

JOURNALISM AS A PROFESSION IN THE FIRST DECADES OF THE 21ST CENTURY: THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT

ЖУРНАЛИСТИКА КАК ПРОФЕССИЯ В ПЕРВЫЕ ДЕСЯТИЛЕТИЯ 21 ВЕКА: РОССИЙСКИЙ КОНТЕКСТ

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The new century poses a wide range of research questions and defines new approaches for research, which deal with the specifics of journalism as a field of professional activity, with the characteristics of the professional journalistic community and with the peculiar features of its representatives. The rapid development of the diverse spheres of everyday life leads to a larger scope for research, a formation of new thematic streams and a redefinition of the methodological approaches in studies of professional journalistic culture. This article analyzes journalism as a profession in contemporary Russia. Such an approach will try to fit within the existing sociologic frames. This article is focused on the skills and competencies of modern Russian journalists, their freedom and professional autonomy, and covers the issues of responsibility and ethics of service. The empirical basis of the presented article is constructed with data from an international research project titled “Journalism in change – professional journalistic cultures in Russia, Poland and

Sweden” initiated by Södertörn University (Sweden), granted by the Baltic Foundation in Sweden and realized by scholars from Lomonosov Moscow State University (Russia), Södertörn University (Sweden) and Wroclaw University (Poland) in 2011-2014.

Key words: *journalism as a profession; Russian journalists; professional skills; professional autonomy; responsibility; norms of conduct.*

В первые десятилетия 21 века стремительное развитие различных сфер общественной жизни приводит к расширению исследовательских горизонтов, в частности открывает новые перспективы в изучении профессиональной журналистской культуры. Возникают новые направления исследований и новые подходы, пересмотру подлежат существующие концепции. Данная статья описывает журналистику как профессию в современной России. Эмпирический материал – результаты комплексного международного исследования «Журналистика в изменении – профессиональные журналистские культуры в России, Польше и Швеции», реализованного учеными МГУ имени М. В. Ломоносова, университетов Сёдерторна (Швеция) и Вроцлава (Польша) при финансовой поддержке Балтийского фонда в Швеции, – позволяет говорить о навыках и компетенциях современных российских журналистов, рассматривать вопросы профессиональной независимости, ответственности, описывать проблемы профессиональной этики.

Ключевые слова: *журналистика как профессия; российские журналисты; профессиональные навыки; профессиональная независимость; нормы поведения.*

Frameworks of the research discourse

The Oxford dictionary of sociology defines *profession as a form of organization or a type of work orientation* and names the crucial

characteristics of each profession – “some central regulatory body, a code of conduct, careful management of knowledge in relation to the expertise which constitutes the basis of the profession’s activities, control of members, selection and training of new entrants (Scott and Marshall, 2005). Sociological literature in the Russian-speaking research community offers definitions, which include both the organizational and human dimension of a profession. It is described as a) the profit-oriented labor activity based on theoretic knowledge, empirical experience and practical skills filled in with functional significance and b) as a large group of people joined by a common labor activity (Gritsanov, 2003).

It seems reasonable to combine the aforementioned visions of *profession* because this makes it possible to discuss its typological features and – at the same time – to rely on empirical data, which reflect the complexity of concrete professionals’ daily practices. D. McQuail in his recent work “Journalism and society” considers *journalism as a profession* a unifying approach in a great variety of already existing research approaches (cultural, economic, political, social etc.) aiming to study the phenomenon of journalism as a whole. Following his idea, let us analyze this concept as it appears in the modern Russian context – the main criteria being the basic skills of media professionals to form community, the social status of the profession, professional autonomy, and the norms and standards of professional conduct (McQuail, 2013).

The social profile and the structure of the profession

As it was written (Anikina, 2012), one problem in the Russian context is the problem of figures. Calculations from the mid-2000s describe approx. 150 000 journalists working in the media industry. It is possible that the journalistic community is divided into homogeneous parts according to medium type. The proportion of registered media numbers

was kept secret during the conducted survey. Official statistics from the reports of the Federal Agency on Press and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation show that before the survey (in 2011) there were more than 90 000 registered and re-registered media: 67 727 printed media, 21 234 audiovisual media and 1 564 news agencies. Within the frames of “Journalism in change” project professionals representing diverse media types were studied as presented in Table 1. The sample was constructed from 500 practicing journalists working in 6 federal districts (out of 8 that Russia has) excluding the Siberian and North Caucasian federal districts (respondents live in the Central, Southern, North-Western, Volga (Privolzhskiy), Ural and Far Eastern regions of Russia)

Table 1

Media type

	Number	Per cent
Print media	335	67
TV and radio	105	21
Online media	40	8
News agencies	10	2
Production companies	10	2
Total	500	100

Respondents represented different types of media companies as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

In what type of media company are you currently working?

	Number	Per cent
National newspaper/big city newspaper	110	22
Specialized magazine	66	13,2
Regional newspaper/local newspaper	63	12,6
Popular/weekly magazine	58	11,6
TV-channel – public service/state	43	8,6
Online publishing company	40	8
TV-channel – commercial	38	7,6
Other newspaper/magazine	21	4,2
Radio-channel – commercial	18	3,6
Production company for radio/tv/film	10	2
News agency	10	2
Free newspaper	8	1,6
Production company for print	8	1,6
Radio-channel – public service/state	7	1,4
Total	500	100

Men and women from three age groups were studied in this project. The proportion of age groups in relation to the gender of the respondents is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Age and gender of Russian journalists

Age	Female (% in relevant age group)	Male (%in relevant age group)	Total (% of all)	Number
- 35 years	70,9	29,1	69,4	347
36-50 years	59,8	40,2	23,4	117
51- years	47,2	52,8	7,2	36

The gender transformation within the journalistic profession was discussed in the last few years – the profession is evidently becoming a female one. This is seen also in the gender balance of practicing media professionals.

Table 4

Are (Have) any of your relatives working (worked) as journalists?

	Number	Per cent
No	355	70
Wife/husband	68	14
Parents	39	8
Other close relatives	4	1
Children	34	7
Total	500	100

It is possible to conclude that in general, journalism is not a hereditary profession or a family job in Russia (see Table 4) – 10% of journalists are linked to their profession through a husband or wife while less people declare that they have parents or some other close relative in journalism. Two-thirds of the respondents confirmed that they did not have any relatives among journalists. The obtained information indicates that there is an absence in the succession of professional development or an absence of inheritance in such career building models. At the same time, however, this could indicate that journalists in modern Russia could potentially create their own professional strategy without any prescribed pattern.

*Table 5***What kind of main employment do you have today?**

	Number	Per cent
Regular employment in a media company	364	72,8
Freelance/your own company	77	15,4
Temporary employment	54	10,9
Temporary job agency	1	0,2
Other	4	0,7
Total	500	100

Following the proposed sociologic scheme of profession description, it is possible to define such formal characteristics of the profession as forms of employment spread among journalists in Russia. The conducted study clarifies that new forms of employment continue developing in our country (Table 5). The Russian journalistic community still stays quite traditional – the majority of respondents (69%) declare that they have regular employment within a media company. Freelance is spreading actively. Only every tenth respondent has temporary employment working within the frames of concrete projects or replacing colleagues. The most atypical method for finding a job in journalism in Russia is to use job agencies.

As the data show the majority of Russian media professionals have regular employment and work hard in their newsroom (Table 6).

*Table 6***How many hours do you work as a journalist
in the course of an average week?**

	Number	Per cent	Average working day (hours/week)
Full time job	341	68,2	45,7
Part time job	159	31,8	19,1

Two-thirds have full-time jobs and spend a bit more time at work than is prescribed by Russian labour law (40 hours per week). Those who have part time jobs (more that 30%) spend normally half a day occupied with professional duties. It is worth mentioning that the general results of this field are confirmed by other survey data.

Skills, training and knowledge in journalism in Russia

McQuail names training and skills as important criteria in defining a *profession* (McQuail, 2013). By estimating training and knowledge level as important features of profession, we can add that the majority of Russian journalists possess a high level of education (Table 7 and 8).

Table 7

What is your highest level of education?

	Number (N=500)	Per cent
University or other higher education	478	95,6
Secondary school	22	4,4
Primary school	0	0

Table 8

Do you have a special education in journalism?

	Number (N=500)	Per cent
Yes, on an academic level	373	74,6
No	81	16,2
Yes, on a non-academic level	30	6,0
Yes, professional training in media	16	3,2

This data is supported by other similar research projects results (Pasti, 2011). The results confirm that media representatives without a specialized education in journalism and mass communication do not form a significant part of the journalistic community.

Under modern conditions, skills are quite often seen through the lenses of technological and technical skills, obtained by people and demonstrated in their daily work. The previous decades made the concept of *multiskilling* one of the most discussed and acute in the fields of journalists’ work. According to the “Journalism in change” project, Russian journalists are not multiskilled in the complete sense of this term; in many cases, they do not name themselves *multiskilled* and express diverse attitudes towards this characteristic (Table 9).

Table 9

**Attitudes in relation to “multiskilling” in the journalistic work
(mean on a scale 1-5, 1 – “not important”, 5 – “very important”)**

	Mean	Number of answers
Multiskilling means more space for creativity	3,64	490
Muiltiskilling gives more power to the individual journalist	3,56	478
In the future, more journalists will be multiskilled	3,53	477
Journalists in my media organization are expected to be multiskilled	3,34	494
I feel like a multiskilled reporter	3,18	490
Multiskilling will decrease the quality of journalism	3	473

Calculations made on the basis of these obtained results suggest that generally one journalist works for 1,5 platforms in order to present his or her text (TV, radio, print press, online medium etc.). Journalists tend to agree with the idea that the ability to use diverse technologies and to work for different platforms helps them discover the creative potential of a

concrete professional and gives them the chance for personal development. In addition, it is possible to predict the multiskilled future of the profession.

The idea of a *universal journalist* realizes itself more evidently in the allocation of professional roles taking place in the Russian media (Table 10).

Table 10

Professional roles in the newsroom

	Number	Per cent in each role
Reporter	267	53,4
Editor	155	31
Commentator	97	19,4
Subeditor/layout	81	16,2
Online editor	63	12,6
Editorial writer/columnist	52	10,4
Photographer/cameraman	47	9,4
Researcher	34	6,8
News anchor	29	5,8
Producer(radio/tv)	26	5,2
Working with ads	21	4,2
Economy/management in the company	10	2
Other roles	1	0,2
Total	883	176,6

* Each respondent could give maximum three alternatives. Total 500 respondents.

Quite often, each person in the newsroom plays more than one concrete role. The spectrum of the studies included mostly so-called traditional roles typical for classic media. More often than not, respondents work as reporters (53,4%) and one-third work as editors. Links with the segment of online media cause quite a significant amount of professionals to work as online editors (12,6%). Generally speaking, the division of duties in the standard newsroom in Russia is still close to the classical one described in the theoretical works on journalism and reflected in Russian law on mass media – the main direction

of these works is creative, with texts, editorial work and organizational activity (Prokhorov, 2007, Law of Russian Federation on Mass Media, 1991).

Journalism as a profit-oriented profession

The inconsistency of modern Russian journalism, to a certain extent, demonstrates itself in the discussion of financial matters, which are traditionally quite a sensitive and difficult topic in sociological studies.

Obviously it is difficult to compare the financial conditions of journalists working in different media, located in diverse regions of the country. Nevertheless, it seems possible to make some generalizations (Table 11).

Table 11

Is it possible to manage on with the income you receive as a journalist?

(one alternative)	Number (N=500)	Per cent
Yes, I can provide all necessary things	200	40,0
Yes, I can survive	108	21,6
Yes, I can do well and provide extra things	83	16,6
No, I have to get money from other jobs	70	14,0
No, journalism is only a minor part of my income	39	7,8

These results demonstrate that journalistic activity provides professionals with sources to live, providing a sufficient income to a significant portion of the studied Russian media professionals. Only one-fifth of the respondents estimated incomes from journalistic work as a small part of their incomes in general. For the rest, journalism allows them to survive. For a small amount, it is a way to obtain extra income (16,6%).

It is remarkable that at the same time, in general, respondents do not suggest that money is the main reason for them to enter this profession (the average score of motivation for this profession is not the highest but it is significant was estimated 4,07 out of 5).

Journalists do not consider money the main attractor to enter into the profession. But at the same time they describe this factor as important when choosing a concrete media company to work for. This can likely be explained by the difference between general estimations and individual decisions.

The mission of the profession and the social functions of journalism

Modern Russian journalists adapted several principles typical of Western journalistic cultures. Data clarify that objectivity and impartiality as professional standards have high scores among others (Table 12).

Table 12

How important are the following professional duties for a journalist in your country?

(mean on a scale 1-5, 1 – “not important”, 5 – “very important”)		
Journalist should...	Mean	Number of answers
...be a neutral reporter	4,38	496
...provide information objectively	4,30	487
...stand free of special interests	4,26	488
...bring forward various opinions	4,26	492
...criticize injustice	4,02	492
...educate the public	3,96	483
...represent diverse social groups	3,88	486
...stimulate new ideas	3,79	485
...simplify and explain	3,53	488
...control public authorities	3,50	486
...influence public opinions	3,49	492
...tell the truth regardless of the consequences	3,28	493
...mobilize people to act	3,18	475
...ensure that the media business does well	3,17	482
...investigate government claims	3,03	486
...provide entertainment	2,81	456

The idea of journalism as a segment of creative industries was confirmed during the conducted study. The task to formulate new ideas was marked as significant by respondents.

The control of authorities, social participation and mobilization were not strongly supported by Russian journalists during the study. To certain extent these results are confirmed by other projects' data (Hanitzsch et al., 2010) and described earlier (Anikina, Johansson, 2013). At the same time, journalists are not ready to educate the public or to provide entertainment – the first option is in the middle of the list, the second is the last according to the data. The intention to educate society is weaker than it was during previous decades when this niche was better developed than currently. Today we see a gradual revival of enlightening and educational media but this revival has not seriously changed the professional consciousness of journalists. Yet, it is not as brightly seen in the respondents' evaluations as it could be. The role of entertainment's weak position is possible due to a kind of tiredness from the light, entertaining character of journalism of the previous decades in Russia.

Ethics of the profession

Theoretically speaking, journalism as a profession was realized as a socially oriented activity that should attract people with a reflected and evident social-civic position. The social functions of journalism and mass media are studied carefully and described in details. The current situation in Russian society makes us look at political interests, as well as the social and political activity of Russian journalists.

It is possible to see here, which is typical for all respondents and described in methodological literature, a fear to answer so-called sensitive questions. But this appears a bit strange if we speak about such public and socially oriented people as journalists. However, a quick glance back to the history of the country and its citizens could give some explanations of this unwillingness to discuss political questions.

Such a position does not exclude the opportunity for journalists to be a part of the political process in Russia. More than a half of the respondents (50,2%) see the chance to become active in the political sphere (Table 13).

Table 13

**Is it an alternative for you to be active in politics
(voluntary or as employed)?**

	No	Perhaps	Yes	Don't know
Number (N=500)	209	193	58	40
Per cent	41,8	38,6	11,6	8

This fact reveals the debate about media as the space for symbolic capital existence, the field where it is possible to obtain and convert the capital of publicity (Fomicheva, 2012). This also makes us consider what is the core and what are the goals of journalistic activity, as they are perceived by media professionals. The idea of journalism as a social lift, described in different works and studies (e.g. in the articles of S. Pasti), is closely connected to the opportunity to enter politics discovered in the Russian segment of the “Journalism in change” project, which deals with the future seen by Russian journalists (see further paragraphs).

The dominance of relativism as the base of perception and reflection on the world of journalism in Russia leads to a weakening of internal relations in the professional community. The necessity to elaborate on the system of common ethical rules and standards is described by Russian journalists as insignificant – an average mean is 3,71 out of 5. This score is the highest in the survey segment dedicated to the ethics and politics of journalism, but it is not high if we look at it separately, and it is lower than in Sweden and Poland. Previous studies of the journalistic community gave similar results – traces of relativism ideology were discovered in the Russian section of the “Worlds of Journalism” study (Hanitzsch et al., 2010). It is possible that soon the shift to new ethical paradigm described by experts (The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics, 2009) becomes evident also in Russia.

Autonomy and independence in journalism as a profession

In the modern international discourse autonomy is interpreted as a crucial part for the professionalization of journalism (Hallin, Mancini, 2004). The results of Russian surveys prove that Russian journalists feel themselves independent in the main aspects of daily work in such aspects as the selection of plots (69,2% of respondents feel free to define the angle to present the story), the stories' coverage and managing personal working time. According to the obtained information, less freedom is given to Russian journalists in choosing a story to cover. In general respondents to certain degree demonstrate the attitudes and changes in attitudes of Russian society as a whole (Levada Center, 2013) – some of the feel independent is several spheres of professional activity.

Among the factors influencing the daily journalistic work state, the influence on the media system and journalism is scored 2,79 of 5 (Table 14). The influence of political affiliation on subjects' selection is stronger according to Russian journalists' evaluations (3,26 out of 5).

Table 14

Different factors influence the selection of subjects in the daily work of your media organization. How could you evaluate the significance of the following factors in the work on your news organization?

(Give your opinion on a scale 1-5, 1 - “insignificant”, 5 - “very significant”)	Mean	Number of answers
The editorial policy of the media company	4,13	493
Audience interest	4,02	494
Professional interest of the journalist	3,89	492
Needs and interests of society	3,7	477
The political connection (affiliation) of the media company	3,26	467
Those who advertise in the media	2,95	439
Strong political actors outside the media company	2,79	447
Economical power outside the media company (big companies etc.)	2,53	424
Other	3,05	22

The reasons for a dependent position, which journalism has today, are quite often complicated and different. Several actors within and outside the professional journalistic community play their roles. The question about influence posed during the survey reveals some contradictions in journalists' consciousness. Respondents perfectly see problems connected to the commercial nature of modern media production such as threats descending from journalistic circles and the State (Table 15).

Table 15

**The independence of journalism can be influenced by different factors.
How do you evaluate the influence of the following factors?**

(Give your opinion on a scale 1-5, 1 - "insignificant", 5 - "very significant")	Mean	Number of answers
The owners demand for profits	3,86	495
Weak professional ethics	3,79	488
State influence (laws and ownership)	3,78	491
Political influence in media companies	3,65	485
Increasing work tempo	3,56	494
Threats against individual journalists	3,34	482
Advertisers influence on content	3,3	487
Source activity (PR/lobbyists)	3,2	462
Foreign ownership	2,8	469

Leading positions belong to such factors as the commercial demand of media owners, lack of common ethic standards and state influence. This set of factors is explainable in a certain sense. The state fixes the rules and proposes juridical frames of professional journalistic activity (it is hardly possible to underestimate this factor on both general and concrete aspects). If we look at the state as a media owner the situation would be clear as well. It is worthwhile to stress that as the survey shows, journalists are worried about ethics. Further analysis shows that this reflection in many cases does not go far and does not lead to any consequences such as the formation of stable and respected codes or their further realization.

The same situation was discovered by Finnish researchers and named the paradox of “marriage of liberalism and authoritarianism” (Pasti, Nordenstreng 2013: 244). It is notable that some coincidence with other previous studies is obvious here.

The paradox concerning the commercial orientation of media companies in conditions of strong state influence realizes itself in the hierarchy of the obstacles journalists face in media companies (Table 16). As well decreasing the power of advertisers, as seen in the data, the source of information unexpectedly appears as a weak factor here.

Table 16

How often do journalists at your media company face the following obstacles?

(Give your opinion on a scale 1-5, 1 – “never”, 5 – “very often”)	Mean	Number of answers
Economic interests of the media company	3,02	454
Limits in the editorial policy of the media company	2,85	479
Political interests of the owners of the media company	2,7	446
Pressure from political actors outside the media company	2,51	429
Pressure from the sources of information	2,5	441
Pressure from advertisers	2,46	434
Other	0,3	447

In reviewing the described results it is possible to say that it is quite early to speak about de-professionalization in the wider context of debates about future of journalism (Nygren, Degtereva, Pavlikova, 2010; Curry, 2013). On the contrary, the conducted study lets us see journalism as profession in the modern interpretation of this term and define specific features of the profession representative in Russia. Some shifts in working with information, professional epistemology and journalism ethics are seen, while some contradictions in the perceptions of personal conditions and general professional contexts could be discovered. To a certain extent, a negative prognosis about journalism seems

reasonable. However a generally professional approach is still an adequate instrument to analyze journalism in Russia.

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