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Youth Media Consumption and Its Impact on Perception of Politics (Regional Case)

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Abstract

Within contemporary scholarships, various aspects of media consumption of «digital» generation are actively studied. However, there is still not enough research on relationship between typical media practices of young people and their inherent political ideas, values, and attitudes. This article is aimed at partially filling this gap by revealing a correlation between the information sources young Russians use, on the one hand, and how they feel about politics and see their country's future – on the other. Empirical data of the study contains results of online survey of 519 young people (aged between 14 and 35) living in the Saratov region, and three focus group interviews in which 36 people took part. Some of the results obtained are brought into correlation with the conclusions made by “Russian Public Opinion Research Center” and “Public Opinion Foundation” specialists. Among other things, a feature is confirmed that many young people do not trust the sources they receive information from.

Keywords: media practice, media consumption, youth, political preferences, mass media, media literacy, Saratov region.

1. Introduction

Dynamic change of information environment requires scholarly conceptualization not only in itself, but also in the context of social and political effects that it entails. In the whole world, every second eleven people go online for the first time. Thus, the number of the World Wide Web users increases by about a million per day ([Digital, 2021](#)). In Russia, situation in this sphere is not much different from the entire world: according to research company “Mediascope”, in September 2021, the level of Internet penetration was about 81.9 %, while among young people this figure exceeded 90 % ([Obshhaja, 2021](#)).

Obviously, such rapid transformation of the information space also has its indirect consequences, manifested in quick-changing parameters of political systems functioning. On the one hand, the world is becoming more transparent: diversity of information resources and ability of nearly anyone to become an author of media messages lead to the fact that today it becomes very difficult to conceal something from society. On the other hand, rapid increase in number of the Web users inevitably causes snowball growth in the volume of information they produce ([Data Age, 2021](#)). However, its quality does not improve at all. Rather, on the contrary: data that does not correspond to reality as well as deliberately fabricated facts are increasingly entering the information space. In our opinion, it is not a coincidence that “fake news” and “post-truth” were recently recognized as the words of the year ([Gatinskij, 2017](#); [Word, 2016](#)).

Meanwhile, most people form their ideas about politics, largely based on how it is presented by traditional media, new media, bloggers, etc. However, whereas grown-ups already have their

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own life experience that allows them to independently assess certain events and processes, young people lack it, their media literacy level is not very high and therefore they tend to be less critical of the information consumed.

In this sense, analysis of the features of media consumption inherent in young people acquires tangible practical significance. The study of media practices typical for youth makes it possible to better understand specifics of their perception of politics and their attitude to it. Moreover, as scholars point out, young people largely set processes that have every chance of becoming dominant in the foreseeable future (Dunas et al., 2019). To our minds, this is true for both media industry and world of politics. In other words, analysis of this problem has a certain predictive potential.

2. Materials and methods

Results of online questionnaires and focus group interviews made up the empirical basis of our research. From November 1 to 15, 2021, 530 residents of the Saratov region aged between 14 and 35 were interviewed. The online questionnaire included 24 questions – 3 closed, 2 open, and 17 semi-closed ones. Two more questions implied the need to evaluate the level of respondents' trust in various sources of information and correctness of the development of various public life spheres in modern Russia on a six-point scale (from 0 to 5). The final sample consisted of 519 questionnaires: 11 questionnaires were not selected for analysis because respondents did not answer all the questions or gave irrelevant answers to open questions.

Among the respondents, there were 63.8 % of women and 36.2 % of men. 69.7 % of them live in Saratov, 23.1 % reside in district centers of the Saratov region, 7.2 % dwell in the countryside. It should be noted that such distribution of respondents by their gender and place of residence is close to real gender and territorial structure of the Saratov region population, according to the All-Russian Population Census taken in 2010 (Chislennost', 2010). There are no more up-to-date figures now as the results of the All-Russian Census-2021 are due in the spring of 2022.

According to their age, respondents were distributed as follows: from 14 to 17 years old – 16.2%; 18 to 25 years – 69 %; 26 to 30 years – 5.2 %; 31 to 35 years – 9.6 %.

At the time of the survey, 4 % of respondents studied at schools; 8.9 % were students of secondary specialized educational institutions; 62.5 % studied at high schools; 21 % worked as hired employees; 1.5 % were engaged in business; the remaining 2.1 % chose the "Other" answer.

Having quantitatively processed results of the online survey, we felt a need to clarify some issues. For this purpose, from November 20 to 30, 2021, three focus groups were conducted, in which 36 young people took part. During the focus group interviews, respondents were asked about the reasons and motives for their use of different information sources, as well as what meanings they put into various concepts related to mass media and politics, and why they support or oppose to certain scenarios for the development of Russia.

Even though quantitative parameters of the study carried out in such way do not allow us to consider it fully representative, we believe that, in general, it enabled us to identify common features of media consumption of Saratov youth in the context of their attitude to politics. Moreover, given that by its demographic, social, economic, and political characteristics the Saratov region is often considered a typical Russian province, it is probably safe to assume that features inherent in the youth living there may be relevant to the bulk of young people residing in most other regions of the country.

3. Discussion

Various aspects of youth media consumption are being actively studied by Russian and foreign researchers. Taking into account specifics of political culture of citizens of our country and peculiarities of Russia's political regime, while reviewing research available on the issue we deem it necessary to focus on analysis of domestic scholarships. No doubt foreign scientists make a valuable contribution to the development of theoretical and applied aspects of examination of media practices inherent in young people (Couldry, Hepp, 2016; Courtois et al., 2011; Hepp, 2016; Lunt, Livingstone, 2016). Naturally, they are primarily interested in exploration of their compatriots' media consumption. However, Russian youth, to our minds, exists in quite specific social, political, and informational conditions that must be taken into account, which, in fact, is what native researchers try to do.

It should be noted that most often the primary focus of scholars is either schoolchildren (Anikina, 2017; Davletshina, 2021; Frolova, Obratsova, 2017; Obratsova, 2014), or university students (Cherevko et al., 2018; Vyugina, 2018; Zhizhina, 2019). The rest of the youth (in its generally accepted sense – i.e. up to 35 years old) either becomes an object of study more rarely or is mentioned in the context of the entire population (Poluekhtova, 2018; Shchepilova, 2014).

According to our observations, media practices of residents of Moscow are studied by Russian scholars more often (Cherevko et al., 2018; Dunas et al., 2018; Tolokonnikova, Cherevko, 2016). As for provincial youth, in most cases, a comparative analysis of media consumption patterns of people living in million-plus cities (Anikina, 2017; Borovlev, 2017; Kulchitskaya, Filatkina, 2021) or in towns (Obratsova, 2014; Smeyukha et al., 2021) is carried out.

A substantial portion of research is devoted to the analysis of motivational factors of media consumption (Cherevko et al., 2018; Dunas et al., 2019; Poluekhtova, 2018). Scholars actively compare various factors that encourage young people to use information sources (Couldry, Hepp, 2016; Soldatova et al., 2017; Vartanova, 2019). At the same time, the idea that young men and women turn to media (primarily the internet) more for socialization and self-actualization rather than for entertainment or information is becoming more precise (Dunas et al., 2019; 2020).

Of note, the internet is no longer considered exclusively as a set of technologies. Rather, it has become the natural environment and an organic part of the daily lives of younger generation (Soldatova et al., 2017: 18). As a result, needs that were previously met only offline can now be satisfied directly – through online communication (Sundar, Limperos, 2013).

Sometimes, theoretical nuances of media practices common among young people are considered (Dunas et al., 2019; Komarova, 2018). Most often, the potential of uses and gratification theory is assessed in this context (Papacharissi, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000; Vartanova, 2014). However, in the whole corpus of scholarship, this segment of publications occupies quite limited place. In this regard, we agree with the colleagues who believe that theoretical conceptualizing of media practices of modern Russian youth cannot be considered a priority area of domestic media research (Makeenko, 2017; Vartanova, 2019).

From time to time (albeit not as often as required by constant changes in media landscape and attempts to understand them), review studies are conducted. In particular, over the past few years, the paradigms widely spread in foreign media studies have been described (Dunas, 2017), development of media theories presented in Russian scholarly journals has been analyzed (Makeenko, 2017), and systematization of research on the media consumption of young people in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain has been carried out (Filatkina, Davletshina, 2019).

Issues of methodological support for studies of young people media consumption are on the periphery of scholars' attention too (Fedorov, 2013; Kulchitskaya et al., 2019). An approach prevails here that it is better to combine the use of various quantitative and qualitative research methods for the analysis of media practices. However, according to our observations, in the vast majority of cases, only questionnaire surveys and/or interviews (both in-depth and standardized) are employed.

At last, the interplay between media and political practices is not actively examined. In this context, special mention must be made of attempts to investigate the association between social networking and political participation (Ahmad et al., 2019; Boulianne, 2015; Bykov, Martyanov, 2021) and polarization (Farahat, 2021; Lee, 2016; Urman, 2020), to identify the impact of social media use on political attitudes (Song et al., 2020; Sunstein, 2017; van Erkel, Van Aelst, 2020; Weeks et al., 2017), to analyze anti-Russian propaganda in internet communications of modern Ukraine within the framework of various student groups' media literacy education (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2021), and to assess contribution of media criticism to the development of media competence of citizens, their rational and critical attitude to political discourses formed by the media (Korochensky et al., 2019).

All things considered, it should be admitted that, despite quite active interest of the academic community, some issues related to media practices of youth have not yet received due attention. Apart from theoretical and methodological aspects mentioned above, influence of information habits and preferences of young people on the nature and content of their political views obviously merits further exploration. In this sense, the purpose of our article is to partially fill this gap by identifying a correlation between where young Russians get information about all that is happening, how they relate to politics and see development of their country in the foreseeable future.

4. Results

One of the first questions of the online questionnaire was focused on clarifying the respondents' attitude to politics.

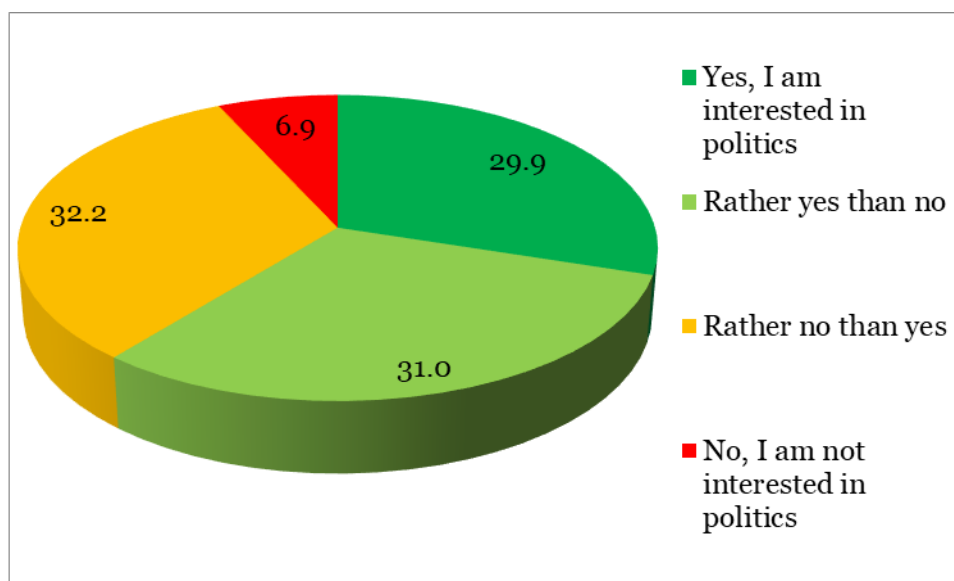


Fig. 1. Level of interest in politics (“Are you interested in politics?”, %)

As we can see, contrary to the popular belief (that modern youth is mainly apolitical), slightly less than two thirds of the respondents are interested in politics. Note that this is indirectly confirmed by the results of the “Russian Public Opinion Research Center” survey. Its specialists have not asked a similar question, but they found out what exactly excites the greatest interest among the audience of social networks and messengers. We consider it very indicative that news about events in the country and abroad as well as politics itself attracts attention of 49 % and 42 % of respondents respectively ([Mediapotreblenie, 2021](#)). Bearing in mind that active users of “new” media were interviewed, most of them are arguably young people.

The question about sources of information used by young people was of fundamental importance for our research.

As anticipated, the internet has become the most popular source of information (with a gap of 43 % from the nearest pursuer!). Rather surprisingly, immediate environment (not TV) took the second place. Conspicuous is the fact that such traditional mass media as radio and the print press have lost popularity even to “teachers, professors or superior officers”.

It is also important that the level of demand for the internet according to the results of our survey almost coincided with the above-mentioned “Mediascope” data on the depth of the Net penetration into the daily lives of young people. Coupled with the results of the discussion of this point during focus group interviews, this circumstance allows us to assert that the trend towards increasing of the internet significance for youth will continue. Above all, the World Wide Web attracts users with its convenience, accessibility (“a smartphone is always at hand”), and the speed of updating information. Some focus group participants also noted that it is more difficult for the state to control content broadcast there.

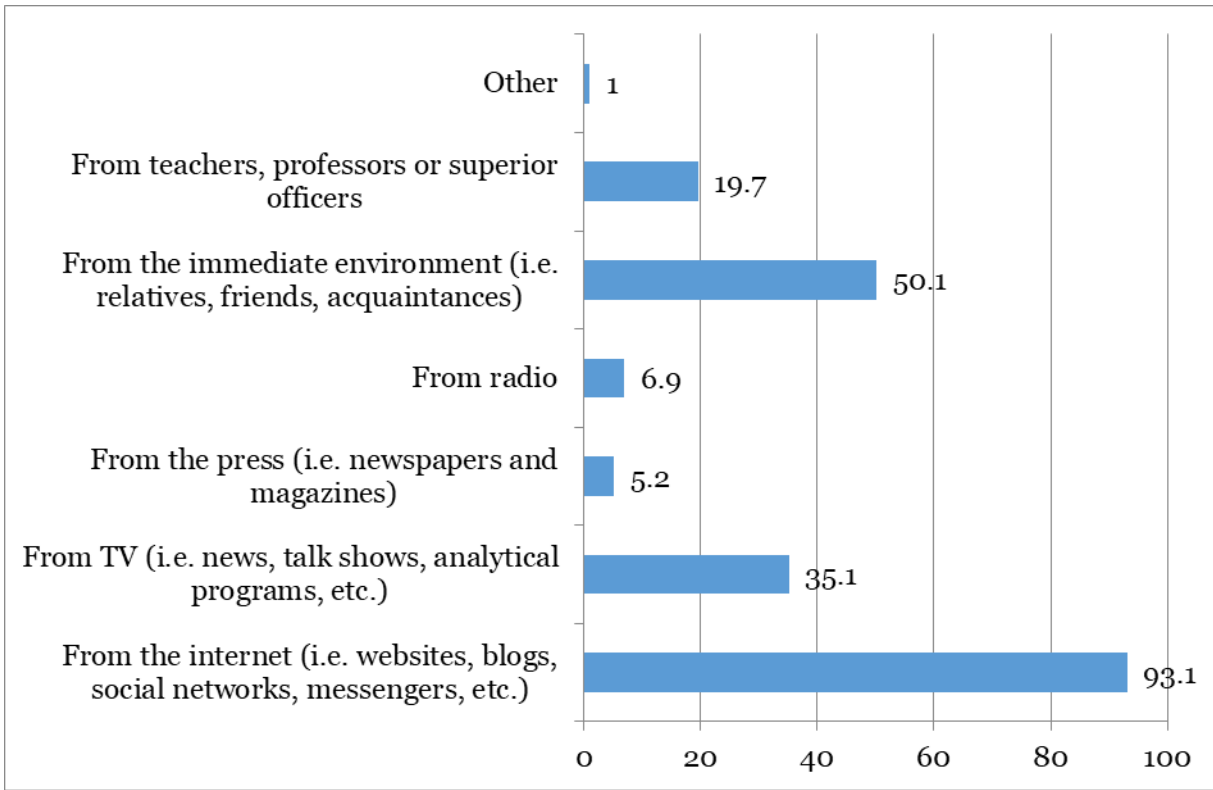


Fig. 2. Sources of information about what is going on (“Where do you most often learn about the events taking place in the country?”, %, no more than three possible answers could be noted)

The results of correlating a person’s level of interest in politics with their preferred sources of information were also very interesting.

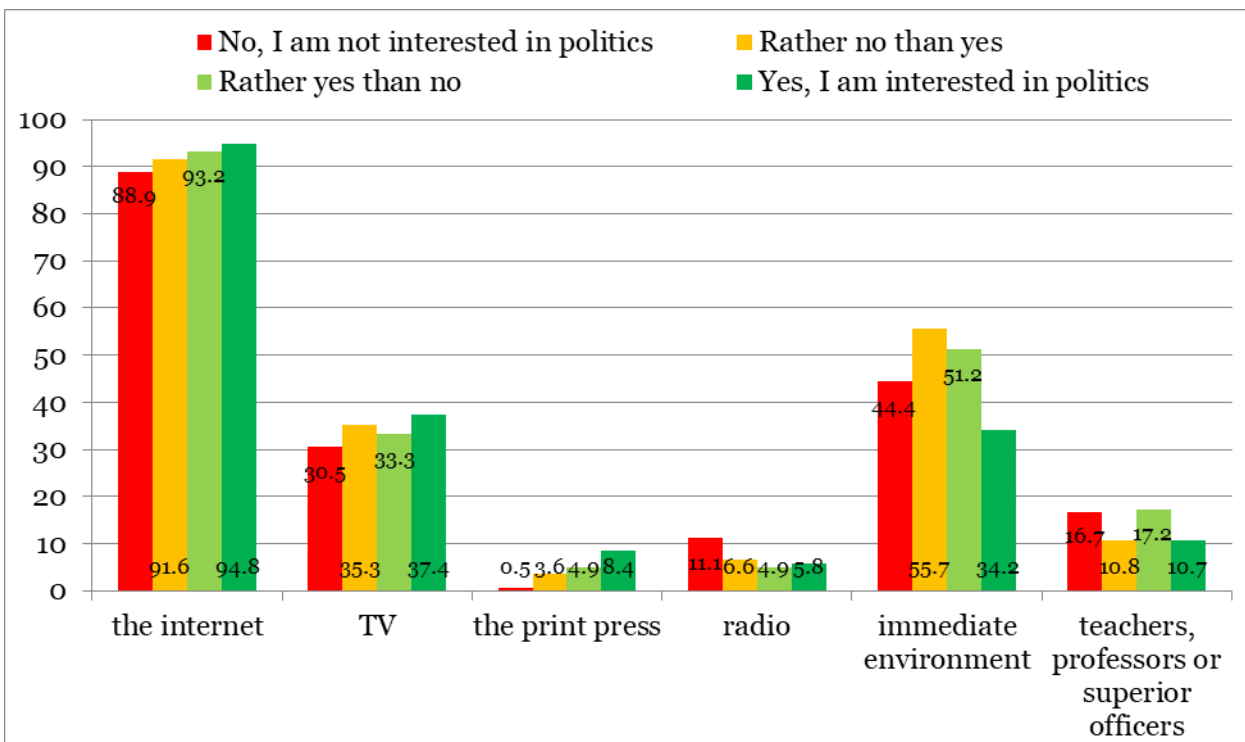


Fig. 3. Preferred sources of information in the context of the level of interest in politics (%)

It turned out that the internet and the print press are slightly more popular among those who are interested in politics, while the immediate environment and radio are more preferred by those relatively indifferent to it. We believe this may be due to the phenomenon of “background” media consumption. Those who are interested in politics, make purposeful efforts to find out what is happening. To do this, they monitor news feeds on the Web, visit thematic sites, and from time to time read socio-political newspapers and magazines. Young people who are unconcerned about politics are relatively more likely to learn news on the radio and from their immediate environment; at the same time, they do it not intentionally, but rather accidentally – as passive listeners or witnesses to other people’s discussions.

This hypothesis was confirmed during focus group interviews. When asked to clarify why young people who are not interested in politics listen to the radio, many respondents said that they often do it “involuntarily” – for example, while in transport, in a barber shop, and other closed spaces. The same applies to the “immediate environment” option: they often hear parents, friends, and acquaintances talking about politics as well as remarks and comments on it from university teachers.

Apart from diversity of the sources used, we also tried to measure respondents’ trust in each of them. In doing so, some of the sources indicated above were divided into two units – loyal and oppositional in relation to the current Russian government. The answers “immediate environment” and “teachers, professors or superior officers”, on the contrary, were combined into the option “people around me”. In addition to these variants, options “foreign press”, “anonymous telegram channels”, as well as “blogs of authors opposed to the authorities” and “blogs of authors loyal to the authorities” were added.

Table 1. The level of trust in information sources (“Evaluate the level of your own trust in the following sources of information by marking one cell in each of the lines, where 0 means “I do not use this source”, 1 – “I absolutely do not trust” ... 5 – “I completely trust”; %)

Information source	0	1	2	3	4	5
Federal TV channels (Pervyj, Russia, NTV)	32.0	20.6	12.7	14.5	12.1	8.1
Oppositional TV channels (Rain, etc.)	38.7	14.4	14.2	16.7	10.9	5.1
Blogs of authors loyal to the authorities	35.8	20.0	15.0	18.9	6.4	3.9
Blogs of authors opposed to the authorities	34.9	17.0	16.4	17.4	10.0	4.3
Pro-government websites	45.2	19.7	14.0	12.9	5.3	2.9
Oppositional websites	40.0	19.0	14.6	15.1	8.4	2.9
Anonymous telegram channels	48.6	14.6	14.0	10.9	7.4	4.5
The print press loyal to the authorities	41.7	23.7	14.6	12.4	4.9	2.7
The print press opposed to the authorities	41.9	17.7	16.8	14.6	6.1	2.9
Foreign press	38.4	19.4	14.8	14.6	8.5	4.3
Pro-government radio stations	55.0	16.9	11.8	10.5	3.1	2.7
Oppositional radio stations	49.6	16.4	12.9	13.2	5.0	2.9
People around me	22.1	24.0	16.9	21.0	11.2	4.8

We consider the polar opposite estimates (i.e. 1 and 5 - highlighted in bold in [Table 1](#)) the most indicative in this case. It catches the eye that literally for each of the sources the level of “absolute distrust” is several times higher than “full trust”. What does it mean? In our opinion, it suggests that young people are largely disappointed with the quality of the content they receive. Apparently, they had to deal with unverified or simply false information from time to time, hence such a high level of distrust of the resources that broadcast this information.

The three anti-leaders are opinion of the environment (24 %), the print press loyal to the government (23.7 %), and federal TV channels (20.6 %). To identify reasons for the high level of respondents’ distrust of people around them, a special question was asked during focus group interviews. It was found out that, for instance, the opinion of parents (and – less often – teachers) is often not trusted because young people believe that grown-ups “are guided by outdated approaches and patterns”, “do not take into account new realities”, “got stuck in the past”. Positions of peers may not be credible because, according to the respondents, they are not always well versed in what is happening and therefore may express erroneous views.

Oddly enough, the same “federal TV channels” (8.1 %) and opinion of “people around me” (4.8 %), as well as “oppositional TV channels” (5.1 %) turned up among the leaders of trust. Therefore, there is a certain split in the attitude of youth towards the first two of the sources mentioned: some of the respondents “completely trust” them while others “absolutely do not trust”. And this is despite the fact that both television in general and opinion of the environment lead in terms of demand among the young audience. In other words, many are not deterred from using, say, television by the fact that they do not trust it.

Roughly the same are the results of surveys conducted in January 2021 by the “Public Opinion Foundation”. There were no direct questions about distrust; however, to the question “Are there any sources of information you trust more than others? And if so, which one exactly?” there was the answer “There are no sources of information I trust more than others”, which collected impressive 25 % of the responses of young people aged between 18 and 30. In addition, the same 25 % answered “often” to the question “Does it happen that news information on television causes your distrust, doubts? And if so, does it happen often or rarely?” (Istochniki, 2021). Of course, it is not entirely correct to draw direct links between the results of our research and the “Public Opinion Foundation” survey (as samples, age ranges of respondents, and formulations of questions and answers used were different), but nevertheless, in our opinion, these findings record to a great extent similar state of youth trust in various sources of information.

We also considered it important to correlate the levels of trust and distrust between loyal and oppositional sources. To do this, we calculated the cumulative shares of trust (points “4” and “5”) and distrust (points “1” and “2”) with regard to each of the two groups of sources.

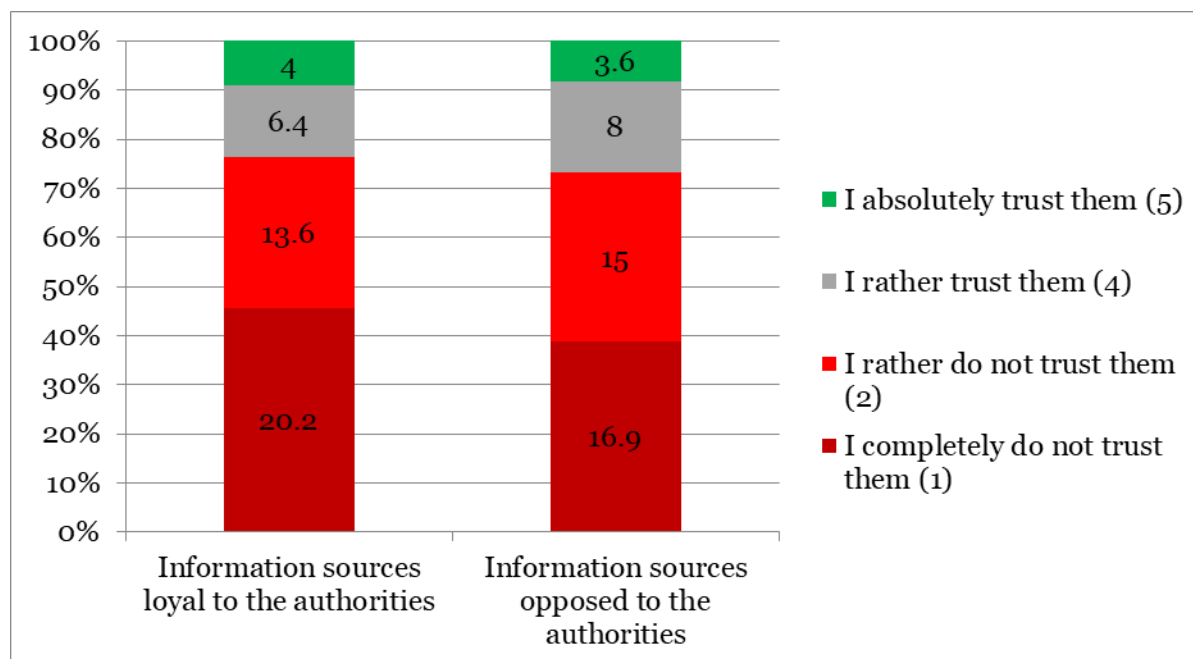


Fig. 4. Cumulative levels of trust in oppositional and pro-government sources of information (%)

Clearly, the structures of confidence scales are largely identical. Distrust in general significantly prevails over trust. At the same time, the general distrust of information sources loyal to the government is almost 2 % more than that of the oppositional ones (33.8 % versus 31.9 % respectively).

Among other things, respondents were asked to assess the correctness of development of certain spheres of life in our country.

As Figure 5 shows, respondents evaluate politics, economics, and youth policy most critically. Social sphere and culture cultivate a slightly better attitude. Development of defense industry was positively assessed by almost twice as many respondents as negatively. In this regard, this sphere clearly stands out.

Besides, we have suggested that assessments of various spheres of life may depend on exact sources young people mainly receive information from. To test this hypothesis, we calculated the

average scores by which different categories of respondents evaluated the development of these areas. With this in mind, we combined all the respondents into four groups:

1. Those who receive information solely from the internet (there were 146 such respondents).
2. Those who receive information from TV and other sources other than the internet (13 respondents).
3. Those who receive information from any sources except TV (167 respondents).
4. Those who receive information from any sources other than the Internet and TV (23 respondents).

The total number of respondents making up these four groups is less than 519 because some of them were not included in the formed categories (for example, because they used both the internet and television).

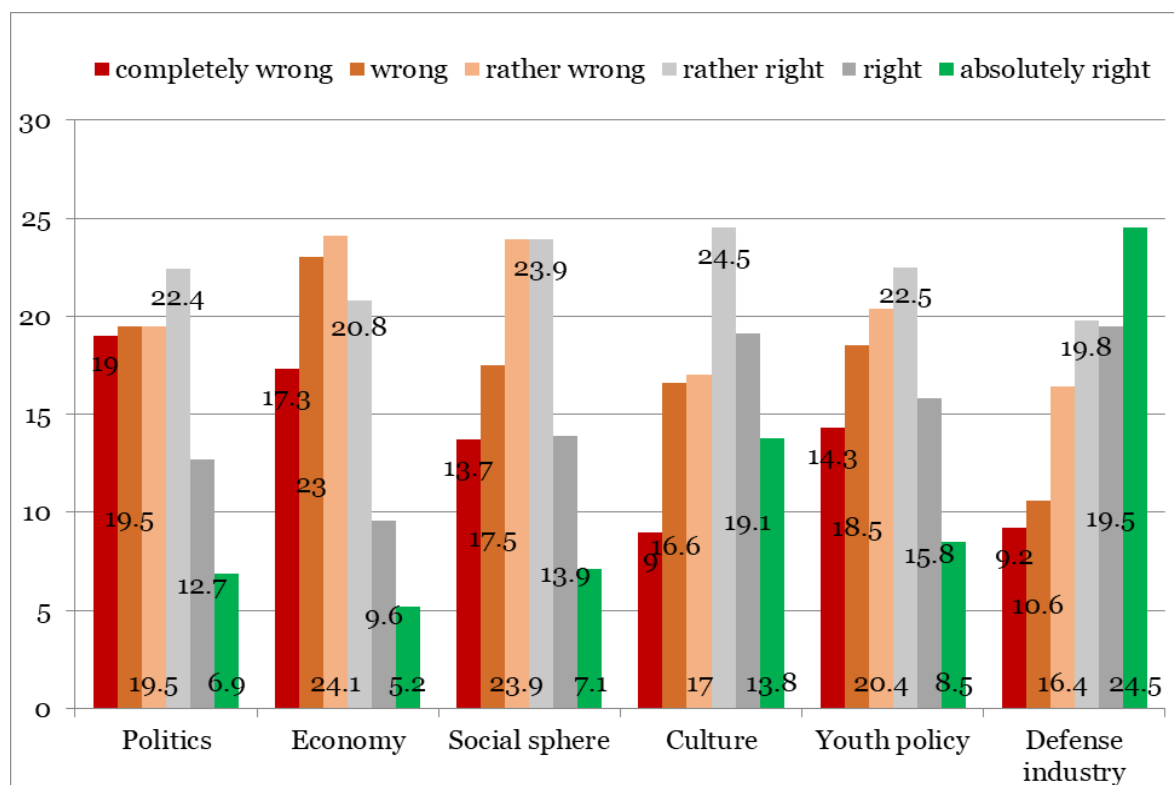


Fig. 5. Correctness of development of certain spheres of life in Russia (“Evaluate correctness of development of various spheres of public life in modern Russia by marking one cell in each of the lines, where 0 means “completely wrong” ... 5 is “completely correct”; %)

Note that people who do not use the internet and TV rate each of the spheres of life higher than representatives of other three cohorts do. Most likely, such respondents generally follow the news less. It is quite difficult to imagine the opposite (that they monitor what is going on, but do it exclusively through radio, print media or communication with others). Consequently, it can be assumed that more negative content prevails in the most popular sources of information (i.e. on the internet and on TV), which, in fact, makes people rate different areas of life lower.

If we compare results only for the second and third categories highlighted in the [Figure 6](#), it turns out that TV viewers are more critical of five out of six spheres of public life compared with those who receive information from all sources other than TV. Admittedly, it is quite unexpected result, but, in our opinion, there may be two possible explanations for it.

The first one is low effectiveness of state propaganda. Those who watch TV mostly follow the news on pro-government federal TV channels. The audience of oppositional TV channels is usually very small ([Istochniki, 2021](#)). Consequently (and this is confirmed by the results of focus groups), efforts of the state information machine to form positive perceptions of current events, processes, and political actors are not effective enough; people prefer to believe more what they see themselves in real life, rather than what they are told and shown from TV screens.

The second possible explanation is purely technical. Relatively low marks given by TV viewers can be explained by a statistical error due to the small number of respondents watching only TV.

As for the rest, distributions of evaluations in relation to the preferred information sources generally coincided with general assessments of these areas by all respondents: young people tend to have more positive attitudes to defense sphere and culture, and negative ones to politics and economy.

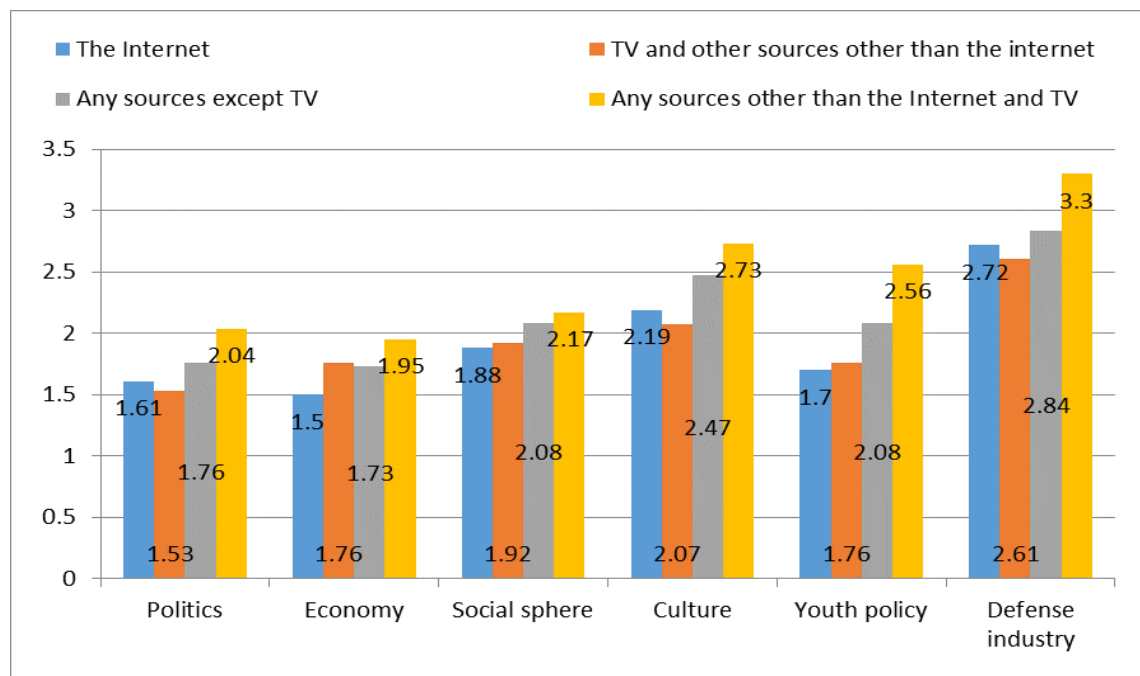


Fig. 6. Correctness of development of certain spheres of life in Russia within the context of preferred sources of information (average point)

5. Conclusion

Media diet and habits of the youth largely determine its attitude to the world around us. Having no rich life experience, in their assessments and judgments young people are constrained to be guided by the views and interpretations of journalists, bloggers, and public opinion leaders who actively manifest themselves in media environment.

Within contemporary scholarship, various aspects of media consumption of the “digital” generation are actively studied. Meanwhile, there is still no extensive research touching on the relationship between media practices typical of young people and their inherent political ideas, values, and attitudes. Plus, in this case it is more correct to discourse on the mutual influence of these two variables: media practice affects the attitude to politics, which, in turn, can predetermine the set of the information sources used.

Contrary to the widespread stereotype about the apolitical nature of modern youth, the results of our research indicate that there are more young people who are interested in politics than those indifferent to it. At the same time, the vast majority of respondents prefer to get to know what is going on from the internet. Also, young people learn the news from their immediate environment and watch TV from time to time. The demand for print media and radio is steadily decreasing. Moreover, sometimes media consumption of the youth may be of a background nature.

An interesting feature has been empirically confirmed that young people often do not trust the sources they receive information from. Most likely, this is due to the disappointment of the audience in media content it consumes. Of note, this distrust extends to media resources both loyal and disloyal to the current Russian government.

It turned out that the Saratov youth is less than enthusiastic about the correctness of development of various spheres of public life. Political and economic courses receive much criticism, while defense policy and culture give less cause for complaint. Interestingly, TV viewers are generally as critical as everyone else is.

In total, more than five hundred young people (aged between 14 and 35) were sampled by the online questionnaire method. Subsequently, 36 respondents took part in focus group interviews, during which certain issues, that prompted questions after processing the results of the mass survey, were clarified. And therein lies the prospect for further development of this study – through expansion and deepening of the empirical base of the analysis. In particular, a separate study of people for whom television continues to be a priority source of information is required. There were not so many TV viewers in our sample, which did not allow us to draw reliable conclusions about them. We constructed a hypothesis about the low effectiveness of the state TV propaganda among the youth, but it needs additional research to confirm or refute it.

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