MEDIA, DEATH, DIALOGUE. SOCIAL AND MEDIA VALUES IN THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE 'FAMILY' SUICIDES IN BULGARIA

Petar KANEV

ABSTRACT:

How media confront abnormal social trends speaks volumes about the prevailing social and journalism norms and values. Bleak economic and social conditions may give rise to suicides, which classical sociological theory views as a strong indicator of a society in a serious crisis and in need of reconstruction. Media coverage and especially comments on such grave events demonstrate the capacity and willingness of journalists to engage in a sensible communication on the issue, or attempt to divert the public's attention from the crux of the matter. A value analysis is thus revealing of media's motivation and the eventual outcome of its thorough or selective highlighting of an alarming situation. The study employs a qualitative type of content analysis to discover the willingness of media to engage in an honest dialogue on the larger picture. The conclusion is hardly optimistic: media in Bulgaria tend to eschew dialogue, provide narrow technocratic explanations of tragedies, developing insensitive blind spots for the wider reality, the social and the human, thus failing its mission. Since values change slowly and under the influence of long-term factors, this study provides an insight on the way cultivation forces have worked in the Bulgarian society and media.

KEY WORDS:

Bulgaria, ethics, media, the press, suicide, social values

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1   Introduction

A series of grisly suicides shocked Bulgaria in early 2013. Two fathers killed[1] their families and themselves, at least four people set themselves on fire, becoming the mediated tip of an iceberg, which experts regard as extraordinary.[2] As classic sociological literature maintains, suicide rate is the key indicator of a society's health.[3] The ensuing media debate, however, generally drowned most social and even human aspects of this severe abnormality, honestly perceived by many as a logical trend.

Petar Kanev
Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications
Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'
Moskovska 1
1000 Sofia
Bulgaria
pkanev@yahoo.com

Petar Kanev is a PhD student at the Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski', at Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications. He holds a Master's Degree in International Journalism from the Missouri School of Journalism (UMC) and a B.A. in Journalism and Mass Communications from the American University in Bulgaria. Mr. Kanev´s career successes in covering international news for a number of media outlets in Bulgaria and worldwide have been recognised by professional and international organisations. Among his publications, dealing mostly with media ethics and value analysis, is the award-winning Failing Hegemony: A Comparative Content Analysis of the Coverage in the World Newspapers in the Lead-up to Iraq Attack (AEJMC 2004). He has just completed his dissertation Press, Values and Myth. A Comparative Values Analysis of Ten Quality Newspapers from Around the World (Bulgaria, England, Russia, Turkey, USA).

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1   See: *Petima sa namereni murtvi v sofiyski apartament, policiyata razsledva sluchaya*. Released on 11th January 2013. [online]. [2013-02-18]. Available at: <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1712180>; *Chetirichlenno semeystvo izbito v Plovdiv*. Released on 21st January 2013. [online]. [2013-02-18]. Available at: <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1730148>.
2   *Bum na samoubiystvata v gradovete na protesta*. Released on 4th March 2013. [online]. [2013-03-12]. Available at: <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1817557>.
3   DURKHEIM, E.: *Samoubiystvoto. Sociologichesko izsledvane*. Sofia : Jenifer-Hicks, 1999, p. 496.

Deviance from the familiar or the acceptable is deeply embedded in most definitions of news. So news-gathering represents a continuously applied value tool, an ongoing review of the world through the lens of an evaluator seeking imperfections and threats.

This is a tool of varying qualities. Its transparency, magnifying power, distortion and interference are constantly changing as the instrument is modified every minute. Identifying social values in media texts suffers from all the shortcomings of the tool implemented. This task, however, is of great importance because of the function of mass mediated communication – to assist the public in their daily survival and strategic development. Values and norms are the basis for the normal functioning and development of the social organism. They steer social integration and regulation. Through their internalisation a person becomes a part of its community, its rules and gained experience.[4]

Values, most of all, represent an attitude, a measure for comparing social facts to what is desired and acceptable (and vice versa) within society. Although different schools are often able to define only their disagreements about the genesis and evolution of values (socially determined vs. God-given, for example), there is a fairly widespread agreement that the existing norms in a group are the product of negotiation, acceptance of existing common dependencies, and hence – shared obligations.[5] The basis of value judgments is to distinguish between good and bad, desirable and undesirable in regard to the purposes of man and society. Values do not really overlap with factual knowledge; they classify it under these two categories.[6]

Suicide as a social fact is a border phenomenon, often outlining the social division between the acceptable in a meaningful social context and the 'monstrous';[7] what is tabooed not only as undesirable, but as a complete negation of meaning, individually and socially. It is not physically impossible, however, and through the viewfinder of society it is the starting point for cognitive identification and evaluation. Naturally, these background values may stand out as only practical or rational – as is suggested in the works of Sumner, Spencer, and Dewey.[8] Rationality, however, may not be only materialistic and can distinguish good from evil in purely idealistic constructions. Most often, people are guided by complex combinations of utilitarian and idealistic motives, which are a focus of both social experiences and the specific circumstances of a problematic situation. This heterogeneity of values has led philosophers and sociologists to recognise that the definition of a person cannot exclude transcendence. It may be an intrinsic feature which Kant[9] sees in freedom even under most restrictive circumstances or the ability to choose between alternative assessments and actions. Yoas states that values emerge in the process of self-empowerment and self-transcendence which includes all communicative phenomena, ranging from "the personal prayer to the collective ecstasy in archaic rituals or militaristic nationalist enthusiasm."[10]

Materialistic philosophy accepts man's freedom to choose non-deterministically while rejecting 'axiological idealism' for its own purely 'religious' reasons. Tasev notes the relationship between philosophy of values and political economy, especially the latter's kinship with axiology.[11] He also cites the limitations of the economic metaphor as a descriptor of the nature of values. But navigation in this metaphor's realm is now inevitable, since for the last few decades basic norms reflect the dictate of the economic over any (other) idealism, be it atheistic, agnostic or religious. For example, in this text we cannot avoid terms like the "market of symbolic goods"[12] as the media sphere is often described. Tasev maintains that the "consumption of ... objects of material and spiritual culture is ... a necessary process of human existence." Consumption almost always signifies the development of a market, and the existence of one means that there is demand for symbolic goods. And they have the "magical quality to meet people's needs."[13]

Symbolic demand and its development (cultivation of taste and critical abilities, but also their degradation) depend on socially determined factors. Here, media act as symbolic goods markets. As in most markets, effect is measured not only by realised transactions. A market is primarily an information system that enables the implementation of all (social) functions of the communication process: orientation (cognitive), correlation (evaluation), enlightening (transmission and reinforcement of meanings), and entertainment.[14] In the social market people participate in creating and maintaining a common programme for survival as they learn of and appreciate opportunities and threats in their world.

Values enter the world of sociology as a natural regulative and creative factor. The social Darwinism of A. Comte, H. Spencer and W. Sumner[15] is very much in line with modern corporate ideology exhorting selfish values, quite logically for the winners in a Darwinian epic. One might note how material success quickly turns fact-oriented knowledge into a stagnant evaluation system (ideology), causing considerable damage to quality learning and assessment. Marxism celebrated the same doomed victory, and we still may witness a new momentous change of dominant perceptions of society.

Durkheim paints a picture of a societal whole, which is different and more than the sum of its component individuals. Social relationships, moral and legal norms in such a society have a defining power as 'binding rules' and it is actually society that empowers and fulfils individuals (otherwise deficient) rather than the other way round.[16] This picture, connecting in a more meaningful way division of labour, competition and solidarity in a complex modern society, allows also for the existence of competitive values and value systems, not cemented in an ideological monolith.

In response to the question about the meaning of life (and it is what man is ready to die for), Durkheim considers exactly the act of suicide. Depending on the mechanism leading to the wilful taking of one's life, he classifies suicides as selfish, anomic, altruistic and fatalistic. It is important to remember that the act of suicide is always performed on the stage of society – an unacceptable, uncaring, or simply disintegrating one. In most cases Durkheim suggests that suicides are a signal of a more general social dysfunction whose treatment (reconstruction) would be an efficient suicide deterrent.[17]

Another important conclusion of Durkheim is that crime is a "normal", genetic disease for a society with a damaged vertical hierarchy of values. Multifaceted analysis of this phenomenon (especially in the countries of defeated socialism) demonstrates the obvious: criminal elites gain power, elites get criminalised, and moral values are scrapped.[18] One cannot but appreciate Durkheim's description of this hierarchy of values, resulting from human transcendence (as in Kant), and mapping it out in modernising societies. As Durkheim puts it, suicides may be explained in the psychological structure of man, which always requires goals that supersede him.[19] Durkheim's prism yields interesting results when considering a recent 'media' suicide. In early December 2012 two Australian radio journalists fraudulently obtained information from a British hospital which had examined Prince William's pregnant wife. One of the victimised nurses, Jacintha Saldanha, committed suicide shortly thereafter.[20]

As unwelcome as it is, this tragedy is a reminder of Durkheim's contention that people adhering to regulatory values like shame and (non-situational) conscience in a very much relativistic world are more likely burdened with perhaps idealistic, dogmatic, but in a sense, a richer value baggage – including a vertical value hierarchy. Unfortunately, in this case guild reactions were dominated by self-defence,[21] drowning the occa-

4   TASEV, V.: *Socialnite cennosti i formiraneto na lichnostta*. Sofia : Partizdat, 1974, p. 45.
5   ILIN, V. V.: *Aksiologiya*. Moscow : MGU, 2005, p. 16.
6   TASEV, V.: *Socialnite cennosti i formiraneto na lichnostta*. Sofia : Partizdat, 1974, p. 47.
7   FOTEV, G.: *Cennosti sreshtu bezporyaduk*. Sofia : Iztok-Zapad, 2009, p. 18.
8   TASEV, V.: *Socialnite cennosti i formiraneto na lichnostta*. Sofia : Partizdat, 1974, p. 81.
9   KANT, E.: Fondements de la metaphysique des moeurs - quoted in PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya*. Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 57.
10   YOAS, H.: Cennosten pluralisam i moralen universalizam. In YOTOV, S. (ed.): *Okolo Habermas*. Sofia : Dom na Naukite za choveka i obshtestvoto, 2000, p. 247-264.
11   TASEV, V.: *Socialnite cennosti i formiraneto na lichnostta*. Sofia : Partizdat, 1974, p. 54.
12   BOURDIEU, P.: The Market of Symbolic Goods. In BOURDIEU, P.: *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1993, p. 112-145.
13   TASEV, V.: *Socialnite cennosti i formiraneto na lichnostta*. Sofia : Partizdat, 1974, p. 54.

14   RANLY, D.: *Principles of American Journalism*. Iowa : Kendall Hunt, 1997, p. 45.
15   HOFSTADTER, R.: *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944; rev. ed. Boston : Beacon Press, 1955, p. 27.
16   DURKHEIM, E.: *The division of labor in society*. New York : Free Press, 1984, p. 227-228.
17   DURKHEIM, E.: *Samoubiystvoto. Sociologichesko izsledvane*. Sofia : Jenifer-Hicks, 1999, p. 477-479.
18   MANLIHEROVA, M.: *Medii i elit. Vzaimni vliyaniya*. Sofia : Avangard, 2007, p. 31.
19   DURKHEIM, E.: *Samoubiystvoto. Sociologichesko izsledvane*, Sofia : Jenifer-Hicks, 1999, p. 448.
20   *Jacintha Saldanha Inquest: Royal Hoax Nurse Found Hanged*. Released on 13th December 2012. [online]. [2013-01-16]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-20708528>.
21   See: O'DONNELL, L.: *Jacintha Saldanha Suicide: Do Not Blame Prankster DJs in the Death of Kate Middleton Nurse*. Released on 7th December 2012. [online]. [2013-01-16]. Available at: <http://www.mic.com/articles/20327/jacintha-saldanha-suicide-do-not-blame-prankster-djs-in-the-death-of-kate-middleton-nurse>; NOLAN, S.: *More Than Two Thirds of Australians Don't Think DJs Were to Blame for Nurse's Death, New Poll Reveals*. Released on 9th December 2012. [online]. [2013-01-16]. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2245496/Jacintha-Saldanhas-death-Most-Australians-dont-think-DJs-Mel-Greig-Michael-Christian-blame.html>.

sional slips of frank "mea culpa".[22] It is hard to imagine, especially based on the media coverage that Saldanha's suicide was caused only by individualistic or selfish motives, and determined only by economic circumstances.

This case brings forward Pharo's reasoning on the problem of evil and suffering endured by apparently innocent people. It can be assumed that if pain did not exist, everything would be permitted, but because it exists only permissible is that which causes undue suffering. The problem of the journalist, as noted by Pharo, is the ability to predict the consequences of the exercise of situational choice.[23]

Another critical issue in the evaluation of acute social phenomena is that of fairness to the other – whether you trust the ability of others to judge us fairly, do we accept the other as a conscientious, rational person, "one of us"?[24] This is an important basis for the possibility of dialogue and negotiation on the nature of the values that bind or separate us. Analysis based on these considerations can highlight moral descriptions – evaluations, excuses, judgments containing evaluations or seeking to change them – through aggravation or mitigation. Pharo notes that moral values and norms are essentially "social constructions", seeing them as thoughts that are difficult to objectify. Weber describes values as ideas about what reality is, what it should be like – these reside in people's minds and direct their activities.[25]

Pharo contends that values and norms are a sociological way to name obligations and the good, and that for their identification there is "probably no other criterion than the semantic one, meaning reasonable comparison of the validity of moral descriptions ... and a hierarchy of these valid descriptions."[26]

In times of intensive public thinking and evaluation activity, substantiated opinions on the facts and nature of an often shocking event may reveal values and norms harboured by individuals and groups. Open debate is not only part of the process of negotiating values; it also represents an opportunity for them to be identified and classified.

Weber, faced with the problem of objectification of values and norms, suggests a cautious approach, awareness of the inevitable subjectivity of any objectification attempts, and stresses the need for intellectual honesty and fairness in the examination and discussion of value issues.[27] Pharo notes that authors like Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, Noam Chomsky, having developed tools for extraction of meaning from a discourse, unite around the notion that this task is very complex and subject to a difficult process of identifying such aspects of communication as ritual procedures, jargon, silence (tabooing). Sachs speaks of "semantic networks" and scenarios, which vary in different social situations and suggest specific "dictionaries" for communication and behaviour in each of them.[28]

Still, Pharo declares the sociological consensus that linguistic analysis is the main means of objectification of meaning in this field of study. He points out the obvious inadequacy of microanalysis at the level of words and symbols and the logical bankruptcy of infinite regression of explanations of language conventions by means of other linguistic conventions. He argues that "language is the means by which we can say something true about some parts of what exists."[29] At a greater technical depth, Quine regards language as a logical tool for working with its three main constructs – predication, quantification and function of truth, where the latter helps determine the veracity of a statement.

Habermas[30] and Apel[31] make such linguistic analysis the mainstay of their search for the "bottom" of conscientious argumentation, consisting of universal "final" values. These, on the one hand are fundamental, and on the other – too deeply hidden under layers of reflections on specific situations.

Habermas suggests that social communication occupies a special place, beyond the purely objective-cognitive and subjective instrumentality of language. He concludes that only communication actions aimed at understanding each other, not at individual success, can integrate validity claims in all the three language use constructs. Taking a view from a quasi-Kantian perspective, Habermas defines the meaningful communication action as one which respects and appeals to the receiver's reason and freedom of will (hence the importance of the category of 'dialogue' for this study). In order to have one, the verbal (or generally symbolic) interaction must meet some minimal criteria. First, the appeal must be sincere; second, the dialogue itself must be of high quality, it must comply with the principles of discourse ethics.

Habermas derives discourse ethics' procedures and rules from the principle that "only those rules of action may be valid, on which all possibly affected parties can agree as participants in a rational discourse."[32] Habermas and Apel claim that in a reasonable dialogue, procedures themselves contain features of morality with universal properties. However, the concept of communicative rationality of Habermas and Apel claims no ultimate truth. Their communication rationality has tactical objectives, and not to explain the world as a whole. It only prescribes somewhat loose limits on what is reasonable in communication. It is also open to revision in the light of new information inputs from experience.

Kettner[33] suggests that discourse ethics may be seen as the obligation to seek in a discussion what is morally acceptable, morally meaningful and reasonably reject what is not so. For this purpose, the participants in such a discussion must define the grounds for their moral judgments, which are "shared interpretations of the structure of moral responsibility" for the consequences from human actions.

Yoas[34] sees the problem of ideological tabooing as an obstacle to the quality intellectual and social dialogue. Based on an "ethics of tolerance", he defends the need for value pluralism. The latter frees mind from the restraints (or blurring) of the thousands of rules of an impossible value universalism – it is necessary to point out that rationality is limited to enclaves of particulate value systems, which do not cooperate or even interact.

Plencner points to psychological phenomena limiting the ability to engage in a rational dialogue. Reflexivity, in his view, is most often trumped by humans' ingrained reaction of 'fight, flight or freeze', when confronted by criticism.[35]

In mediated communication social environment affects every stage of interaction. The author of a polemic newspaper article inevitably expresses a distinct personality of his own; he, however, speaks to the audience, to the society. To be understood at all, he uses symbols that can be decoded by the public, and more often than not, constructs a rationale of his evaluation judgments using value markers, understandable and internalised by the audience.

For the purposes of this study we must point out that the task of the researcher of opinions in the press is (or should be) greatly facilitated by the authors. Their task is to make their value-loaded messages as clear as possible and ready to be assimilated by the reader. A more serious challenge for the researcher is the analysis and comparison of texts from different cultures; where even when the language used (e.g. English) is identical, narrative techniques may vary substantially.

Noting that a fact can always be falsely described, Pharo emphasises that value descriptions may also be true, but carry different cognitive or normative value. Every day the press offers us examples of such divergent descriptions of even quite straightforward facts: information about the same event can draw attention to the various aspects of an incident. The use of semantically loaded terms lets us draw conclusions about the direction of intentions and the author's value grounds. Pharo notes that "if the selected meaning is not adequate, then ... the phrase suffers from moral falsehood."[36] Such a phrase, however, provides information about the values of the author, including his willingness to engage in an ethical dialogue in the spirit of Habermas and Apel. It is worth mentioning the "analysis of justifications" in light of Quine's argumentative hypothesis:

22   See: BAKER, K. J. M.: *Who's to Blame for British Nurse Jacintha Saldanha's Suicide?* Released on 10th December 2012. [online]. [2013-01-16]. Available at: <http://jezebel.com/5967121/whos-to-blame-for-british-nurse-jacintha-saldanhas-suicide>; MOONEY, B.: *A Victim of Today's Culture of Casual Cruelty.* Released on 9th December 2012. [online]. [2013-01-16]. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2245605/Jacintha-Saldanha-A-victim-todays-culture-casual-cruelty.html>.
23   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 58-63.
24   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 64-66.
25   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p.71.
26   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 242-263.
27   WEBER, M.: *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences.* Glencoe : Free Press, 1949 - quoted in BERRY, D.: *Journalism Ethics and Society.* Vermont : Ashgate, 2008, p. 134.
28   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Todorka Mineva, Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 151.
29   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Todorka Mineva, Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 151.
30   HABERMAS, J.: *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action.* Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1991, p. 211.
31   KETTNER, M.: *Discourse Ethics Beyond Apel and Habermas, a Realistic Relaunch.* In Nordicum-Mediterraneum, 2011, Vol. 6, No. 1. [online]. [2013-02-02]. Available at: <http://nome.unak.is/nm-marzo-2012/6-1x/24-articles61/92-fv>.

32   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 155.
33   KETTNER, M.: *Discourse Ethics Beyond Apel and Habermas, a Realistic Relaunch.* In Nordicum-Mediterraneum, 2011, Vol. 6, No. 1. [online]. [2013-02-02]. Available at: <http://nome.unak.is/nm-marzo-2012/6-1x/24-articles61/92-fv>.
34   YOAS, H.: Cennosten pluralisam i moralen universalizam. In YOTOV, S. (ed.): *Okolo Habermas.* Sofia : Dom na Naukite za choveka i obshtestvoto, 2000, p. 250.
35   PLENCNER, A.: *Critical Thinking and the Challenges of Internet.* In Communication Today, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 16.
36   PHARO, P.: *Moral i Sociologiya.* Sofia : Sonm, 2006, p. 251.

data (facts) not linked by any logical causality. For the purposes of this study both logical and false arguments are interesting, even ones with misleading conclusions, based on true facts and totally absurd (false facts linked by impossible logic). Qualitative assessment of such argumentation allows for reasonable assumptions on the values defended or denied by the text as comprehensible and comparable units.

2   Research Methodology

Discourse analysis as a method to identify values of participants in a discussion is an established method in academic practice. Bengston and Xu,[37] Cragg,[38] and Morito[39] utilise a kind of communication analysis to identify values and their hierarchy among various stakeholders in debates on environmental issues.

Gorin and Dubied[40] analyse social values in media texts about celebrities, comparing them to values prevailing in the wider society. Kasardzhian[41] explores values dominant in popular cartoons in the American press, which construct a special vision and ideal of everyday reality. Marketing strategies, disregarding local social values (including ones to be challenged) are a notoriously irrational waste of resources; strategic communication like religious missionary stands firmly on identifying values and social contexts.[42]

Categorisation of values is a normal part of a three-step analysis of the availability and weight of values expressed or implied in a text. Morito uses the steps of identification, categorisation and evaluation, in which values are found, then classified in more general categories and subsequently evaluated in regard to their hierarchy, relative "strength" and weight.[43]

For the purposes of this study, the opposition between dialogic and monologue values shall be used. Their polarity allows for a binary assessment of the identified values, but in order to take account of possible nuances of evaluation, its value is placed on an ordinal scale of 1 to 5, where one is 'very dialogic', 2 represents 'more likely dialogic', and 3 means a neutral view.

Such a view should not be possible in a polemic article; however, the press in Bulgaria serves daily examples of inadequacy of reflection in which an event becomes a (pseudo) occasion for reiteration of authors' pet constructs, without much regard to circumstances, causes, or consequences of the event. So the 'grey' score 3 will apply to such journalistic failures. 4 shall mean 'more likely monologue' nature of expressed or implied values, 5 shall signify extreme aversion to dialogue in the text.

The unit of analysis is the opinion article or interview on the subject published between 11th and 31st January 2013 on the opinion pages of the relevant edition – editorials, op-ed pieces by columnists, employed by the publication or contributions and interviews of external experts. Three popular Bulgarian daily newspapers aimed at the mass, non-specialist audience shall be examined. In many ways they are major portals for analytical and interpretive opinions. Discussion messages often overflow from their pages to electronic forums, to other media, especially to the 'theatrical' genres of television and radio (e.g. talk show interviews).

3   Results and Analysis

In consideration of the study period, in the Opinion section of the Trud, Standard and 24 Hours dailies exactly 10 articles and interviews were published. Most of them (six) are in the 24 Hours, three are published by Standard. Trud printed only one very small column. The average orientation of the articles was 3.2, which, especially in view of a 1.39841 standard deviation for the population is firmly in the grey area of neutrality. Half of the articles, however, do not support dialogue, one is assessed as neutral, and four express dialogic values. Three articles occupy the extreme poles of the debate – one for dialogue, two having a totally monologue character.

The majority of published opinions deal with private factors – the specific psychological state of the perpetrators, the institutional environment (or lack thereof) for people with mental illness. The demand for a broader context (social factors) for the hopeless state of the perpetrators or probing the topic of the financial indebtedness of one of them (Tepavicharov) are mentioned only briefly and are effectively tabooed. Expert presence is clearly limited to forensic psychiatry – it is dominated by assertions and non-evaluative, descriptive language (again – in passing) of the severe social situation in Bulgaria. Even sensible recommendations like those of the national consultant in psychiatry professor Vihra Milanova bump into the unspoken inability of Bulgarian society to ensure their implementation.[44]

The interview of Professor Milanova in the Standard daily[45] is related to the case only superficially. It explains diagnostic, therapeutic and bureaucratic procedures in the treatment of conditions that may lead to "extended suicide". In no way, however, social factors are considered. If viewed from the perspective of excuses, the interview defends the reputation of science and medicine, but conceals social circumstances. The question is whether they are not tabooed as an overwhelming (evil) force. Just as reasonably, but fragmentary is the lonely voice of Alexander Botev in Trud.[46] The author notes that "pills alone" cannot cure the problem and calls for a "psycho reform" which he himself does not expect to happen.

The second case of "extended suicide" brings forward the case of military servicemen who are the perpetrators in both cases. Materials stressing this aspect set society against the military with its structure and clarity of rules. At the same time, society itself is not described, except as being uniquely allergenic to soldiers. "Technological" recommendations dominate: expert work with risk groups, measures of control over access to weapons. Social context assessment is tabooed; the reader is silently left to perceive it as normal, because of its existence. Rosen Yordanov,[47] Iliya Marinov,[48] and Petar Vasilev[49] paint a stereotype of servicemen which is readily picked up by Slavi Angelov in 24 Hours.[50] It combines professional stigma and omission of the wider social context, offering a technocratic and hardly feasible solution: control (unclear how) access to weapons of people whose profession is based on working with these. Meaning in this article breaks apart on a number of levels – it seems to argue that our society is protected by psychopaths who should not use the tools of their work. The search for illusory explanations most often yields equally phantasmal prescriptions.

This "technocratic" or "masculine" semantic field in the press is opposed by the emotional and modest minority of one editorial,[51] Margarita Petkova,[52] and Lora Simeonova.[53] Paradoxically, Simeonova's article consists of verdicts, although in favour of values with the potential to prevent similar tragedies. While consonant with a more plausible explanation of the events, Simeonova's appeals are rather an expression of despair and disbelief in the rationality of the reader. Similar desperation sounds in the 24 Hours' editorial appeal, an apparent attempt to protect innocent victims. In these invocations we can hardly find the prerequisite for

37   BENGSTON, D. N., ZHI, X.: *Changing National Forest Values: A Content Analysis*. Research Paper NC-323. St. Paul, MN : U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, 1995. [online]. [2015-06-01]. Available at: <http://www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/10806>.
38   CRAGG, W.: *Mapping Values, Descriptive Axiology and Applied Ethics: Lessons from Four Environmental Ethics Case studies*. [online]. [2015-06-05]. Available at: <http://www.schulich.yorku.ca/ssb-extra/businessethics.nsf/lookup/publications/$file/axiology.pdf>.
39   MORITO, B.: *Value and Ethical Analysis in Vulnerability to Climate Change*. [online]. [2015-06-05]. Available at: <http://www.parc.ca/mcri/pdfs/Morito.pdf>.
40   GORIN, V., DUBIED, A.: *Desirable People: Identifying Social Values through Celebrity News*. In Media, Culture, Society, 2011, Vol. 33, No. 4, p. 599-618.
41   KASSARJIAN, H. H.: *Social Values and the Sunday Comics: A Content Analysis*. In Advances in Consumer Research, 1983, Vol. 10, p. 434-438.
42   APECH, J.: *Socio-anthropological Implications in Cross-Cultural Church Planting*. In Indian Journal of Theology, 1996, Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 88-97.
43   MORITO, B.: *Value and Ethical Analysis in Vulnerability to Climate Change*. [online]. [2015-06-05]. Available at: <http://www.parc.ca/mcri/pdfs/Morito.pdf>.

44   NIKOLAEVA, L.: *Dvama ot vseki sto sa s tezhko razstroystvo*. In 24 Chasa, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 12, p.14.
45   CHIPILEVA, M.: *Stigmata da si psihichno bolen*. In Standart, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 9, p. 12.
46   BOTEV, A.: *V ochakvane na psihoreforma*. In Trud, 2013, Vol. 76, No. 12, p. 10.
47   RADKOVA, S.: *Savov e izbil blikite si, za da slozhi krai na mukite*. In 24 Chasa, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 16, p. 14.
48   DENOV, L.: *Samoubiec, veche napravil fatalnia izbor, se otkriva mnogo po-trudno*. In 24 Chasa, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 23, p. 14.
49   VASILEV, P.: *Voennite izpushvat v civilnia zhivot*. In Standart, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 18, p. 13.
50   ANGELOV, S.: *Voenni izbivat semeistva v sblusuk s realnia sviat*. In 24 Chasa, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 29, p. 10.
51   EDITORIAL: *Detsata Ne Sa Ni Vinovni*. In 24 Chasa, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 20, p. 11.
52   PETKOVA, M.: *Tepavitcharov – noviat Kotcho Chistemenski*. In 24 Chasa, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 23, p. 10.
53   SIMEONOVA, L.: *Apokalipsisut vutre v nas*. In Standart, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 17, p. 13.

quality dialogue: acceptance of the other as an equal, rational entity, expecting a reply at all. The short editorial call of 24 Hours suffers from an almost colloquial logical gap: "...[O]ur children are not guilty of any of the problems of the adult. So they should not become their victims." The seeming obviousness of this construct is actually deeply misleading: the perpetrators hardly blamed their loved ones for their shared hardships. The far more probable explanation – deviant perceptions of suicide as liberation from the pressure of an inhuman order, is clearly tabooed by the article.

The only piece that really seeks common ground for conversation, even as a lamentation of both victims and killers, is that of Margarita Petkova, a poet, in the 24 Hours. Starting with the title, her article also fits into its theme the destruction of the vertical hierarchy of values – describing the deletion of the concept of the heroic in a society permeated by credit drudgery. Petkova stresses that the torn social fabric cannot save those falling down, that what is most important – interpersonal communication has been lost, that despair is not an accident, but a logical outcome under the circumstances.[54]

Amid the total of 10 articles on the topic, the loneliness of the mere two that do not taboo the social and the human is extremely disturbing. Taboos, manifested by the Bulgarian press, apparently drift away from the principles of dialogue; they are not conducive to a conversation with the reader and try to intrude onto him a one-way information interaction, denying his right to an authentic attitude to the problem.

Compassion and knowledge are for the most part denied to the audience – both as authentic expressions and as potential guidelines. Uniformity of most of the comments and almost hundred per cent domination of despair as the final semantic product tell a story of a somewhat narcissistic press unprepared to discuss real problems faced by individuals and society. The problem is becoming a professional one because of an emerging tendency for the press' spotlight to veer away from what is significant.

Conclusion

In Pitirim Sorokin's view, if a stimulus asserting a given belief is repeated over and over, the belief may be internalised – even, for example, one of the "normality" of what is criminal.[55] This view, obviously related to the theories of strong direct media effects,[56] has been empirically refuted, but in times of a significantly advanced fragmentation of both the media audience and media content. Historically, theories of strong media effects have been replaced by those of setting the public agenda, suggesting the ability of social elites and editors to dictate "how to think" or even the weaker "what to think about".[57] This influence inevitably affects the evolution of values over time, as observed by Solík et al.[58]

Today creators of some of the unpopular theories of yesterday, especially those of cultivation effects,[59] might feel justified when faced with the results of the long-term effects of the repetition of semantic vectors in the press, combined and enhanced by ideological, post-Cold war structural and semantic convergence (adopting the language of the victor, increasing uniformity of media content and economic environment, conceptual defragmentation of audiences). It seems like it is time for communication theorists to rediscover mass mediated communication and the revival of some of its features like one-way flow and propaganda.

In *The crisis of our time*, Sorokin reflects on the historical conflict between different value systems with respect to the "vertical [dimension]" of values. He sees history's main opposition as the one between ideational and sensate – polar states of sublime worship of the holy on the one hand and the material and hedonistic

on the other. Sorokin finds the most severe defect in the sensate system in the blurring of the boundaries between sensate "truth and lie, reality and fiction, law and utilitarian expediency".[60]

In this description one can easily find many features of modern media and society, the more that journalism today has captured many of the symbolic functions of the arts – those of representing and interpreting reality.[61] Simply put, a public, which is fed mostly raw footage of failure and very rarely gains access to the high art (and meaning) of transcendence, will probably adapt to a simulacrum of a world where 'vertical' values would be peripheral. One direct consequence of the "haunting absence of aura",[62] of sublimity is the dissipation of imagination. A related, similarly terrifying and dysfunctional media-driven development is the degradation of critical thinking and even rudimentary capacity to start and maintain dialogue.[63]

The process in question, driven by the pervasive genres of mass entertainment and advertising is not just some form of natural change. As demonstrated in this and, hopefully other studies, it is augmented by a cohort of willing pundits, thus taking the form of a societal control, of commanding myth. Although their name is a legion, these willing propagandists are surprisingly uniform in the narrowness of their message[64] which can essentially be distilled to a complacent division of the universe into winners' and losers' compartments. In order for a(ny) simplistic ideology to reach global scale and influence, it inevitably pads itself with social taboos on planetary scale.

Taboos controlling one's life are as telling about a subject's health in terms of social psychology as are his core values. A subject's low score in compassion and empathy is usually associated with certain pathologies.[65] And assumed roles (combining those of 'winner' and opinion leader) are suspected of moulding character to such specifications, as shown by Zimbardo's prison experiment.[66]

It is important to fit this process of desensitisation of the press into the wider context of recent developments in both media and related academic research. There, the much celebrated effects of social media's role in the Arab Spring[67] meet the intense allergy western news outlets start to develop over readers' reactions to their editorial line,[68] in order to come full circle to how counter-productive it is to completely shut out dissent.[69]

There can hardly be any question that the documented manifestations of 'winners' and 'losers' role-playing by the press is related to power relations that are too far away from Habermases dialogue protocol. Naturally, the question about the vector of development of such a society emerges: is this totalitarian deletion of huge areas of inherent human activities, aspirations and hopes, irreversible? Turmoil in economy and in the area of social and international stability show that both mechanisms of self-regulation and hard control begin to fail. For a media researcher it should be alarming that professional journalism's sight seems to develop ever larger blind spots when it selectively taboos key social markers and processes.

54   PETKOVA, M.: *Tepavitcharov – noviat Kotcho Chistemenski*. In 24 Chasa, 2013, Vol. 21, No. 23, p. 10.
55   SOROKIN, P.: Chelovek, tsivilizatsiya, obshtestvo. In SOGOMONOV, Y. A., (ed.): *Chelovek, tsivilizsiya, obshtestvo*. Moscow : Politizdat, 1992, p. 34.
56   RANLY, D.: *Principles of American Journalism*. Iowa : Kendall Hunt, 1997, p. 57.
57   MCCOMBS, M. E.: *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion*. Malden, MA : Blackwell Publishing Inc., 2004, p. 112.
58   SOLÍK, M., VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J., LALUHOVÁ, J.: *Media as a Tool for Fostering Values in the Contemporary Society*. In European Journal of Science and Theology, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 6, 2013, p. 73.
59   RANLY, D.: *Principles of American Journalism*. Iowa : Kendall Hunt, 1997, p. 62.

60   SOROKIN, P.: Krizis nashego vremeni. In SOGOMONOV, Y. A. (ed.): *Chelovek, tsivilizatsiya, obshtestvo*. Moscow : Politizdat, 1992, p. 427-488.
61   KYOSEV, A.: *S Pomoshta na Chuk*. [online]. [2014-12-20]. Available at: <www.liternet.bg>.
62   DENKOV, D.: Natrapchivoto Otsustvie na Aura. In DEYANOVA, L. et al. (eds*.): Medii i prehod*. Sofia : Polis, 2000, p. 96.
63   PLENCNER, A.: *Critical Thinking and the Challenges of Internet*. In Communication Today, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 16.
64   BALNAVES, M., DONALD, S., SHOESMITH, B. A.: *Media Theories and Approaches: A Global Perspective*. Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009, p. 299.
65   BABULA, M.: *Motivation, Altruism, Personality and Social Psychology: The Coming Age of Altruism*. Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013, p. 60-82.
66   HANEY, C., BANKS, W. C., ZIMBARDO, P. G.: *Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison*. In International Journal of Criminology and Penology, 1973, Vol. 1, p. 69–97.
67   EATON, T.: Internet Activism and the Egyptian Uprisings: Transforming Online Dissent into the Offline World. In TAKI, M., CORETTI, L. (eds.): *The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings – Past and Present*. In Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, April 2013, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 15.
68   See: MOOSA, T.: *Comment Sections Are Poison: Handle with Care or Remove Them*. In The Guardian. Released on 12th September 2014. [online]. [2015-10-05]. Available at: < http://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2014/sep/12/comment-sections-toxic-moderation>; APPLEBAUM, A.: *Another Reason to Avoid Reading the Comments*. In Washington Post. Released on 28th November 2014. [online]. [2015-10-05]. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-another-reason-to-avoid-reading-the-comments/2014/11/28/b37a9f30-7722-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b_story.html>; VALENTI, J.: *Not All Comments Are Created Equal: The Case for Ending Online Comments*. In The Guardian. Released on 10th September 2015. [online]. [2015-10-05]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/10/end-online-comments>.
69   GERBAUDO, P.: The 'Kill Switch' as 'Suicide Switch': Mobilizing Side Effects of Mubarak's Communication Blackout. In TAKI, M., CORETTI, L. (eds.): *The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings – Past and Present*. In Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 25-46.

Suicides and society's reaction to these represent a strong marker of the state of that society. A values-based content analysis of opinions on such cases yield precious insight into the roles assumed and assigned by the press. The couple of widely reported but superficially interpreted family murder-suicides in Bulgaria demonstrate that national media as of that moment (2013) struggle to show empathy to the victims and to fit the incidents into a logical social context. Instead, institutional and technical aspects are invoked, few sensible solutions are proposed. The results suggest that media opinion leaders in Bulgaria may have developed a 'winners' vs. 'losers' type of relation to their wider and less fortunate audience. Grave problems are usually associated with the fragmentation of societies into cognitive and empathy-deprived ghettos defined by class affiliation in an increasingly unequal world. Changing values alters the world not only in terms of perception, but also in the way people interact and, effectively, design it.[70] Tabooing compassion notes an alarming trend, with the capacity of normalising aggression and enmity to outsiders, shutting out dissenting voices, thus precluding the possibility for the start and carriage of a meaningful dialogue.

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