

JOURNALIST AND JOURNALIST'S CULTURE IN RUSSIA

ЖУРНАЛИСТ И ЖУРНАЛИСТСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА В РОССИИ

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This article scrutinizes the figure of media professional in Russia, deals with sociological portrait of a journalist taken in historical prospective. Following the existing research practice, some comparisons have been made between journalists acting in different periods of modern Russian history (from 1920s to 2000s), between Russian and foreign media professionals. Russian professional journalistic culture is analyzed in the international context.

In this article a brief description of sociological study tools and methods is given, a journalist is seen as a subject of study in Russia. On the base of concrete sociological research projects the main frames, problems and significant conditions of journalist's work in Russia are presented.

Key words: *media professional; journalist; journalistic culture; sociological approach; institutional roles; ethical ideologies.*

В статье представлена фигура профессионального журналиста в России, создан социологический портрет российского журналиста в исторической перспективе. На основании проводимых

исследований в области изучения профессиональных журналистских практик, результатов ряда российских и международных исследовательских проектов, а также материалов исследований журналистов в СССР произведены сравнения различных периодов журналистских практик в стране, представлены сравнения отечественной и ряда зарубежных журналистских культур.

В материале дан обзор социологических методик исследования журналистов, обсуждены значимые проблемы и ограничения профессиональной деятельности журналистов в современной России.

Ключевые слова: *медиапрофессионал; журналист; журналистская культура; социологический подход; институциональные роли; профессиональная этика.*

First of all, it is necessary to give a general description of a journalist in order to understand the main things about the professional. There are diverse interpretations of this term – both theoretical and practical. But full and sufficient definition could be found if a journalist is defined as a judicial category: “The journalist shall be understood to mean a person who edits, creates, collects or prepares messages and materials for the editor’s office of a mass medium and is connected with it with labor and other contractual relations or engaged in such an activity, being authorized by it” (Zakon “O SMI”, 1991).

This definition points to the main directions of further discussion about professional journalist’s culture, since it mentions different types of professional activity, the most important counterparts of a journalist and fixes the principles of collaboration between journalist and other actors. All these aspects influence the professional realization of a journalist, the conditions of professional activity, and will be taken into consideration in this article.

Before speaking about the figure of a journalist in different historical, social, political and economic conditions it is worth describing briefly some methodological questions that give a kind of general frame of dis-

cussion and assist in proper understanding of former and contemporary journalistic cultures.

During the decades of media system and media studies development in Russia solid arsenal of information was collected. The base of sociological tools and methods used in order to define journalist and journalists' practices and cultures was gradually cultivated. Nowadays it is possible to name diverse research methods and techniques from expert polls, phone, face-to-face, online, e-mail interviews with practicing journalists to diaries and cards, etc. Thereby the information about profession and professionals is gathered from a huge variety of sources and according to existing experience the main of them are so-called "ordinary" journalists, media managers and future (or young) journalist graduates.

Contemporary general scheme of sociological analysis takes existing Western approaches and could be presented as a three-part scheme. The first is the societal level which provides the analysis of social, economic and political conditions, cultural and historical context and takes into account global trends seen in "local" dimension. The second – the organizational level – offers the view of concrete structure (editorial office, newsroom, medium, etc.). The third – the individual level of analysis enables us to speak about the personality of a journalist. The media systems and journalist's cultures are seen from viewpoints of senior managers responsible for strategic planning and general running of a medium, junior managers who make concrete decisions concerning concrete problems or functioning of proper desk and non-management staff (journalists themselves).

Modern research practices (Weaver, 1998; Hallin, Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch, 2010; *The Global Journalist in the 21st century*, 2012) provide detailed description of societal and media industry aspect, and pay serious attention to political culture in which a media system is constructed and functions. In Russian situation these aspects are also important, since the country has recently come through social and political transformations. This leads to the analysis of social types of media, acute roles of mass media in general and concrete journalists in particular, to the

search of diverse influential factors, possible interventions, the freedom of journalist's work and existing limits, etc.

The journalist in the USSR and in Russia: historical and sociological perspective

In the 1920s the first attempts of journalist's research were made. At that time the need for studying the newspaper staff was rooted in the necessity to provide the editorial boards with qualified journalists. Two types of the study were realized in that decade. In the early 1920s registration and statistical data collection on two levels took place – one on the level of the Central Communist Party committee, and the other on the level of professional journalists' institutions. In the late 1920s the sociological polls were conducted. The aims of those research projects were to elaborate recommendations for editorial boards in order to improve professional qualification of journalists and to offer the typology of journalistic professions (such as journalists themselves, those who edited materials, those who worked in publishing houses, etc.) At that period scholars' activities concentrated, on the one hand, on media contents studies and on the other hand, on defining of the subject under investigation and on its deeper description.

In the 1930s sociological research in the USSR – in general and in the field of media in particular – was almost frozen. The statistic data on media professionals were being collected but they were closed for the public.

The revival of sociological research and public discussions took place *in the 1960s*. The first significant step in the development of media sociology in Russia was the establishing of The Institute of Public Opinion of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. It was the unique department of the popular newspaper opened by a famous Russian sociologist and philosopher Boris Grushin. As he wrote, “it was really the first wide attempt of the establishing of the institution of publicity, the establishing of civil society.

Its basic characteristic feature was the appearance of people independent from the state. They began to express their opinions” (Otkryvaya Grushina, 2011). This phenomenon is very interesting and it was important for the sphere of media sociology at that time, and that is the reason why it is mentioned in this article. But of course it dealt with the figure of a journalist to a lesser extent than other research initiatives.

During the 1960s the research projects dedicated to journalistic staff in different regions and towns were realized – in Leningrad it was one of the research groups led by Kuzin, in Novosibirsk the study of the same type was made by scholars headed by Parfenov, in the Estonian republic lo Vooglaig conducted such a study.

Sociological interest in the field of journalism and mass media also touched upon precise types of periodicals, e.g. local press (Committee for Press financed the project “Functioning of Local Press” in Ryazan region) or concrete newspapers (e.g., central ones – *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, *Pravda*, etc.). Results of the research were made public – the book “*Literaturnaya Gazeta* and its audience” was published in 1978. During these projects the social and demographic characteristics, educational level and specialization, professional orientations, ideas on journalist’s mission, tasks and functions, creative skills of media people, their social and professional status, personal characteristics, etc. were searched through methods which combined filling in of so-called registration cards and traditional questionnaires.

One of the biggest projects was constructed and realized in 1969–1971. It was a complex sociological research that combined media audience poll, publishers’ poll, content-analysis of materials and correspondence and journalists’ poll. This project dedicated to the studying of mass media in a big industrial town (Taganrog) was conducted by the Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University. Its author and the main organizer was also Boris Grushin. The studies of the journalists – “Activity of Mass Communications as a Source of Information” (B. Grushin and A. Shiryayeva) (47 Pyatnic, 1972) and “Mass Communications as the Channel of Forming and Expression of Public Opinion”

(B. Grushin and V. Kazantsev) – represented journalists from diverse points (Teoriya i sociologiya SMI, 2010).

One of the conclusions of this project connected with media professionals was that the journalists' opinion about the most important part of information activity was characterized as incomplete and contradictory. That gave the reason to think about professional consciousness of journalists not only in historic perspective but also as a whole, as one of significant regulators of professional activity.

The poll also exposed that in the late 1960s journalists did not think seriously about mass media as the channel for public opinion expression. One of possible explanations of that fact was deep orientation to ideological influencing and forming opinion in accordance with existed ideology. With the social and political transformations in the Soviet Union and then in Russia the situation changed insignificantly – the shifts became more evident in the 1990s and 2000s, but even in modern conditions this role of mass media is not the main one according to media professionals' studies.

In the 1970s the portrait of a journalist was supplemented with new features linked to the future perspective of a media professional and education of journalists. At that time it was not the discussion about media education in modern interpretation of this term but only the discussion concerning the education for future professionals. The areas covered by researches of that period were the status, professional specialization and mobility of graduates, supply and demand in the Soviet media system. The main directions of the study were the tasks and principles of journalistic education, the stages of professional education, the directions and forms of education depending on specific features of a concrete medium, the relations between education institutions and editorial boards.

The Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University organized educational programs for practicing journalists, which included lectures that discussed obtained results and conclusions of the studies, seminars where necessary methodological information and research approaches were taught in order to make journalists skilled and prepared

for using sociological methods in journalistic work – e.g. techniques of analysis of audience letters, usage of press questionnaire forms, etc.

In the 1980s work with editorial correspondence, relations with the audience and freelancers, the role of sociological research in editorial practice, effectiveness of media materials and texts became the topics of research in the Soviet media sociology. The Union of Journalists of the USSR and the Faculty of Journalism organized postal poll of managers represented by regional parties, youth and town papers, TV and radio stations. It is worth mentioning that at that time the result of methodological development was the functional card “Journalists’ Model” (that indicated social and psychological features of media professional) and a diary for respondents.

The 1990s began with fundamental changes in social and political life followed by shifts in media system. Social transformations and media development led to the appearance of new conditions of professional journalist work and – further – new spheres of research. Diverse media channels were studied – in 1990 TV and radio research “Perspective of Television and Radio Development” was conducted. One fourth of all the journalists working in information and social political departments of editorial offices of TV and radio stations, and experts representing civil organizations were examined. Taking into consideration the acute social and political situation, research reports made recommendations concerning the ways of development of TV and radio segments of media system.

From that poll the question about professional freedom and independence as the most important condition of activity became the central one. In the early 1990s only one fifth of respondents considered themselves quite independent, half of participants mentioned certain limitations, and another one fifth spoke about the absence of necessary freedom. These data became the evidence of the shift in professional consciousness from dominating tasks of ideological propaganda towards fast informing of the society about happening events (Teoriya i sociologiya SMI, 2010).

The increase of local media significance inspired the new wave of lo-

cal press research projects. New phenomena in modern Russian media sphere with new forms of media establishing, etc. were to be searched. In 1991 the profile Ministry approved a regional complex study “Local Press and Perspective of Its Development” in Yaroslavl region where media audience and journalists working in municipal and regional newspapers were examined. It also covered the figure of a new for Russian media system activist – the founder. This type of respondents was included into the sample for the first time in Russia.

The first international comparative studies of journalists became the feature of new realities at that time.

In 1992 the first Russian-American research of professional orientation of journalists in two countries was conducted. In was partly continued in 1995-1996 in collaboration with the research center of *Middle Tennessee State University* and had the main focus on media freedom.

It clarified the high actuality of ethic and law responsibility of Russian journalists and found certain grade of instability of their professional orientation in comparison to the American respondents. The typical feature for Russian representatives of media became dominant for the external limitations, law requirements, etc. This distinguished Russian and American journalistic practices – for instance, in the USA journalists rely more often upon self-regulation and traditions. This statement is just also for modern reality in Russia.

International research activity and collaboration with scholars form was continued in the new millennium (see further).

In the early 2000s several polls of local journalists took place. In 2002 research team appealed to 150 representatives of the biggest Moscow media, graduates of Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University, who were asked mostly about the professional journalistic education but also about the problems of routine journalistic work. Another research project conducted by the Institute of Regional Press, involved only professionals from the local media, which narrowed the scope of project. But it was important as a pilot – preliminary – study useful for obtaining valid data for possible comparisons.

The results of that polls showed that the grade of influencing and

the list of actors having certain influence on journalistic practices had changed. The pressure of owners, different financial structures were named among other actors such as power and administrative sources. Dependence from the local authorities appeared to be very strong, especially it was seen in the situations of media established by the structures affiliated with the local powers.

Some recent studies were aimed at describing relations between media and audience. In 2002 the Commission for Freedom of Information Access asked local media professionals about the satisfaction of audience information needs. About 37% of the respondents pointed that local media complied the audience needs and more than a half did not agree with this statement. Despite this fact fixed in polls of active journalists the level of trust to mass media still remains relatively high in the Russian society.

Making small digression, let us glance at the general Russian media system analysis that shows: TV is still the agenda setting medium in Russia, and it has the highest level of trust among Russian citizens. 79% of Russians chose television when they were asked about the kind of communication medium, which was of greatest importance in shaping political discourse and setting the political agenda for them. Radio is at the second place (23%), newspapers are at the third (16%), the Internet media have 7% of trust (Obshestvennoe mnenie – 2009, 2009). Such high rate of trust to television could be partly explained by so-called technical reason – it is the channel with the biggest coverage which is used by most of people (94% of Russian citizens get information on current events in Russia and abroad from the TV programs) (Televidenie v nashei zhizni, 2010). But it is necessary to note that the question of trust does not have direct connection with the problem of meeting the needs in information of audience. The question of satisfaction of hunger for information is asked very rarely along with the block of questions concerning evaluations of modern media and reflections on them. That is why reliable information could be obtained only from one source – from journalists.

Journalistic cultures in 2000s:

Russia in the international context

Trying to define the place of Russian journalist's professional culture in a general context it is worth using generalized research frame in which, for instance, "diversity is modeled in terms of three constituents: the domain of **institutional roles** refers to the normative and actual functions of journalism in the society, while **epistemologies** are concerned with the accessibility of reality and the nature of acceptable evidence. **Ethical ideologies**, as the third domain, point to the question of how journalists respond to ethical dilemmas. The three constituents can be further divided into seven principal dimensions: Institutional roles are made up of the three components interventionism, power distance and market orientation, epistemologies are marked by the dimensions objectivism and empiricism, and ethical ideologies consist of relativism and idealism" (Hanitzsch, 2007).

Evaluating the data of Russian poll of journalists conducted within the international project "The Worlds of Journalism", it is possible to consider Russian journalists young professionals. Professional experience in Russia according to the data in a significant part of cases is less than 10 years (63% of the respondents). This gives us the right to mention here some findings of other international Russian-Swedish study where future journalists – universities' graduates – express their opinions about the profession as follows: "Many students are pessimistic about the future and fear that journalism will be transformed into entertainment, PR, propaganda and "bloggization". This confirms that social and moral ideals are increasingly running the gauntlet; information ersatz can angle a real story. The answers from the Russian students show clearly that they understand the tendency towards instrumentalization that limits the autonomy of the profession in Russia, and how political and economic powers outside journalism use the media for their own purposes (Nygren, Degtereva, Pavlikova, 2010).

Turning back to the Russian journalists' poll, we can say that generally such a perception of profession leads to spreading of so-called "universal journalist" idea. This statement is proved by the data –

75% of the respondents cover different types of stories in their media. This situation is partly supported by the tendency of thematic universalization which was typical for Russia for several years and still remains quite serious in spite of activation of other contradictory tendencies.

The third interesting feature of a Russian journalist is his/her professional devotion and strict affiliation to a concrete medium. Almost 90% declared that “do not work for other media”. Of course this could mean better financial and social conditions for journalists in comparison with the situation of their colleagues one or two decades ago. This could also point to the implementation of new business models and strict commercial agreements between journalists and employers. But also it is necessary to make some corrections on the level of sincerity of responses which could influence the results. Nevertheless, we may conclude that Russian media professionals in their practices repeat some general trends at the same time reflecting national specifics connected with media development and social changes happened in last decades.

The following table presents the results of “The Worlds of Journalism”³² project concerning the main functions of media professionals shown by the respondents from different countries. Here national specifics influence the data as well. Stronger intention to form public opinion typical for certain period of media system in Russia is evident, along with a quite low intention to control government activity, or to advocate social changes, or to motivate people (which, to our mind, is linked to weak traditions of civil society and its institutions in Russia). At the same time, the urge towards attracting the audience could be estimated as positive in some cases.

³² URL: <http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/public.htm>

Table 1

	AUS	BRA	BUL	GER	IND	ISR	ROM	RUS	SPA	SWI	TUR	UGA
set the political agenda	25	24	21	21	41	39	27	35	18	24	55	51
influence public opinion	25	24	57	17	48	42	13	62	30	20	73	67
advocate for social change	37	53	28	23	61	49	49	29	44	31	80	87
be detached observer	71	86	40	89	63	58	85	70	82	89	90	79
be watchdog of government	76	89	70	88	81	58	47	57	58	64	91	87
be watchdog of business	67	51	36	72	60	40	25	32	44	55	74	57
support official policies	15	43	18	18	22	10	27	27	29	13	21	78
convey positive image	6	14	4	5	13	9	6	31	6	9	8	30
attract widest audience	40	19	43	36	71	44	31	53	30	38	53	61
provide interesting information	62	67	73	84	72	68	72	64	74	82	55	56
provide political information	79	99	86	98	79	77	79	71	71	95	90	94
motivate people	52	60	63	72	64	50	62	46	61	64	80	77

Percent of respondents saying "extremely" and "very important", N=1185

Social roles typical for the Russian media in general, according to the journalists' viewpoint, are educating, culture shaping, which is realized in the dissemination of values (85%) and in the dissemination of knowledge (65–75%), the role of psychological support for people (60–70%) and a group of social functions – social development (60–65%), channel for social communication (55%), expression of public opinion (40–45%), public criticism (35–40%).

Answering the open question about the significant and important professional standards, Russian journalists most often named:

- objectivity;
- impartiality;
- honesty;
- efficiency;
- responsibility;
- reliability;
- accuracy;
- precision

If all the journalists followed this list and chose these standards for themselves in practice, the situation in Russian journalism would be almost ideal. But it is necessary to take into consideration existing obstacles and discuss the limiting factors.

Another open question presented the most serious factors of influence, such as:

- editorial policy and unofficial censorship;
- time;
- specific of medium (channel);
- policy (in general);
- inner limits

Making an overview of data concerning factors influencing freedom of journalism obtained from the Russian media professionals, it is possible to make several accents.

It is important that the audience has a significant influence upon Russian journalists (Anikina, 2012). More than a half of respondents in Russia estimate that readers, viewers and listeners are very influential, or somewhat influential in terms of professional journalistic freedom. Moreover, the audience studies and the market research are the factors of influence for the journalists. It is notable in contemporary period of Russian media system development, when commercial logic and commercial interests strongly define the situation, and at the same time, when the media market faces deep segmentation based – among other criteria – on concrete and specific audience interests and consumers' demand.

Respect to the source of information is still a characteristic feature of the contemporary Russian media sphere. To obtain the complete picture it would be necessary to find out proper reasons and conditions of this; probably one of them is rooted in the sphere of media law, which, in its turn, also puts some limits on the journalistic freedom, as polls show. Nevertheless, now the source of information appears quite an important actor, which could impose limit of journalists' freedom.

At the same time, society in general does not attract journalists very much. Two thirds of respondents are not concerned about the reaction of

the communities covered. This marks the weakness and vulnerability of the journalistic professional position, on the one hand, and contradicts the perception of the audience, on the other one.

It could be named a remarkable fact and be defined as a positive characteristic of the Russian reality that professional ethics and company standards are the factors of extreme importance, or are considered very influential in the daily journalistic practice. At the same time – as data show – general principles today are more important for wider circles of media persons than the agreements and norms implemented at concrete editorial office.

Typical feature of modern Russian media reality is a strict limitation of daily practice caused by pressing news deadlines – this factor provokes the complaints of the majority of the respondents. Great information flows, strong competition in media market make journalists produce their texts in a shorter time period and causes some tension.

The fact that company management and senior colleagues and editors still remain influential actors seems to be explicable. Looking at the Russian situation in the international context we may fix that media professionals in Russia quite often consider censorship an important source of influence – as their colleagues from Chile, Egypt, Uganda and Israel do (*The Global Journalist in the 21st century*, 2012).

Among the factors of less influence for the Russian journalists is a low interference of friends and relatives or peer colleagues, etc. New technologies also do not create serious barriers for media professionals today. The weak and low influence of professional journalistic associations marked by the respondents in several respects reflects the current situation, when participation in the professional organization sometimes has just a formal character.

It is worth pointing that journalists express no obvious unity concerning censorship – the groups of those whose daily practice is limited by censorship, and those who do not feel its influence are represented quite well according to the data. It is necessary to search for the additional

criteria to clarify the picture. Almost the same situation appears in cases of advertisers' influence. Some respondents do not face any limitation on their side, some point them very influential.

During this poll 14% of Russian journalists mentioned the absence of limits for their professional activity. This level is not very high but could become good starting point for further development of independent journalism, of course only if multiply external factors will facilitate these positive transformations.

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