

Do the Bulgarian Media Have a Social Marketing Orientation?

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Abstract. *The paper examines the problem of building a media environment through a socially responsible management model. The specific nature of this part of the non-production sphere – media business organisations – provides an opportunity to present a study of a relatively new phenomenon: the role of socially responsible marketing in mass media. A study of the importance of socially responsible marketing according to the practice of regional media in Bulgaria is presented, including a continuum review, non-standardised interviews, and a survey of media teams and users applied. Answers are sought to the questions of how socially engaged the media are and what the expectations of their users are. The study shows that the monitored media produces products that objectively and impartially reflect social issues of public importance. However, there is a significant discrepancy between assessment and self-assessment of their contribution to public life. From the interviews conducted with journalists, it is clear that the media self-assess exceptionally highly as responsible participants in public life. However, users give a "two" on the five-point scale for the social role of the media. The main conclusion is that the creation of a socially responsible and alternative media space through social marketing approaches is essential for the effective functioning of a sustainable and solidary society.*

Keywords: social marketing, social problems, socially responsible mass media, communication, CSR.

Introduction

In a way unprecedented in human history, people's daily lives are saturated with media and media messages. An essential delusion of mass media is that it exists to give its audiences what it wants (Croteau & Hoynes, 2005: p.192). However, from a legal and economic point of view, the media is a business entity (Croteau & Hoynes, 2005; Martin, 2023). The private media – predominant in Bulgaria – are oriented similarly to other companies towards a positive economic result. That is not realised by the users of media production, who perceive the newspaper, radio, and television channels as institutions similar to municipalities or regional administrations and not as companies from the commercial register (Kotler *et al.*, 2010).

Like a municipality, for example, the media institution is also clothed in some power – one influences in an administrative-legal way, and the other influences the mind and emotions through communication. Croteau and Hoynes (2005: p. 192) rightly argue that the most significant impact of commercial media on society is the successful colonisation of social space. It is about a substantial impact that cannot be bypassed and ignored.

At the same time – in an era of extraordinary dynamics in the communication and media environment, it becomes clear that interactions with audiences are paramount (Popova & Venelinova, 2018). Today, although to varying degrees, almost everyone depends on information and communication to carry out daily activities related to work, education, health care, leisure activities, personal relationships and other things they are engaged in (Cusack, 2023). The needs

of modern man for information are no less than the needs for administrative services. Why is this analogy significant? As a social phenomenon, the media have a dual nature because they are both business agents (according to their legal and economic nature) and empowered institutions (according to social perception). Accordingly, their role in society is subject to this duality (Bognár, 2018), which places the media in a particularly ambivalent situation. That affects and determines their corporate social responsibility.

Connecting the media with the concept of social responsibility is a relatively new phenomenon. At the same time, the concepts of corporate social responsibility and socially responsible marketing broadly cover their semantic fields. Everyone can implement social marketing – from individuals, informal groups and formal organisations to non-profit or business organisations. Its purpose is not to launch a product or service but to influence social behaviour (Kotler & Andreasen, 2005). Therefore, social marketing differs and is more challenging to implement than traditional marketing, as it involves changing the unacceptable behaviour of the organisation in a complex economic, social and political climate characterised by limited resources (Stoyanov, 2018).

In a narrow sense, socially responsible marketing is seen as campaigns in which corporations aim to change behaviour in favour of better public health, safety, the environment or public well-being (Nnam *et al.*, 2021). In a broader sense, socially responsible marketing is a marketing philosophy according to which business organisations, decidedly profit-oriented (Pavlov, 2022), must consider, in one form or another, society's short-term or long-term interests (Stoyanov, 2018). For the study, a broad understanding of the phenomenon of socially responsible marketing will be applied. In these cases, socially important causes gain greater visibility, and citizens change their opinions and actions, including their involvement.

The study of the significance of socially responsible marketing in alignment with the practices of regional media in the Ruse region was conducted in 2020. Despite being a relatively recent social phenomenon, various media types are currently undergoing significant changes, transitioning from the decline of traditional formats to the rapid ascension of new digital platforms. The study focuses on modern media in their conventional manifestations, both print and electronic, alongside emerging Internet-based media. The primary objective is to explore the issue of civil society development in Bulgaria, explicitly emphasising a crucial aspect: the establishment of a media landscape through the implementation of a socially responsible management model.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the authors provide a theoretical framework for examining the existing literature on media social responsibility and the concept of social marketing. After the literature review, the chosen and applied methodology is discussed, and research questions are developed. In the "Results and Discussion" section, answers to the formulated questions are presented, and relevant outlines are made. The "Conclusions" digest the main findings of the conducted research.

Literature review

In pursuit of increased profits, the media has expanded dramatically into almost all spheres of public and private life, bringing with it the commercial imperative that drives the industry (Croteau & Hoynes, 2005: p.191). The exact impact of the media on society is challenging to establish, but this does not change the perception (Cusack, 2023) that the media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion on a wide range of issues, from politics to social and environmental issues (Bognár, 2018). Through agenda setting, selective reporting, framing, opinion leaders, and social media, the media can influence how people think and feel about specific topics (Ballan, 2023).

Therefore, the influence of the media on public opinion can have a significant – positive or negative – impact on society. For example, media coverage of environmental issues increases awareness and action to address climate change. On the other hand, sensational reporting can lead to a distorted perception of reality, fear, anxiety and even panic among the public (Cusack, 2023). That is especially felt during crises, natural disasters, terrorist attacks or pandemics when the way events are covered worsens a given situation and causes harm to individuals and communities (Ballan, 2023). That poses the question of the social responsibility of the media as business agents and empowered institutions in the direction of solving social problems.

Ravi (2012) argues that the social responsibility philosophy of the media is an extension of the libertarian philosophy in that the media recognises its responsibility to resolve conflicts through discussion and promote public opinion, consumer action, private rights, and critical social interests. The fundamental essence of this theory is that freedom carries duties, and the press must be accountable to the public. If it fails to comply with this duty, a designated public agency has the power to enforce it. At the same time, public opinion and the actions of consumers should also serve as a guarantor that the press adheres to its expected behaviour (Ceasar & Hodgson, 2008).

An analysis of the Bulgarian business environment (Stojanović *et al.*, 2021), which, as it became clear, also includes the media, emphasises the importance of the impact of corporate social responsibility on the competitiveness of organisations and the increased trust of stakeholders. Although the government, on the one hand, and companies, on the other, promote socially responsible behaviour, there is mistrust regarding the sincere intentions of businesses and prejudices regarding the benefits of implementing socially responsible practices, including social marketing.

Social marketing is a concept that falls within the scope of corporate social responsibility. It is defined as the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily adopt, reject, change or give up behaviour for the benefit of individuals, groups or society as a whole (Kostadinova, 2019). The definition makes it clear that corporate social marketing is most clearly distinguished from other social initiatives by focusing on changing individual behaviour – changes that help increase societal engagement (Stoyanov, 2018).

The understanding of the concept of social marketing is built on the knowledge obtained from business practices, specifically, the development of measurable objectives, research of human needs, creating a product aimed at specific user groups, positioning technology groups by human needs and desires, constant monitoring of environmental changes and an organisation that builds the ability to adapt to changes (Stoyanov, 2018). According to Smith (2006), social marketing goes beyond single media or public education campaigns and involves a complex, sustainable and integrated approach designed to achieve a long-term vision. Social marketing is often misinterpreted as social advertising or communications when they are two different interventions. The concept is also different from social networking and commercial marketing. Social marketing involves carefully initiating and promoting specially designed marketing programs to change people's attitudes towards certain behaviours positively (Nnam *et al.*, 2021).

Social marketing uses various techniques to influence behaviour change to improve social and personal outcomes (Nnam *et al.*, 2021). Samouei *et al.* (2015) argue that social marketing attempts to influence the social behaviour of target audiences in a way that benefits society and has wide application in international health programs such as addressing alcohol and substance abuse. Social marketing does not simply emphasise the needs and wants of people in society. Instead, it affects the behaviour of people in society in a more widespread way because social marketing

methods and principles prioritise the target audience based on their needs and wants, changing beliefs and attitudes to achieve the desired behaviour.

Regardless of the specifics of the proposed definitions, social marketing focuses on changing behaviour to improve the well-being of society as a whole. Concrete change and its associated impact rarely happen quickly, and key audiences and partners should be aware of this (Stoyanov, 2018).

Methodology

Socially responsible media marketing is seen as a competitive advantage through the synergy of topics and activities that enable media companies to achieve their goals in convergence with the long-term interests of society and the environment. The understanding of the social responsibility of the media in the conducted research is based on checklists of the media association Responsible Media Forum (Ceasar & Hodgson, 2008), whose members are the BBC, NBC Universal, Virgin Media, The Economist Group, Warner Bros, Discovery and other influential organisations.

The defined topics (Table 1) related to the corporate social responsibility of the media in relation to other sectors are the result of an in-depth study with the participation of the Forum members and serve as the basis for determining the socially significant topics used in the toolkit of the present study.

Table 1. Topics related to mass media CSR (Ceasar & Hodgson, 2008)

Question Panels	Topics related to media CSR
Common topics for all sectors	supply integrity, investment in communities, environmental management, investment in personnel, climate change, employee diversity, customer relations
General topics of distinct media relevance	pluralism, promotion of a cause, data protection, attitude towards freelance professionals, copyrights, health, safety and security, transparent ownership, awareness of the impact of communication, responsible advertising, promotion of sustainable development, human rights, fair reporting, civic consciousness, compliance with the law
Media-specific topics	assessment of creativity, creative independence, various products, media literacy, transparent and responsible editorial policies, freedom of expression, unbiased and balanced products

Source: Authors' development.

Objectives

The research focuses on modern media outlets, including traditional print and electronic media, as well as the fast-spreading online media platforms. The aim is to examine the role of media in fostering the development of civil society in Bulgaria, with a specific emphasis on one of its crucial aspects: establishing a responsible media environment. In addition, the paper tries to find answers to the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Do the investigated media practice socially responsible marketing?

RQ2: Do the researched media create a favourable environment for the CSR of other local institutions?

RQ3: Does society's assessment of the social role of the media differ from the self-assessment of the media themselves?

RQ4: Are society's expectations of the socially responsible role of the media more significant than their practice indicates?

Data and methods of data collection

The research presents the topic of socially responsible marketing in the practice of 25 regional Ruse media according to the modern concept of CSR and the doctrine of sustainable development (Kostadinova, 2019). The study's time frame is the *second quarter of 2020*.

The media market in the Ruse region (Bulgaria) is relatively well balanced. Various types of traditional and new media were selected, including five groups: *Newspapers* – Utro and Bryag (dailies), Forum (weekly); *Television stations* – BNT Sever, Delta TV, KIS 13; *Radio stations* – Municipal and Darik radio Ruse; *Online media* – Ruse news (ruse-news.com), Ruse info (ruseinfo.net), Accent (Akcent.bg), Arena media (arenamedia.net), Ruse for Ruse (ruse4ruse.com), Danube Most (Dunavmost.com), Ruse dnes (ruse-dnes.com), Sedmitzata (sedmicata.com), which also publishes a weekly free magazine with the same title, Top Novini (ruse.topnovini.bg); Correspondence points of national media BNR, BTA, Trud, Monitor, Nova TV.

Three data collection methods were applied:

(1) Overview of the output continuum of the five investigated media groups from April to June 2020.

(2) Conducting non-standardised interviews with top managers and owners of the investigated media.

(3) Survey, on the one hand, of journalists from the investigated media and, on the other, of their users – through checklists.

Research tools

Continuum Review. The main question that the continuum review answers is the socially significant issues the media focuses on. Since there is a lack of a single definition of a socially significant problem, an understanding of the categories in the study includes *Human health and security, Environmental protection, Child Welfare, Poverty, and the State of the Urban Environment*. The object of interest in the review of the continuum of media production is the long-term problems, considered in their entirety because of their perceived social weight (for example, a criminogenic situation in the city and its possible solutions), rather than news (a robbery, a new market, an incident) that the media reflects, driven by the agenda of events.

Non-standardised interviews. In-depth unstructured interviews are carried out with 25 owners and top managers of regional media in specially held meetings. Only the topic of the conversation is preset. It relies on social interaction between the interviewer and the respondents. The approach makes it possible to expand the scope of the research with topics that the researcher has no way of knowing in advance. The main groups of questions included in the interview are (1) collection of technical information on the functioning of the investigated media – creation, transformations, ownership, personnel, (2) discussion with the owners/managers about their perspective on the categories: *mission, vision and goals of the media; socially responsible media; the media as a citizen*, (3) discussion of the media and non-media appearances that the owners/managers emphasise as a manifestation of socially responsible marketing.

Survey of media teams and users. Two different questionnaires were used to investigate the attitudes and evaluations of journalists and their consumers (readers and viewers) regarding the issues under consideration. The checklists are mirror-designed by including similar questions that allow for comparing viewpoints. Closed and open questions were used to compile the survey, intended for representatives of business organisations, non-profit organisations, educational institutions and other institutions. Five of the closed questions were dichotomous, and the rest were

multiple-choice. One of the questions is formulated on a five-point Likert scale. Four of the questions are ten-level semantically differentiated.

Limitation

The selection of the media is according to 4 criteria applied together or separately: (a) everyday media production; (b) a permanent staff of journalists; (c) popularity among the Ruse public; (d) significant impact on consumers. As an object of research, the media are different in their nature. Therefore, it is impossible to apply the same criteria in the analysis of their production.

Results and discussions

Continuum Review

The leading position of a headline is an undeniable indicator of the high degree of importance with which the media assesses an event or fact. In this way, conclusions can be drawn about the set of values that the organisation shares and its relevance to the local community's problems. The maxim that the front page sells the issue makes the act of what is put there the primary concern of the issue editor. The goal of any newspaper is to grab the potential reader's attention through headline selection, looking for a match between "news" and the consumer's value system – in a way that the newspaper understands that match.

During the study period, the investigated print media published a total of more than 728 headlines on the front page, of which 103 were related to the predefined socially significant categories: *Human Health and Security, environmental protection, The welfare of the child, Poverty; State of the Urban Environment*. That represents 14.15% of all titles for the period.

Due to the specificity of the functioning of the rest of the media, which does not allow distinguishing titles, the analysis of media production covers all news. The way in which online media arrange the news on their sites, for example, does not allow us to conclude what value is given to it. Events and facts are published in the order of their occurrence or acceptance by the editors – without arrangement and classification of more essential and less important. The total number of publications is 1669, of which a total of 199 (11.92%) are dedicated to the socially significant topics selected in the study.

The data obtained answer *RQ1: Do the investigated media practice socially responsible marketing?* The media included in the study produce products that objectively and impartially reflect social issues important to the community, serving the public interest in access to information. The five main socially significant topics are present in the daily products of the considered media groups.

Despite that, a significant problem stands out: the ratio of socially essential topics to the rest of the information presented to the audience by mass media communication. As it was pointed out, in the research period, the share of socially significant topics was 10-15% of the five media groups' overall topics. The remaining per cent of titles are devoted to secular events, service information, news from the field of education and culture, crimes, fraud, court reports, traffic accidents with victims, and advertising. For comparison with other practices – for example, the social slots of the national televisions and other foreign mass media, the share varies between 15-20% (BNT, 2012; Newman, 2023). It can be argued that socially significant topics are presented satisfactorily as content in Bulgarian media. However, compared with the practice of the world's mass media (Ceasar & Hodgson, 2008), the local media lag behind in terms of the volume of information on social problems and the depth of their research, interpretation, and comment.

At the same time, the study correlates positively (61-64% for the five groups) with the second RQ2: *Do the researched media create a favourable environment for the CSR of other local institutions?* From the review of the media production, it can be concluded that the socially responsible appearances of other local subjects – institutions, schools, and organisations – have found a place in the daily news. In this way, the contribution of other institutions to the protection of human health and the environment, the welfare of children, the alleviation of poverty and the improvement of the urban environment becomes available to the audiences.

Non-standardised interviews

The conducted interviews show that the analysed media are led by managers who are often also owners of the media. Property information is not always adequately disclosed on a publisher's page or in another format. Some publishers even argue that such information is not intended for users of the media and has no relation to the quality of media publications.

Most of the media studied do not have a clearly stated mission, vision, or values. According to the majority of interviewees, the mission is implied – *to inform objectively and provide entertainment*. In general, the media have not developed corporate social responsibility and donation policies.

At the same time, some of the owners openly state that they maintain close relationships with the local administration, as well as with schools and museums. The relationship is primarily concluded in free coverage of the institutions' social projects and activities. That supports the positive answer to RQ2: researched media create a favourable environment for the CSR of other local institutions.

The conducted interviews provide an answer to the *third research question (Does society's assessment of the social role of the media differ from the self-assessment of the media themselves?)* from the point of view of the owners of the studied media. According to them, the mission of media is to inform objectively, not socially, and this is embedded in their very nature. In contrast, Ceasar and Hodgson (2008) argue that media companies can meaningfully contribute to a more sustainable future through impactful communications, that is, by doing what they do best.

Survey of media teams and users

Both types of respondents believe that the media should create a favourable environment for the CSR of other organisations. Paradoxically, 100% of journalists accept this statement. At the same time, consumers (who should be much more interested in a favourable environment for CSR) hesitate as to whether the media should have this obligation. Their responses ranged from complete agreement (52.5%) to some extent.

The survey also answered RQ3: *Does society's assessment of the social role of the media differ from the self-assessment of the media themselves?* It becomes clear that the media rate themselves extremely highly as responsible participants in public life. However, users *rated two on a five-point scale* for the social role of three of the five groups of media studied. The significant discrepancy between the assessment and self-assessment of the contribution to public life can be explained by the lack of studies on the attitudes of the media audience, overestimation of one's role, neglect of general activities outside media production and a number of other reasons that are not flattering to the media.

Users have a rather theoretical idea of the role of the media as an environment for the manifestation of CSR. In fact, the majority of them have never approached the media with such a problem. Between 57.5 – 62.5% gave a negative answer to the question: *Have you ever received*

support from a regional media in your practice for implementing your social responsibility? Respondents claim that there are even cases in which the media confronts a cause that consumers judge as socially beneficial. At the same time, all interviewed journalists claim that their media creates an environment where socially profitable ventures can emerge. That is also the definite opinion in the responses of media owners and managers.

The data show a difference in journalists' self-assessments and users' assessments on the subject and provide a definitive answer to *RQ4: Are society's expectations of the socially responsible role of the media more significant than their practice indicates?* Most (87.5%) users consider it insufficient that social responsibility is expressed only through media production. They also have expectations for other actions affirming the role and place of the media in the community.

At the same time, journalists tend to consider media products as a sufficiently strong manifestation of the public role – *i.e.* a media outlet does not need to do anything else to be socially responsible. That may explain why most of the studied regional media do not articulate their mission, vision and goals. They accept that their mission to inform objectively is in the nature of the media. The thesis is also expressed in the interviews with the media managers.

However, the public thinks that media production is not a sufficient manifestation of a socially responsible role. Users have other ideas for realising the social role of mass media communication through non-media actions. Firstly, through participation in public councils and commissions, but also the implementation or support of projects, a particular corporate policy for environmental protection, educational initiatives, *etc.*

According to similar studies by the American Press Institute (USC, 2017), public trust in the press has declined sharply in recent years, partly due to biased, inaccurate or unfair reporting and perhaps partly due to efforts by certain interest groups to delegitimise the media. The authors of the studies ask the logical question: *Can the press serve as a fourth estate if the public does not trust its work?*

The latter question and the results of the present study underline the need for future research and to think about the subject of media with a responsible civic position. In strategic planning, in which the question of mission and vision should be discussed, many things differ from what is evident in advance. Thus, the media would find another image of itself, bringing it closer to its audience.

Conclusion

Disagreements between media and audiences should become the subject of research. That is not a practice of regional media – it requires financial and human resources. Understanding that dissonance with the values and attitudes of their audiences is causing them economic harm can lead them to explore consumer behaviour, something that can be done with fewer resources if they take advantage of affiliate networks and channels.

A comparative analysis should be made between media and non-media practices of regional, national and foreign media and business organisations. Good practices can be transferred to the regional level to strengthen their role as socially responsible institutions.

Holding constant content analysis will significantly increase media self-awareness and improve socially responsible marketing. A number of the ideas above can be effectively implemented in partnerships, combining the capabilities of the mass media and other contact audiences – local institutions, NGOs and educational institutions.

In conclusion, the study shows that regional media must create a favourable environment for the sustainable development of a socially responsible model by disseminating information that

promotes good social practices. These are the main expectations of their users - readers and viewers.

The media should not be self-aware or perceived as a form of power but as an expression of diverse interests produced by civil society. Diffusion in the information space is still to come. It is related to creating a competitive and alternative media space, increasing the opportunities for citizens and groups to know and control the social environment surrounding them.

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