection of data.

Empirical results of studies conducted in Turkey also confirm the importance of management decisions made on the basis of shared values and moral standards. For municipal leaders, the dimension of "internal moral perspective" is of particular relevance. Moreover, proactive leadership of the manager has an overall positive impact on the activities of municipal employees, their motivation for high-quality work with the population, reducing the risks of such destructive aspects as improper performance of services, rudeness, haste, conflicts (Bozaci, Güner, 2024).

During the focus group, informants pointed out a differentiated approach to the selection of information sources. Young people are more interested in "popular Telegram channels or VKontakte publics". According to focus group participants, official media provide their readers with more generalized, superficial information. A similar conclusion is made based on the materials of foreign studies, which emphasize the potential of social networks for shaping the image of politicians and municipal leaders. Firstly, the audience reach expands, the accessibility of certain socio-demographic groups, especially young people, increases. Secondly, the more emotional nature of the presentation of material on social networks compared to official media, press releases, speeches ensures increased audience engagement. Thirdly, the interactive nature of interaction on social networks (the ability to exchange comments) initiates the development of sustainable interactions between the authorities and the population in the media environment (Heidenreich et al., 2022). The stability and mass character of digital interactions create conditions for the delivery of reliable, objective information about the activities of the municipality, which in the long term contributes to the formation of a positive image of municipal employees.

A mandatory condition for this is the presence of specific work results, their social significance for the population. In contrast to the positive image of the regional leader of the Kursk region, the generalized (impersonal) media image of a municipal employee in the eyes of students has very negative features.

Respondent E (girl): "Most often, of course, an image of an official is created who steals or does something only for his own benefit... But, in fact, if you dig a little deeper, you can find a lot of information about officials helping society, responding to their requests, holding receptions, and in general, many do not steal, but on the contrary, do everything to improve society."

Informant B (girl): "Yes, I read articles about officials in the media ..."

The media replicate such characteristics of representatives of this professional group as greed, dishonesty, bribery, bureaucracy, the desire to achieve their own goals as opposed to public ones. These trends are very destructive for the image of municipal employees. During the focus group, students repeatedly emphasized that objective reality often contradicts established stereotypes. However, the scale and multi-channel replication of the negative image of municipal employees in the media devalues the real achievements of their activities.

Similar conclusions were made in foreign studies. According to scientists, the role of the media in forming the image of political leaders is decisive. The plurality and ubiquity of media technologies, the influence of digital opinion leaders, and the growing trends of "filtering information consumption" (choosing sources that coincide with the user's opinion and ignoring opposing points of view) form a new media reality, where media framing is becoming a powerful tool for influencing public opinion (Uwalaka, 2024).

Given the scaling of falsified information in social networks, the tasks of media literacy education should be expanded by conceptualizing new pedagogical approaches. In particular, foreign researchers conclude that it is necessary to develop cognitive and affective abilities for

information processing (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2015; Schreuers, Vandenbosch, 2021). Reflection of emotions and feelings in the process of information consumption can become a reliable tool for counteracting the manipulation of public consciousness, a mechanism for destroying established false stereotypes.

According to young people, positively colored content in official media "does not save" the situation. The functional weakness of official media reduces the effectiveness of their activities in forming a positive image of state and municipal employees.

Respondent A (young men): "As for the presentation of the image of an official, there are two sides of the coin: there are more popular media among young people, where he is usually depicted as some kind of impersonal entity, greedy and powerful. And from the government media, we are positioned as a beautiful, sacred image..."

The results obtained during the focus group illustrate the importance of obtaining reliable information for young people. The categorical nature of the two diametrically opposed poles of the media image of municipal employees (on the one hand, the negative, expressed in corruption practices, bureaucracy, and, on the other hand, the exaggeratedly positive, "sacred", characterized exclusively by socially approved behavior) does not find a response among young people.

The study addressed the problem of finding tools for forming a positive image of municipal employees. Answering this question, students focused on the objective limitations of the activities of municipal employees, reducing the attractiveness of this professional trajectory. Increasing the prestige of work in municipalities (increasing wages, benefits, career growth), according to informants, can be considered as a foundation for attracting proactive employees interested in high-quality work.

Respondent E (girl): "Perhaps current school graduates would be motivated to enter and work in the municipal service in general – greater popularization, in the sense that current municipal employees would come and tell them what it is like to be such an employee, what are the advantages of working from the side of the person who does this. For us, it is probably also a good practice to communicate on a regular basis with people who are in this structure and who, like no one else, can truthfully answer our questions that arise..."

The development of the personnel potential of the municipal service in this context is one of the drivers of the formation of its positive image. In addition, ideas were expressed regarding the media image of a municipal employee, the need to popularize specific achievements and results of the work of government bodies in the media space.

Respondent A (young men): "People may be put off by this image of an official that has become ingrained in the minds of most people..."

Questionnaire surveys of student youth confirm the results of our qualitative research. In particular, A.A. Bukhner, characterizing the assessments of young people, speaks of the lack of information in the media space about the activities of state and municipal employees. It seems necessary to update in the media agenda such qualities of government officials as competence, professionalism, and individual decision-making style (Bukhner, 2020).

Students are quite selective in choosing sources of information. The results of the focus group interview illustrate the contrast between official and unofficial sources of information in the assessments of young people, where priority is given to the latter. According to the focus group participants, official media provide more generalized information, which is declarative and impersonal.

In characterizing the influence of the media on the formation of the image of municipal employees, the informants expressed themselves quite unanimously. The negative connotation of media materials was emphasized, the focus in the media on such stereotypical features of the media image of a municipal employee as greed, selfishness, dishonesty, theft, corruption, bureaucracy. At the same time, according to young people, the media image of a municipal employee presented in the official media is also far from reality. Focusing on the exaggeratedly positive features of an official, socially approved behavior, the "sacredness" of the image does not find a response among student youth.

Thus, in the course of the study it was established that modern youth is interested in receiving objective reliable information about the activities of state and municipal employees. The request for targeted information illustrating the specific results of the activities of government bodies is especially relevant.

5. Conclusion

The results of the focus group interview showed that students studying in the field of "public and municipal administration" are interested in the modern political agenda, monitor information about the activities of local governments in the media space. At the same time, students are quite selective in choosing sources of information. The results of the focus group interview illustrate the opposition between official and unofficial sources of information in the assessments of young people, where priority is given to the latter. According to the focus group participants, official media provide more generalized information, which is declarative and impersonal. The greatest interest among students is caused by "*popular Telegram channels and VKontakte publics*".

Informants spoke quite unanimously when characterizing the influence of the media on the formation of the image of municipal employees. The negative connotation of media materials was emphasized, the focus in the media on such stereotypical features of the image of a municipal employee as greed, selfishness, dishonesty, theft, corruption, bureaucracy. At the same time, according to young people, the media image of a municipal employee presented in official media is also far from reality. Focusing on exaggeratedly positive features of an official, socially approved behavior, the "sacredness" of the image does not find a response among student youth. According to focus group participants, the presentation of extreme poles of the image of a municipal employee in the media space (strongly negative and exaggeratedly positive) distorts the real picture of the activities of local governments.

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that media literacy education should occupy an important place in the system of training and advanced training of municipal employees. In particular, media literacy education of municipal employees should include the following elements: the formation of skills of positioning oneself in online communities, skills of creating media content that weaves positive experience of solving socially significant problems of local communities into narratives of everyday life, the consolidation of ethical principles of media consumption and public interactions in the media space.

Thus, the study found that modern youth are interested in receiving objective reliable information about the activities of state and municipal employees. It has been established that student youth show significant interest in searching for address information. In essence, municipal government acquires for young people the "face" of a specific official, whose actions shape ideas about the specifics of the profession they are receiving. The integration of data found during the address search on the specific results of the municipal official's activities with the formed ideas about the municipal service as such forms the media image of the local government. Representation in the media space of everyday practices of "service", the ideological link between municipal service and the common good seems to be the most effective tool for forming the image of municipal employees.

Further areas of research may include the following: the influence of the image of the municipal service on the readiness of the local population in territorial self-government, the assessment of media and social network materials the municipal service, the determination of factors in the formation of youth trust in official sources of information.

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