

## Conference Paper

# Environmental Identity: Information Strategies for Mobilizing 'Negative Memory' of the Audience

Lyudmila Zubanova, Sergei Sinetskii, and Maria Shub

Chelyabinsk State Institute of Culture, Chelyabinsk, Russian Federation

### Abstract

The article analyzes the issues of interactive media culture development in modern society. The authors consider information and media strategies as tools for constructing the ecological identity of deprived territories residents (on the example of Chelyabinsk region). The article is based on research carried out between 2015 to 2019, monitoring the environmental situation in Chelyabinsk region. Mass representative surveys, held among the southern Urals citizens, expert interviews, content analysis of official information sources and informal channels of communication users (social networks), thematic debates with regional journalistic community served to ground the main ideas for this work. The resource mobilization idea of the 'negative memory' of the audience is the key conclusion, obtained during the analysis of sociological data. Negative memory is a stable negative perception of the territory ecological image under the influence of the broadcasted media content. The theoretical principles of memory studies are the base of this approach. The research has fixed the contradiction between the subjective readiness of the audience for constructive mobilization in the area of environmental initiatives and the 'negative ecological memory' of the territory. To model the favorable environmental media content it is essential, firstly, to adjust it by: i) using the resource of opinion leaders and social advertising; ii) engaging the expert community in a broad public dialogue on environmental issues; iii) developing independent media projects aimed at radical transformation of the environmental agenda coverage in Chelyabinsk region.

**Keywords:** information strategies, audience, ecology, identity, negative memory

Corresponding Author:

Lyudmila Zubanova  
 milazubanova@gmail.com

Published: 21 January 2021

Publishing services provided by  
**Knowledge E**

© Lyudmila Zubanova et al. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the XXIII International Conference Conference Committee.

## 1. Introduction

The status of audience as an active subject of media space is no longer in doubt in the era of interactive media culture and digitalization of society (in contrast to the previously expressed theories of 'information target' as an object of unlimited influence on the consumer). Network culture with its constantly expanding communication centers and information channels puts the user's media identity among the significant (or even dominant) identification attributes. Metaphorical concepts such as "digital footprint",

 **OPEN ACCESS**

"digital body" and "digital profile" directly point to the connection between the real person and his or her virtual counterpart ("real virtuality" as by M. Castells).

The nominal power of information affects all spheres of public life without any exceptions; moreover, media strategies frame different facets of personal identity. Thus, the political agenda affects the electoral preferences of the audience, broadcasted cultural and entertainment content shapes leisure models and sociocultural preferences of the audience, etc. Here we must include as well the correlation between information strategies and the ecological identity of the audience formed by the broadcasted information.

The ecological factor as an indicator of the local development [4], [7], [8] or the development of the culture as a whole [10] has been repeatedly brought to the attention of sociologists. The ecological component as a tool for identity construction is associated with the current "identification cultural codes" or "interpretation schemes" (frames) prevailing in the minds of residents [3]. The "environmental agenda" is particularly relevant in such territorial entities, which have the status of a "stress region", according to the assigned degree of environmental tension [5]. Chelyabinsk region belongs to the number of such regions. Local people here bear the conflict perception of the residence's place, although combining it with the habitual nature of reflecting this conflict in the everyday practices and viewpoints.

The authors of the article carried out the research from 2015 to 2019 monitoring the environmental situation in Chelyabinsk region. Mass representative surveys, held among the southern Urals citizens, expert interviews, content analysis of official information sources and informal channels of communication users (social networks), thematic debates with regional journalistic community served to ground the main ideas for this work. The idea of resource mobilization of the 'negative memory' of the audience is the key conclusion, obtained during the analysis of sociological data. Negative memory is a stable negative perception of the ecological image of the territory under the influence of the broadcasted media content.

## 2. Methodology and Methods

To comprise this research we have compared the environmental situation in the region in the form of the views of the locals upon the current ecological state to the study of information strategies that reflect the territory media image.

The authors of the article carried out the research from 2015 to 2019 monitoring the environmental situation in Chelyabinsk region. Mass representative surveys, held

among the southern Urals citizens, expert interviews, content analysis of official information sources and informal channels of communication users (social networks), thematic debates with regional journalistic community served to ground the main ideas for this work. The idea of resource mobilization of the 'negative memory' of the audience is the key conclusion, obtained during the analysis of sociological data. Negative memory is a stable negative perception of the ecological image of the territory under the influence of the broadcasted media content.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Based on the conducted population surveys (in three cities of the Southern Urals), the survey has stated that environmental issues are the object of the citizens' attention focus. The majority of residents (67.2%) show clear interest in environmental issues in the city / region. The audience mainly involved in the information agenda related to environmental issues is people aged 25–44 and 45–59 who are married and have children. In general, the perception of the region in residents' minds is strongly associated with the environmental component. The environmental factor appears a driver of public moods (being the cause for both stabilization and destabilization of the latter).

Chelyabinsk region has a rating of a negative leader among other regions of the Russian Federation: "the environmental situation in Chelyabinsk region is worse than in the most regions of Russia" (30.5%), "we are the one of the most deprived areas" (31.5%). On the one hand, we can assume a distinct prejudice of residents' assessments in this issue, and therefore an acceptable bias of comparison with hypothetical 'others'. On the other hand, the nature of identification in relation to other subjects that is on the principle of 'us and them' largely determines the allegiance of the local residents. The study has recorded an explicit negative context of territorial identification. Information strategies for constructing 'negative memory' support this image. Chelyabinsk, the capital of the southern Urals, is presented in the media as the city, which regularly occupies leading positions in rating of environmentally disadvantaged cities (public "Green patrol"), and is also one the most aggressive cities (the third position in the rating agency Zoom Market). In addition, the media often appeals to Karabash — a single-industry city, with a strong image of "the dirtiest city in the world".

As a result, the residents' obtain a constructed belief that problems in the field of environmental regulation are incapable of solution. It is noticeable that such moods become a memory construct. They actively consolidate in the minds of residents, transmit and reproduce among various socio-demographic groups.

In the rating of environmental problems, the following ones persistently maintain their positions:

- Air pollution caused by the operation of heavy-industry plants (56.4% respondents).
- Lack of a waste management system (34.3% respondents).
- Uncontrolled dumps (34.1% respondents).
- Deforestation, lack of a promising landscaping program (30.7% respondents).
- Pollution of natural water bodies and coastal zones (27.9% respondents).

The local population retain a low valuation level of media support of the environmental situation in the region. The respondents indicate that there is a lack of information about the environmental situation in the city/region, and that media support does not reflect the real state of affairs in the field of ecology; only 13% respondents identified journalists as trustworthy information resource. There is a subject-matter deficit of socially beneficial educational information and positive eco-content.

The position of regional journalistic community, which constructs and actively supports the informational representation of 'negative memory' of the audience, reinforces the problematic character of the situation. The results of the content analysis identified the following showings:

- The percentage of negative information on environmental issues more than twice larger than the amount of positive/neutral information in Chelyabinsk media.
- There is a small percentage of references to the positive eco-projects and social advertising in the field of environmental protection.
- Insignificant presence of environmental process subjects in the actual memory of environmental information consumers. Which results in insufficiency of media actions on this matter.

Subject-matter discussions with journalists of regional media, gave the authors the following data:

1. Low degree of territorial identification of the journalistic community with the city / region: during the conversation, the vast majority of students studying journalism (90%) indicated desirable prospects for leaving the city; working journalists marked the fixation on departure in 50% of cases. This attitude, which does not imply personal and professional establishment in the region, makes it

unnecessary to build long-term information and educational strategies, and does not contribute to the personal and professional responsibility of the journalistic community.

2. Unspoken perception of oneself as an active subject of information reformative activity: the vast majority of journalists recognize the destructive impact of negative information on investment prospects, regional patriotism, and migration activity. At the same time, journalists do not associate the prospects of possible correction/optimization of the situation with their own efforts, preferring to reproduce the existing negative agenda of the environmental situation coverage in Chelyabinsk region.

Probably, due to such circumstances, the audience focuses on other sources of information. Local residents distinguish the following resources as trustworthy: informal sources (30.2%), competent ecologists, scientists (29.2%), independent bloggers and columnists (27.2%), representatives of public environmental organizations, and eco-activists (23.7%).

The audience pays special attention to social media. Social media as an informal response of residents provides information 'in first person', thus acting as an efficient means of communication for participants of virtual interactions. Furthermore, social media has a significant influence on mobilization (audience cohesion, messaging, active dissemination of information, prompting actions) and presentation (positioning of the ecological image of the region).

The audience's environmental identity is particularly manifested in the local thematic communities in the social networks (based on the analysis of 12 thematic communities in the social networks "Vkontakte", "Odnoklassniki", Facebook, and Twitter). The authors assessed this type of identity based on the following areas:

- Promotion activity of the environmental topic on personal (own accounts) and public (pages of city Internet communities) information resources;
- Evaluation of environmental materials by users: critical, creative or neutral message of broadcasted messages;
- Communicative solidarity of the social network audience, i.e. content generating and broadcasting in the form of reposts, retweets, etc.

As shown by the analysis, the network cooperation of the audience in relation to environmental content has the following characteristics:

- Active form of demonstrating emotional support for informal environmental initiatives;
- Visualization of the ecological image of the territory;
- Expressed conflict between the assessment of the natural heritage of the territory (maximum demonstration of support) and the activities of entities responsible for the ecological well-being of the region.

Social media has a sufficient resource for network cooperation, particularly for the organization and mobilization of community members. Moreover, social media forms a realistic value-based worldview of the audience on a number of issues. It is necessary to present constructive information to Chelyabinsk social media communities more actively and fully (with the calls for personal participation in solving environmental problems, agitation for active participation in environmental events).

According to the results of the surveys, there is a prominent focus on the information-driven mobilization of the audience: 59.5% of respondents believe that residents should always take part in the discussion and decision-making on environmental issues; 20.7% adhere to the position of one-time participation in discussing the most important and topical issues. The idea of public information evaluation is becoming increasingly popular. The leading position of participation is voting on Internet platforms. This largely indicates the popularity of online cooperation practices of citizens. Such form of network activism (as well as participation in public opinion polls on environmental issues) implies internal motivation of engagement in solving environmental problems. Accordingly, it involves the readiness for collective responsibility in supporting certain socially significant initiatives.

The forms of direct involvement of citizens in 'live' interaction are also gaining significant support: participation in city hearings, readiness to engage in the work of commissions, meetings of the interested public with decision-makers in the field of ecology. The answer "I am not interested in any form of participation" is typical for 15% of respondents, among whom the majority of respondents are older age groups (60 years and older), as well as those who consider themselves to be the most dependent socio-economic categories.

Public evaluation as "crowd control" of existing and planned large-scale environmental projects and initiatives is a favorable reference point for transforming the image of the future. This will allow the audience to focus on creative practices for solving the identified issues, as well as envision promising projects to improve the environmental situation in the city/region.

Thus, the survey has revealed the contradiction between the subjective readiness of the audience for constructive mobilization in the area of environmental initiatives and the "negative ecological memory" of the territory, the message that is consistently broadcasted in the media of the region.

This research describes "negative memory" as associated with the constructed experience of belonging to the environmentally neglected territory. The media image becomes a symbolic representation of this memory.

The peculiarity of 'negative memory' is in its dual nature [6]: the need to displace negative experience (unwillingness to associate with it) combines with the need to verbalize and capture these negative attitudes in the public media space. On the one hand, the media broadcast negative or critical agenda dominating the information eco-market. On the other hand, the residents themselves through direct communication tools (social networks, messengers, etc) retransmit this information. This situation requires a targeted adjustment of the information environment.

The steady tendency to highlight the environmental agenda in a negative way leads to a deterioration of the image of Chelyabinsk region, to a decrease in its investment attractiveness, and increases depressive moods of the local residents. To model the favorable environmental media content it is essential to adjust it by:

- strengthening PR support for events held by the authorities, covering the implemented positive eco-projects in the region;
- using the resource of opinion leaders and social advertising, engaging the expert community in a broad public dialogue on environmental issues;
- introducing in the media and informal social network communities the results of public opinion on the efficiency of single environmental initiatives;
- searching for new formats to attract the attention of the audience to environmental problems' solution ('green rating');
- communicating with the subjects of environmental regulation in the region: in the form of speech communication and special event technologies (master classes, trainings, training seminars);
- developing independent media projects aimed at radical transformation of the environmental agenda coverage in Chelyabinsk region.

Social media should be used in several ways such as a means of communication (interpersonal communication); as a means of information (content generation); as a means of presentation (positioning the desired image); as a means of mobilization

(rallying the audience, motivating for action). It is advisable to create a parallel positive eco-media environment in social networks that will leverage the impact of "negative memory". It can be a network of personal pages of eco-volunteers of different ages living in any city of Chelyabinsk region and systematically communicating with each other. Such network will involve other users in environment related communications.

## 4. Conclusions

The key research conclusion defines the relations between the formed 'negative memory' of the stress territory and the self-identification of residents living in this problem area.

The concept of 'negative memory' is comprehended in the paradigm designated by us as past-conceptuality [9]: the combination of previously formed but still existing representations (collective memory) and actual practices of perceiving the present in stable values, norms and behaviour patterns of local residents. The theoretical principles of memory studies are the methodological foundations of this approach.

Aleida Assmann points out that it is the question of identity, which while participating in jointly experienced events turns out to be the basis for the collective memory [1]. In Chelyabinsk region ecological narrative is a "dominant narrative" [2], which influences the construction of the 'negative memory', and, therefore forms a negative identity of the inhabitants of the territory.

A negative image catalyses many problems of the specific cities and the region as a whole. It can be adjusted by the well-planned and consistently implemented policy of switching the negative memory of the population to positive experience in solving environmental problems using informal communication media and audience mobilization.

## Acknowledgments

The results of this empirical study were obtained with the administrative support of the Ministry of Ecology of Chelyabinsk region. The concept of 'negative memory of the territory' was implemented in the framework of the fundamental research "Memory Culture of Industrial Cities of the Russian Province: Memorial Strategies for Regional Identity", which has won the grant of the President of the Russian Federation for the state support of leading young Russian scientists — Doctors of Science (Competition MD-2020).



## References

- [1] Assmann, A. (2014). Long shadow of the past. Memorial culture and the politics of history. *New Literary Review*, p. 328.
- [2] Alexander, D. (2012). Cultural trauma and collective identity. *Sociological Journal*, vol. 3, pp. 5-40.
- [3] Bolotova, A. A. (2002). Formation of new cultural codes in modern Russia. Ecological settlements: between the city and the village. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, vol. 5, issue 1, pp. 43-69.
- [4] Engoyan, O. Z. (2009). Environmental problems of the region: risks, dangers, interests of the local population. *Sociological Research*, vol. 11, pp. 65-72.
- [5] Zubanova, L. B., Zyhovskaya, N. L., Sinetsky S. B. and Shub, M. L. (2017). Ecological culture: efficiency of formation and reproduction scenarios in stress regions. *Sociological Research*, vol. 7, pp. 132-140.
- [6] Kasyanov, V. V. and Samygin, S. I. (2019). Historical and collective memory and social order. *Humanities, Socio-economic and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, pp. 76-80.
- [7] Sosunova, I. A. (2005). Social and environmental tension: methodology and methodology of assessment. *Sociological Research*, vol. 7, pp. 94-104.
- [8] Titarenko, L. G. (2015). Ecological aspect of lifestyle: basic values and types of behavior. *Sociological Research*, vol. 2, pp. 106-112.
- [9] Shub, M. L. (2017). Social, collective and cultural memory: a new approach to the semantic boundaries of the definition of concepts. *Observatory of Culture*, vol. 14, issue 1, pp. 4-11.
- [10] Yanitsky, O. N. (2006). Ecological paradigm as an element of culture. *Sociological Research*, vol. 7, pp. 83-93.