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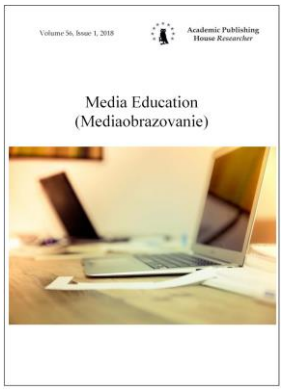
Published in the Slovak Republic
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)
Has been issued since 2005
ISSN 1994–4160
E–ISSN 1994–4195
2019, 59(1): 135–142

DOI: 10.13187/me.2019.1.135
www.ejournal53.com



Social Work Profession in the Focus of Digital News Media

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Abstract

One of the major goals of this article is to contribute in some way to enlarging the vision of the role of social workers in the coinage of their professional image through the collaboration with media. The examination of social work practice and professional image, as manifested in three Russian newspapers *Izvestiya, Komsomolskaya pravda* and *Gazeta.ru* over a three-year time period reveals that social workers are not proportionately portrayed according to their actual numerical representation in schools and that they are actually over-represented in negative manner. This kind of unfavorable media coverage leads to the construction of negative professional image.

In the light of real potential of social workers for influencing their public image a serious concern has been raised about the role of professional education. To promote positive professional image, social workers should be able to apply the knowledge and skills of interaction with a variety of modern media. This suggests that social work education should prepare students to use, manage, and shape their communication with mass media. The curricula and content of education should ensure future social workers to frame their professional portrait by gathering, reporting, and disseminating the news and views about the profession in media in an accurate and objective manner.

Keywords: news media, social pedagogues, social workers, professional image, professional education.

1. Introduction

We live in the era of digital media. It means that media play a dramatic role in different spheres of modern society. Media have multiple forms, including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, films, photography, cartoons, and the next generation of Internet (comprising of a large number of tools: online social networking, e-mail, Twitter, online chat rooms, Listservs, professional networking sites, news groups, etc.). They serve as key factors changing people's attitudes to socio-political, economic and cultural problems. The development of digital and electronic media forms in comparison with print ones gives more opportunities to recipients for obtaining information relevant to social realities and forming their own opinion and attitudes. This directly concerns the issues of professional activities.

The socio-pedagogical professions are in the focus of our attention: social work and social pedagogics (further in the article for the both professions we use one term 'social work'), which rise and growth in Russia over the past twenty-five years was dynamic, though not always progressively. And media has been crucial to this process for a variety of reasons, not least because they are capable to frame mass consciousness, meanings and ideals; create images and stereotypes.

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With the advent of digital media we are exposed to urgent social problems more than ever before. We should acknowledge that news media prefer to select and publish shocking materials about social problems and the activities of social workers, which cause a negative emotional reaction in the public about this profession and professionals. This kind of unfavorable media coverage leads to the construction of negative professional image of social workers and what is most important inhibits the development of this profession as a whole.

It is true that social workers themselves often give reasons to criticism. There are a number of real problems, drawbacks and difficulties in everyday interactions of practitioners. Our experience and research show that social workers are quite indifferent to their public image; they pay little attention to PR actions: do not fully use news media to show the effectiveness of their work, to demonstrate the relevance of qualified social assistance, and therefore their own positive role in normalizing the social situation in society. Whereas the establishment of contacts with the public through press media means, regular and meaningful coverage of social work achievements, an objective, unbiased representation of information cannot but contribute to the formation of the positive image of a profession.

Recent sociological studies of the professional image of social workers and social pedagogues are very revealing. Sociological data show that the population in various regions of Russia does not fully appreciate this type of activity (Bukhtereva, 1999; Polukhina, 2009; Vartanova, 2014; Vishnevsky, 2009 and others). The researchers conclude that negative image of social workers is not only a consequence of media coverage, but also the fault of social workers themselves and the result of imperfection in professional education.

There is no doubt that in order to consolidate positive ideas about socio-pedagogical activity as an intellectual profession in our society, social workers should be more active and consistent in representation of their own practice, explaining the base values, high standards of professional behavior and the commitment to client well-being as a defining element of a professional ethos. To promote their positive professional image and their profession, social workers should be able to apply the knowledge and skills of interaction with a variety of modern media: information and news portals at the national and regional levels; news agencies; regular print and digital mass media; television and radio channels, etc. All this suggests that social work education should prepare students to use, manage, and shape their communication with mass media in order to create a positive professional image of social work in our society. It means that the aim of social work programs is to educate and socialize new members of the profession to the culture and knowledge base of the mass media – in other words – to mold media literacy of future specialists.

It is also very important for the professionals to have some understanding and awareness of the way in which social work and social workers are represented both *in* and *by* the media. That is why we undertook the analysis of the content of three Russian newspapers *Izvestiya, Komsomolskaya pravda* and *Gazeta.ru* since January, 2016 till December, 2018.

2. Materials and methods

A primary goal of this study is to examine the character of representation of the social workers' activity and the type of social work professional image that has been reported on through published articles in digital media. We have attempted to offer a systematic examination of social work practice and professional image, as manifested in three Russian newspapers *Izvestiya, Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Gazeta.ru* over a three-year time period. Newspapers were selected for analysis on the basis of their size, importance and availability in the Internet. Our research focuses on the analysis of the articles retrieved through online databases of these newspapers. While this method was deemed appropriate for this study, future reviews may seek to find information in other media constructed discourses and online sources in order to include a wider array of opinions about social issues and their professional remedies in social work practice.

A search was conducted through the portals of these three newspapers using the method of continuous sampling by keywords "social work", "social worker" and "social pedagogue". In so doing, we try to highlight the complexities and challenges associated with facilitating change processes in formation of social work professional image.

In the newspaper *Izvestia* we have found 659 articles with the key words. Then we analyzed the content of all articles and found out that only a small part of the materials deals to some extent with social work and social pedagogy. In *Izvestia* we identified 82 objects for analysis, in *Komsomolskaya*

Pravda – 18, and in *Gazeta.ru* – 19. A number of serious issues arise from the analysis of the articles' content, and the results identified in this article were drawn from this analysis.

3. Discussion

The problem of "*image as it is*" became the object of scientific research in Russia relatively recently – in the 1990s. However, western and American scholars have conducted research in this field already since the 1930s. This problem was studied by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and etc. Gradually, on the basis of discoveries in various scientific fields, a new scientific direction grew up – imageology.

Now a lot of Russian researches dedicate their works to the problem of image genesis, its structure and formation (Gavra et al, 2011; Konstantinova, 2011; Naumova, 2004; Semenova, 2009 and others). The analysis of the current literature shows that the interpretation of the image phenomenon is very diverse. It is explored from different perspectives and is applicable to a wide range of objects: a person, a profession, an organization, a company, a region, a city, a trademark, etc. A brief review of existing works suggests that one should distinguish between studies devoted to the image phenomenon itself (substantive status) and to the process of its formation (procedural ontological status). It is the second view that is more characteristic of the pedagogical approach. In this case, the authors often devote the main attention to the personal qualities of specialists, limiting themselves to the analysis of the individual level of a professional image. Assuming the importance of such studies, we note, however, that in some of them there is a simple replacement of the concepts "readiness", "competence", "professionalism" by the "fashionable" term "image" (Begidova, Daurova, 2017; Gluzman, 2017 and others).

It is also necessary to mention the works in which the necessity of coinage of social work positive image has come to the fore in connection with the development of digital media. Russian scientists have examined various aspects of the role of media in modern society. For example, N.A. Akopyan explores the role of media in shaping stereotypes of mass consciousness (Akopyan, 2008); I.V. Abakumova and A.V. Grishina reveal the special role of the media as a component of the development of civil society in the context of modern information society. They emphasize that the media play an important role in the construction of personal patterns of the reality (Abakumova, Grishina, 2011). T. Dubrovskaya examines the linguistic component of the discourse in printed mass media. She notes that journalists have a right not only to inform the readers but also to give ratings and evaluate this or that event. It is no coincidence that journalists are called representatives of the fourth power (Dubrovskaya, 2014). The research of I.M. Dzyaloshinsky and M.A. Pilgun is very informative (Dzyaloshinsky, Pilgun, 2017). The authors try to define the meanings and ideals that modern media construct and promote in the current circumstances of informatization of all social processes.

The problem of interaction between media and social work is explored in the work of O.S. Buhtereva. The author draws attention primarily to sociological methods and examines different aspects of the media and their relationship to social work as a multidisciplinary universal phenomenon of public life (Bukhtereva, 1999).

The analysis of the works of foreign authors (Boulding, 1956; Brosius, 2011; Bruyns, Jukema, 1990; Davey, 2013; Flint, 2015; Healy, 2014 and others) shows that the image of the profession develops in different cultures and countries in different ways. It is especially important in the case of liberal professions and in relation to shaping professional image of these occupation, to which socio-pedagogical activity belongs. The knowledge of historical, cultural, political and economic factors provides evidence for an account of how and why image of a profession evolved in one or another form (Lubove, 1965). The cultural context helps to explain the quite high public weight of such professionals in economically developed countries, which is reflected in their special mission in the society, high degree of demand in the labour market, decent wages and social status (data of Labour Office United States. http://www.bls.gov).

Such scholars Ali (Ali, 2012), S.R. Brady, J. Young, and D.A. McLeod (Brady et al., 2015), R. Kubey (Kubey, 2005) emphasize that media and social sciences have common goals: to create a more democratic society by educating informed, competent, and active citizens .

J. Cubbage, Ph. Gillians, C. Algood, and V.S. Ramsey (Cubbage et al., 2016) pay special attention to the role of media in shaping the image of the social work profession. They consider that the low public opinion of the profession should be changed by universities that "can begin to

provide media literacy training and media awareness within the curriculum to assist future social workers in stemming the tide of negative coverage and portrayals of the profession in the media".

Since the media influence the audience's view of history, politics, culture and science, as well as the nature, image and relevance of profession, scholars argue that media literacy education becomes a pedagogical imperative. In this connection it is not surprising that more than thirty states in the US have introduced media education components into their educational standards in teaching social sciences, including history, economics, geography, and civil society (Kubey, 2004; Kubey, 2005).

Researchers draw attention to the fact that modern social workers should take the opportunity to push the boundaries of the use of the media, bringing to notice the necessity of a holistic media education (Duran et al., 2008). And this kind of literature has been steadily increasing over the past decade (Bucher et al., 2013; Chan, 2016; Gelman, Tosone, 2010; Giffords, 2009; Joung et al., 2018; Perron et al., 2010; Reamer, 2013; Stanfield, Beddoe, 2016; Westwood, 2014). Scholars actively promote the concept of media literacy which should be incorporated into curriculum to prepare social work students to become competent practitioners in the modern digital world. Yet such kind of research is still few in Russia. Having in mind this fact we tried to observe the newspaper publications in order to draw attention to the necessity of promoting the positive image of social work profession with the help of media, as well as to the ways and resources which can be helpful in this effort.

There is no doubt that further detailed research of the relations between social work and mews media is timely and may be very helpful not only for theoretical purposes but also for practical outcomes. Future of social work as a profession in Russia depends on its capacity to relocate itself in media space. Social work needs to position itself as a credible occupation with the technical capacities and vocational dispositions to critically engage and communicate with media.

4. Results

The issues of social work image which we discussed above are becoming more urgent and problematic in the context of dramatic development of the contemporary media. But it is still difficult to receive correct and precise information about the social work profession through news media. Our survey of three newspapers shows that the portrayal of social workers and their practice is not very frequent. None the less, a number of points can be made through the analysis of the articles.

We divided all the articles containing references to the issues of education, social problems, youth policy and so forth into 4 groups, according to the subjects they address: 1) accidents; 2) comments and views on social problems; 3) information and events; 4) activities of social workers and pedagogues. But sometimes it is quite difficult to identify correctly the main message of the precise article since the media coverage embraces the wider social contexts and processes. The content and style of presentations vary widely. Among 82 articles retrieved from the portal usvestiya.ru the general bulk (48) is dedicated to different social problems and reasoning on how to solve them. Amidst them are the following problems: teenagers' suicides, juvenile delinquency, bulling, aggressive behavior and its prevention, work with invalids, inclusive education, links between schools and students' families, organization of summer vocations for children, etc.

We examined the number of times social work or social workers were mentioned in 3 newspapers over a three-year time frame. We found out that the title "social worker" or "social pedagogue" hardly ever used. Instead we may read about pedagogues, teachers, psychologists, and other professionals, such as "mediators", "tutors", "defectologists", and volunteers, public and political leaders, clergymen, experts, who answer the questions, discuss social and educational problems or take part in round tables with journalists.

As for social workers they are usually mentioned in news media in connection with violations and infringements of orphans' and children's rights in schools and correctional institutions. Among 36 articles selected for the year 2018, 14 articles in a varying degree were focused on multiple disadvantages and failures of teachers, educators and social workers. Journalists depicted cases of cruelty, aggression or neglect in the practice with at rick children and youth. Usually when the media gains control of the story following a tragic incident, the focus tends to be exclusively on what goes wrong without speaking about the strengths of educational practice or the limitations of the work. And this is not only our opinion. Different western scholars make the same conclusions (Chenot, 2011; Cherry, 2018; Choate, 2016; Niehaus, Krüger, 2016).

Although these data mainly concern teachers, it can be assumed that quite often it is social workers that are meant, since there is an indication of the type of institution where the case take place (educational organizations for problem adolescents, orphans, at risk children, etc.). For example, in gazeta *Izvestia* A. Chipovskaya writes about a criminal case which was opened in Tatarstan on the fact of bullying a pupil of a private school for at risk teenagers. It was found out that *people* (author's italics) with spots in the biography were involved in working with problem children: the director had a canceled conviction for drug trafficking. The teachers also had problems with the law and used unacceptable measures for children (Chipovskaya, 2018).

We may suggest that most of the negative and questionable remarks about particular social work cases originated from politicians and writers who did not know a lot about social work profession because main bulk of information is published in specialized and scientific journals.

The articles' analysis also shows the lack of active position of social workers in promoting their professional ethos, strategies and expertise.

Despite positive reports in dissertations and scientific articles about effective development of social work profession we see the decline of discourse around the practice of social work and cross-professional collaboration in digital media. For example, head of the Center for Analysis of Incomes and Living Standards of Higher School of Economics Alina Pishnyak believes that "strengthening friendly attitudes towards people with disabilities is the result of the work of the state and NGOs" (Berishvili, Kretzul, 2018). Nothing is said about social worker's role or their professional impact on this process.

In 1991 when the profession just appeared social work professionals were seen as the active actors promoting social change and empowerment of all disenfranchised members of society. However, over the 25 years, there has been a shift in the way social work and practitioners are viewed. Once seen as the profession created to offer a joined-up service for those in need (including children and their families), today's social worker is seen as bureaucratic and less effective actor in social and pedagogical interactions. Social work and its mission are presented in fragments and not as a multi-faceted activity. Social workers are not perceived as experts/professional helpers providing support during crises, and facilitating social responses to needs.

What is considerably more alarming is that social workers are withdrawn from the wider discourses about the ways and means of educational and psychological provision at schools and other educational institutes. This shift is very apparent when we analyze the content of the articles since 2016 till 2018: the frequency of using the term "social worker" falls, instead the term "psychologist" – rise. (Berishvili, 2018; Grigoryan, 2018; Kretzul, 2018; Kretzul, Nodelman, 2018 etc.).

This can be seen throughout the coverage of the articles about teenagers' suicides. According to statistics, every year in Russia 1.5 thousand children committed suicide and another 4 thousand attempted to commit a suicide. The authors of the numerous articles see the reason of this situation in a lack of specialists: primarily *psychologists*, *psychiatrists and child sexologists* able to work effectively with at risk teenagers and youths at schools and educational institutions. In the media context which we analyzed, there is no place for *social workers* as well as for social pedagogues. That is why we may conclude that their role is becoming quite peripheral.

Consequently, at the end of 2017 "The Concept of Psychological Service Development in the System of Education in Russian Federation" was signed by O. Vasilieva, the head of Ministry of education (The Concept…, 2017). In this document it is stated that the purpose of the Psychological Service should be professional (psychological, psycho-pedagogical, social) support of activities aimed at preserving and promoting the health of students at different levels of education, reducing the risks of their maladjustment and negative socialization. For this purpose staffing services at schools will be composed of psychologists.

The introduction of new working postings of psychologists at schools is supported in many publications (Chipovskaya, 2017; Filippova, 2017; Khetagurova, 2017; Kretzul, 2017, etc.). But is it realistic to expect so much from the structural change of social workers by psychologists? How the new specialist (psychologist) at school will become more effective than social worker? Will the status of social workers be further undermined following the introduction of Psychological Services in education?

Our analysis shows that the mission of social work as a profession coincides largely with the main goal of the Psychological Service stated in the "The Concept". It is as follows: "to promote the creation of conditions for the preservation and strengthening of psychological and mental health

and the development of students, providing them with psychological support and assistance in difficult life situations" (The Concept..., 2017).

According to Global definition of social work approved by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in July 2014 "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above mentioned definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels" (https://www.ifsw.org/). As such social work offers even wider contexts than psychology on people's circumstances and the range of educational, group-based and organizational work tasks in which social workers are involved. All these helps us to conclude that the social work profession has to be seen as a force able to provide more accurate and earlier assessment of personal problems, and organize more effective intervention in collaboration with other professionals, improving the way they share information and dovetail their services.

Being impacted by negative opinions of political leaders, education officials and ministerial office-bearers, social work as a profession endures come-down. The profession may continue to decline without special efforts and active struggle to overcome these negative portrayals. That's why we think that propaganda of social work professional mission is very important. We contend that social work as a profession has the ability to meet individual needs and become involved in change on different levels: educational, psychological, social, cultural, media and others. Members of the profession should continue to struggle to overcome in media means negative portrayals of social work and to reshape public opinion about the necessity of the services provided by social workers and social pedagogues to those in need.

5. Conclusion

The media plays an important role regarding the image of the social work profession. Continued criticism by the press and improper representation of social work have major consequences. The misguided media depiction of the profession impacts the morale of social workers, as well as their professional practice, facilitates in shaping negative public opinion and impacts social policy.

Our findings show that social workers and social pedagogues are not proportionately portrayed according to their actual numerical representation in schools and educational institutions and that they are actually over-represented in negative manner.

We are convinced that the digital media should be deliberately and persistently used by social workers to voice the mission and values of their profession or make claims about their functions as activists and civil actors. In the light of real potential of social workers for influencing their public image a serious concern has been raised about the role of professional education. The curricula and content of education can ensure future social workers to frame their professional portrait by gathering, reporting, and disseminating the news and views in media about the profession in an accurate and objective manner.

We remain optimistic about the opportunities for promoting the social work positive image with the help of media literacy content in social work training. And we argue that reputation of this profession may be regulated by social workers themselves.

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