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Global media and communication industries and “green investors discours”[1]

Indústrias globais de mídia e comunicação e o "discurso dos investidores verdes”

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Abstract: Global media industry may be called one of the most important tools to advance “green” agenda and promote mode on ecological way of life and reasoning. As a result, this industry became represented as something per itself ecological and oriented toward sustainable development while the industry refusal to use paper over last 15 years is apprehended as something particularly socially responsible and ecologically friendly. At the same time global media and communication companies are big public conglomerates attracting a lot of investments and generate huge value on stock market. In this paper we are trying to question thesis about per default ecological friendliness of cultural industries through examining their ties with others sectors and their “green” messages to investors. Through analysis of environmental reports and sustainability reports of big tech and media corporations the author shows that so called “green shift” is just a strategy to attract investments into fashioned industry rather than real care about the collective wellbeing.

Resumo: A indústria global de mídia pode ser considerada uma das ferramentas mais importantes para avançar a agenda "verde" e promover um modo de vida ecológico e uma forma de raciocínio sustentável. Como resultado, essa indústria passou a ser representada como algo intrinsecamente ecológico e orientado para o desenvolvimento sustentável,

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enquanto a recusa da indústria em utilizar papel nos últimos 15 anos é vista como algo particularmente socialmente responsável e ecologicamente amigável. Ao mesmo tempo, as empresas globais de mídia e comunicação são grandes conglomerados públicos que atraem muitos investimentos e geram um enorme valor no mercado de ações. Neste artigo, buscamos questionar a tese sobre a suposta amizade ecológica por padrão das indústrias culturais, examinando seus vínculos com outros setores e suas mensagens "verdes" para os investidores. Através da análise de relatórios ambientais e de sustentabilidade de grandes corporações de tecnologia e mídia, o autor mostra que a chamada "mudança verde" é apenas uma estratégia para atrair investimentos para uma indústria da moda, em vez de um verdadeiro compromisso com o bem-estar coletivo.

1. “Green media” = “green capitalism”

An eco-friendly lifestyle has become an important part of the modern world and a significant part of modern consumer culture. We are paying more and more attention to how biodegradable the material used to make the plastic bag is, products labeled "bio" have taken an important place on store shelves, and some retail chains have made such products their competitive advantage. In this "green" culture, the media industry, in all its diversity, takes an active part by promoting this way of life. Moreover, this "promotion" is associated not only with advertising communication in traditional mass media, but also with the activities of digital platforms, which to a large extent have begun to "mediate" our everyday practices.

Thanks to the digital platforms of transport applications, we can compare the length of the route on a scooter or bicycle with a car and prefer more "eco-friendly" way to move. In fact, the media today is much broader than it was 20 years ago, we are increasingly talking about "deep mediatization", that is, the interpenetration of media and social practices (Hepp, 2019).

The close ties between modern cultural industries and the eco-agenda creates the feeling that these industries themselves represent something progressive by default, and, therefore, environmentally friendly. As the European Association of Cultural Institutions Culture Action Europe writes in its report, " culture can contribute to combating climate

change, environmental degradation and achieve sustainable development" (Culture Action Europe, 2020). At the same time, we forget that media are also ones of most important industries on the public stock market and, as a result, they are also constructing “green” messages for investors. Thus, the "green" agenda for these industries is also an important part of their business model, and their supposedly "minimal" negative impact on the environment must be assessed not only in the context of the production of symbolic goods that glorify the environmental agenda, but also in the context of the chain of production and especially consumption of these goods, which is largely associated with other industries which are far from only eco-practices. In this article, we will try to analyze this inherent contradiction of the media from the point of view of the political economy of the media.

To examine reports we will use the production chain approach which is establishing the relationship of the reported business with other so called “filières” dependent from them. From this point of view the Google business should not be dissociated from the business of device manufacturers the demand for which is driven by rise of Google calculating capacities.

2. Financial Logic of “Sustainability Reports" of the Media Business

It would be a mistake to say that today's entertainment and media industries do not talk about their own burden on the environment at all. As a rule, the world's major media companies and platforms have so-called "global sustainability reports", which are public, but primarily aimed at shareholders. Sustainability is not only about protecting the environment, but also about various social actions and activities aimed at the development of future generations. The strategy of companies today is primarily to invest in renewable energy sources and transfer their own business to renewable energy sources in order to achieve zero emissions. Meta platforms is openly aiming to achieve net-zero emissions from operations across the entire value chain by 2030, as well as invest and research in renewable energy (Meta sustainability report, 2023).

If you pay attention to these statements, you can see that the company, unlike the classic liberal "green" discourse, aimed at involving everyone in environmental practices, on the contrary, does not involve the user in these practices in any way. It declares: " Take

bold climate action by minimizing our footprint, championing renewable energy, restoring water resources, engaging our suppliers and supporting climate justice" (p. 8). It's as if the company is saying to the consumer: "We'll do everything ourselves, we'll just achieve zero emissions." At the same time, the user is not required to take any measures to save their own digital actions. At the same time, the company emphasizes that its contribution is to adequately inform consumers about climate change. We see the classic neoliberal approach, when the consumer, having all the information, independently builds a bright future, allowing companies and the neoliberal state to do the rest.

Alphabet's (Google's parent company) environmental report almost starts with the neoliberal message we talked about in the case of Meta Platforms: " To empower everyone with technology, we've committed to help 1 billion people make more sustainable choices by the end of 2022 through our core products. " (Google environmental report, 2022, p. 4). As you can see, the company only helps, first of all, informationally, and the choice is made by people. Many companies in the entertainment business emphasize that their main product is eco-friendly per itself, precisely because they inform the user and help him make the right choice. Walt Disney makes the centerpiece of its sustainability policy storytelling (i.e., its core business): "At The Walt Disney Company, we strive to inspire a better world through the power of stories. We aim to tell stories that mean something to people—stories that illuminate the world around us, spark hope, and bring people closer together". (Walt Disney Corporate Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 4). In its report, Comcast draws attention to the fact that Universal, which owns it, strongly supports the "green" agenda in film scripts and participates in the jury of the "pitching" festival (Comcast impact report, 2023).

Almost every major company in the media and culture industry promises in its reports to reduce the carbon footprint in its value chain. However, the key question here is what companies consider to be their value chain. Meta Platforms refers to the "reuse" of its own components, the use of low-carbon concrete in the construction of data centers, etc. (Meta sustainability report, 2023). That is, the company talks only about its value chain, not to mention the related chains of telecommunications, device manufacture, etc. Comcast is not much different from Meta, except for the obligation to use more environmentally friendly packaging (which is understandable, since Comcast sells smart

TV boxes). Sony says that when negotiating with suppliers of raw materials, it takes into account the emissions that these industries produce (Sony Sustainability Report, 2022, 26), but it does not say how the company reduces the volume of devices sold and solves the problem of their recycling.

Finally, the most important thing in corporate sustainability reports is the focus on investments. As a rule, these reports are located on corporate pages in the "for investors" section. Hence, the key audience that these documents are aimed at is investors. Investors make a decision to invest in a particular company based on these documents. From this point of view, green reporting serves as an additional source of cash flow for these companies. The focus of the Aphabet report is primarily on "investments". The word "investment" appears 9 times in the report, while the phrase "climate change" appears only three times. The centerpiece of Alphabet's sustainability policy is the so-called issuance of sustainability bonds, which are invested in various environmental projects (Alphabet Sustainability Bond Impact Report, 2022). In Bond impact report the company mentions the modernization of data centers, the construction of renewable energy facilities, the construction of "green" housing, investments in "clean" transport (equivalent to electric transport), and the reduction of food waste in the company's cafes as areas of investment. These investment objectives, coupled with the generally high level of speculative value of media companies in financial markets (Bouquillion, 2008), do not serve to "reduce the impact" on nature, but to attract investors who are "sensitive" to green issues: pension funds, portfolio investors, etc.

That is, it is necessary to understand that the organization of reporting in the field of so-called "sustainable development" itself is the same double market of attention as the main market for the sale of content and advertising, and this market may also speculate with the green issues, which are also overheated by the media. Drawing attention to the development of "electric" transport and the construction of network of electric charging stations (which Google is engaged in) actually attracts investors also because the use of such charging stations involves the use of Google electronic services, and therefore an increase in the volume of commodifiable user data, and therefore an increase in data, data transmission networks capacities and data storage facilities, which inevitably increases the load on non-renewable energy.

3. Conclusion

Being far from "Luddism", we are not saying that media industry should close its digital development at all. The issue is that today the media are actively used to promote eco-friendly behavior, healthy lifestyles and "green practices", but at the same time, their own immanent functioning and progressive financial logic associated with the commercial model of consumption, maximizing audiences, increasing traffic and the volume of content, is not focused on sustainable development and eco-friendly behavior. We need to understand that the media are involved in very wide production chains, primarily because the media business was started by companies that came to this with a completely different profile: from logistics to banking services. And only a general understanding that the carbon footprint involves all stages, including the consumption of media content and especially the device race, will be able to lead to an objective assessment of the possible carbon footprint.

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