RUSSIAN MEDIA AND THE INTERNET

РОССИЙСКИЕ МЕДИА И ИНТЕРНЕТ

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The Internet that changed the shape of media at a global, national and regional level influenced the Russian media as well. Despite the economic crisis the Russian media advertising indexes showed positive dynamics and Internet advertising market since 2010 demonstrates the faster growing in comparison with advertising in the "old" media. Russia gains the first place in Europe in the number of Internet users (68,0 million as for June, 30 2012) and is rated as intermediately penetrated country (Internet World Stats. Usage and Population Statistics, 2012). The Internet has become the third resource for obtaining news after television and print media for the whole population (18+0), and the second — for the younger generation in the age group of 18—24 (Osobennosti potrebleniya informacii: stolici vs drugie goroda Rossii, 2012). Two Russian media websites — www.kp.ru and www.ria.ru got into European top 10 in this category by the number of unique visitors. These data drive media researchers to move further for comprehensive understanding of online media sites and their affects on traditional media practices, experiments with new media platforms forcing them to newsroom convergent solutions, new platform integrations, interaction with audiences, and alternative agenda setting.

The paper covers historical perspective of Russian Internet media, and describes its three periods of development; it distinguishes two media groups and several sub-groups, their basic and extra features as part of media system, and figures out local and global trends that sooner or later affect development of Russian media industry and determine a next stage in online media development.

Key words: *Internet; Runet; online media; hypertext; multimedia; interactivity; user generated content.*

Интернет, изменивший конфигурацию СМИ на глобальном, национальном и региональном уровнях, оказал серьезное влияние и на российские средства массовой информации. Несмотря на экономический кризис российские рекламные индексы продемонстрировали положительную динамику, а рынок интернет-рекламы, начиная с 2010 г. развивался более высокими темпами роста по сравнению с рекламой в «старых» СМИ. Сегодня Россия занимает первое место в Европе по числу интернет-пользователей (68,0 млн. на 30 июня 2012 года) и оценивается экспертами как страна с умеренным индексом проникновения Интернета (Internet World Stats. Usage and Population Statistics, 2012). Интернет стал для населения (18+) третьим источником новостей после телевидения и печатных средств массовой информации и вторым — для молодого поколения в возрастной группе 18—24 (Osobennosti potrebleniya informacii: stolici vs drugie goroda Rossii, 2012). Помимо этого, два российских медийных сайта www.kp.ru и www.ria.ru попали в первую десятку европейских сайтов в этой категории по количеству уникальных посетителей.

Эти данные заставляют медиа исследователей продолжать свои дальнейшие изыскания над выяснением природы интернет-СМИ, их взаимодействием с традиционными практиками средств массовой информации, изучать эксперименты редакций на новых медиа-платформах, конвергентные решения создания текстов и новые форматы взаимодействия с аудиторией, приводящие к созданию альтернативных повесток дня.

В статье автор описывает российские интернет-СМИ в исторической перспективе, выделяет три периода их развития, предлагает вариант их деления на две медиа-группы и несколько подгрупп, рассматривает их основные и дополнительные функциональные характеристики как части системы средств массовой информации, выделяет их локальные и глобальные свойства, которые рано или поздно повлияют на развитие российской медиа индустрии и определят дальнейший этап развития онлайн-СМИ.

Ключевые слова: *Интернет; Рунет; интернет-СМИ; гипертекст; мультимедиа; интерактивность; контент, созданный потребителями.*

Online media in Russia: periods of development

In 2011 the amendment to the main Federal Media Law legalized the definition of online media that briefly sounds as "a website in the Internet registered as mass medium in accordance with this law" (Zakon "O sredstvah massovoi informacii", 2011). According to the law the registration as media is ex gratia and not mandatory. Those websites which are not registered legally do not belong to media. Debates on what is mass media in the Internet (Internet-SMI: Teoriya i praktika, 2010) have finished.

The short historical account of media in Runet (the Russian Internet segment) could be described in terms of three periods.

The first started in March, 1995 when *Uchitelskaya Gazeta* jumped online (Gorny, 2007). As opposed to other emerged media sites being just presentations of their "parent" publications from the very beginning it exported the full package of information from a print edition to a digital platform. In 1996 *National News Service* conducted online transmission of the presidential election. Although it was available only for 5,000 users and mostly from abroad this event was the next step to demonstrate

media consumers and media producers broad opportunities of a new channel. By 1998 several other newspapers have made timid experiments in digital environment mostly by computer enthusiasts.

The second period (1999—2004) was marked by appearance of several content outlets capable to compete with traditional media. Among them there were *gazeta.ru, lenta.ru, strana.ru* and other media content projects that positioned themselves as online media which did not have equivalents in offline and spread information only via the Internet. The audience gradually got used to them as a full-scale information source. Khodorkovsky, Gusinsky and other media moguls were general investors, and Fund for Efficient Politics was the main developer.

During this period the *RosBusinessConsulting (RBC)* success story turned around. RBC opened its server in 1995 and during the financial crisis this Internet agency which was not well known to the digital natives and much less to the general public started online publishing the most demanded information about currency rate changes. From this very moment *www.rbc.ru* became the most visited site specialized in finance. The chosen information strategy led to the fact that the amount of visitors nearly equals the circulation of a daily newspaper.

The financial crisis pushed out *gazeta.ru:* at the end of February 1999 it published a beta-version and since March 1999 started production on a regular basis. *gazeta.ru* was the first medium which called itself an online newspaper. Within several months ratings of *gazeta.ru* reached leading positions in Runet that signaled an appearance of the formation of an extra online media sector alongside traditional media — print, TV, radio.

Low-cost production turned out to be attractive for investors and within 1999 a number of media outlets were opened. Some of them appeared to be successful; others survived for a short time but then were closed down because of their unprofitability (Internet dlya zhurnalistov, 2001).

The next five year period (2005—2010) was marked by an open discussion about the crisis in traditional media, and especially in print ones. The concern was provoked by positive dynamics of online readership which was significantly larger than the increase in sales of traditional

newspapers. According to *World Newspaper Association* within the five-year period of time beginning from 1999 the number of Internet users increased by 350%, while the sales from print circulation grew by only by 4,75%. Along with the fall of circulation figures and the losses of advertisers, which were marked in all countries, it proved the presence of a serious crisis in the print and newspapers market (Internet-SMI: Teoriya i praktika, 2010).

Offline journalists all over the world were concerned about the new conditions of media consumption mostly by young audiences, active usage of portable digital devices; growing popularity of individual communication as well as participation in blogosphere, social networking, usage of social containers); and of classified ads that step by step moved from print media to the Internet (Sredstva massovoi informacii Rossii, 2011).

Taking into account these challenges many media sites reconstructed their online departments and newsrooms, which made an opportunity to gain more independence and the right to pack content according to online rules.

During its short history online media proved their substantiality as a part of Russian media system. They possess the whole package of classical media features along with original features which has a special social niche different from the old media audiences not that numerous but younger, richer, and more educated. Additionally they develop to be more flexible in periodicity; boundless in content distribution; reach smaller segmented groups; focus attention on information zones which are characterized by both universal and special topics (Internet-SMI: Teoriya i praktika, 2010).

By the end of this development period online media started off full exercise special digital essentials like hypertext, multimedia opportunities; interactivity, social networking and information exchange with the audiences. Here is the list of top media sites that by 2010 explored digital potential to the full extent*: RIA Novosti (www.rian.ru), Kommersant (www.kommersant.ru), Vedomosti (www.vedomosti.ru), Komsomolskaya Pravda (www.kp.ru), Ekho Moskvy (www.echo.msk.ru), lenta.ru (www.lenta.ru).*

Online media: two groups

Due to the fact that Runet media sector is too young it is early to talk about a clear typological structure. However, we can distinguish several online media groups using a number of clear measures.

The structure of Internet media could be determined in connection with offline in two different groups. One emerged as a result of traditional media change-over to a new digital platform, the other — as initially digital and focusing only on the Internet as a distribution system for information. In another terminology: incumbents, or established organizations, and insurgents, as new firms (Kung, Picard, Towse, 2008).

Newspapers were pioneers to move online. We mentioned *Uchitelskaya Gazeta* — the first traditional newspaper which jumped to Internet without any pressure. Later followers were *Izvestiya, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Argumenty i Fakty,* and all other national newspapers. Nowadays you cannot find any of them without a digital version.

From another originally Internet group that emerged initially on the basis of web-technologies and functioned only in the Internet environment we can name *gazeta.ru, lenta.ru* and other online outlets.

Experts divide the first group in three clusters (Sredstva massovoi informacii Rossii, 2011):

1. "Clones" or equivalent copies of traditional media. These media are still the majority in online catalogues especially in local and niche sector. The number of titles is close to the officially registered media, as no respectable print media outlet, radio station or TV channel could go now without a site in the net (Sredstva massovoi informacii Rossii, 2011).

2. "Hybrids" or modified online versions of traditional media. They emerged on the basis of their offline prototypes, but instead of duplication the content they create extra packages of information in order to reach wider audiences. New sections, hypertext links, multimedia solutions, interactive options — with the help of such various transmission schemes compared to parental media, these editions save the same typological frames and the same brand. This group is bounded mostly with

mainstream media, national papers *(Izvestiya, Rossiyskaya Gazeta,* etc.*)* and broadcasting channels *(VGTRK, NTV, Radio Mayak, etc.*).

3. Online outlets independent from offline with their own system of sections, news update dynamics (some publications passed to a continuous 24x7 content update), substantial multimedia and interactive solutions. These sites represent the third model of traditional media web-versions which is bound to the offline "parent", however uses all the possibilities of the online environment (*Argumenty i Fakty, Ekho Moskvy* are good examples).

The second group includes media projects that emerged in the Internet and do not have offline prototypes. Trying to find their profile they build their own business strategies and unlike the first group take leading positions in Runet online ratings. Some of them openly state their commercial interests and promise to reach their payback point. In this group experts distinguish two clusters: information portals —multifunctional Internet services, which imply a variety of topics, genres and services along with the never ending flow of information; and sites of digital newspapers or magazines with a larger number of analytical articles than the news stories *(slon.ru)*.

Extra measures for media sorting

At the end of 2010 a new group of media that launches its projects both online and offline appeared. This media type includes such projects as the radio station *BFM* and site *BFM.ru*, the magazine *Snob* and its site *snob.ru,* etc. The emerging new type of both online and offline media is a signal to put a question about new measures for media classification sorting.

The popularity of such publications is also influenced by the fact that old media are not capable any more of satisfying the needs of new audiences for "24x7" information. The Internet practically destroys the established understanding of periodicity of the editions. The rhythm of

updates is unique in every editorial office; however, there are no technical limits for the frequency of updating. In an ideal situation the new information block should appear on the screen while the event is evolving, online.

The geographical reach of a publication has also been reassessed. In the Internet the notions of time and distance do not work, information becomes transboundary. The majority of sites including media are open for people from all over the world. The charge for content, technical problems with Internet access and the language of communication are the main barriers to information. In fact, online media with the Russian language potentially reach not only Russian citizens but also Russian speaking people from all over the world. In some cases the amount of visits from abroad could reach even 30–40% of daily visits *(www.kp.ru, www.rian.ru)*. The globalization of audience dictates the character of the content, rhythm of updating, and time when different users in different time zones become active.

The character of information dissemination via the global computer network allows content producers to reassess the parameters of national and local press crucial to old media. In the Internet national media co-exist with local information. However, the character of consuming shifts towards external audience – users from other regions. We may say that the Internet capabilities compensate two vectors – the centripetal and the inclination towards regionalization.

Internet publications treat differently the exclusiveness of the information product. For example, the equivalent copies ("clones") use the same texts and selections of related articles as their offline parental editions. In an organizational perspective that means that media organizations do not need special staff working online and gathering and presenting of information is organized by using offline media principles – traditional content solutions, frequency of refreshing information, etc.

The particularity of the information model for "clones" lies in the fact that they publish information simultaneously with parental editions or with a slight delay. Moreover this kind of sequence (first print, then

online) is crucial for managerial decisions and is based on the fear to lose steady readers. But gradually media managers come to understanding that this strategy is not efficient: according to sociological surveys Internet audience does not match with the audience of old media. In Runet more and more sites publish their online content on a separate schedule with permanent updating. The goal of editorial managers in this case is to attract new consumers and not to lose the old ones who for some reason do not buy print editions any more or do not switch on either TV or radio (Televidenie glazami telezritelei, 2012).

Modified versions of traditional media ("hybrids") have their own approaches. They don't copy their parent editions precisely, but publish online versions following their own structural rules and time schedule.

How do they integrate? Firstly, the materials are adapted for screen reading. Site creators understand that long texts are hard to perceive, that the main page should contain previews and leads to the stories, that headlines should be informative and include key words which help information search. Secondly, unlimitedness of space should be taken into account and articles could be supplied with extra related topics; information is updated online; hypertext links are included to enlarge the information field. Thirdly, clear and simple navigation system with original sections and stories. Fourthly, editorial office as separate department with own financing and organization scheme, adapted to online publishing.

Online media content balances between general and specialized, focused interest. Media that form online top-lists are mostly of general interest profile and could belong to both groups – online versions of "old" media and original online media (*gazeta.ru, lenta.ru,* etc.). However, we can find specialized and niche editions in the net as well. They are focused on audiences with special interests (finances, car industry, sports, religion, gender topics, etc.).

Digital technologies allow publishers to be more flexible in publication structure and composition. That is why online version of traditional media with a settled content scheme may transform and include extra

sections devoted to current events or topics of segment audience interest represent social groups, people sharing the same interests, etc.

Publications which are initially specialized show another trend. To attract a larger audience segments they expand covered topics. For example, *RosBusinessConsulting* includes in its information menu of general interest news and typologically became both financial and general interest online edition.

One of online media particularities is new possibilities for communication with audience. Almost all of them use the function of social networking, interactive discussions and forums for regular communication with readers. Shapes are different: informing and promotion in networks, chats based on focused interests, discussions concerning a given topic or a certain article, ratings, votes. Some media create their own virtual clubs, readers' communities for communication not only with the editorial office, but also with each other. Finding a steady reader is the most grounded answer to the challenges of the competition with "old" media.

Modernization features of online media

Media sector of Runet is one of the most rapidly developing information fields. The characteristics of the new channel such as openness, non-limited access to information and accessibility for all population layers, interactivity and enhanced speed of information distribution, hypertext (the possibility to expand information in-depth) as well as multimedia are sure to contribute. The geographic position of the country, the spread of its territory and the remoteness of some regions also influence these development prospects.

But there is a number digital divide factors restraining developments which include the lack of broadband access to the Internet, the undeveloped system of electronic payments, poor equipment and low technical culture of society as well as rather high prices for Internet services. The

development of the sector is also limited because of the lack of legal base in the field, the lack of respect to copyrighting, and poor personal data protection mechanisms.

However, despite the objective difficulties the dynamics of Internet usage in Russia is growing positively and contributes to consumers' demand for online information. This fact encourages renovation processes in Russian digital media. Editorial offices especially in business and general interest sectors regularly consider their sites to be not only an additional channel of information but as independent projects separated from its digital version of the parent edition and giving users new possibilities of information consumption.

Below we specify modernization features that appeared in leading online media such as *RIA Novosti, Vedomosti, Kommersant*, and others (Internet-SMI: Teoriya i praktika, 2010).

The emergence of constantly updated online newsfeed becomes a required component for media sites' structure. In online newsrooms deadlines are designed with regard to demands of the users who want to get information 24 hours 7 days per week. This formula is the main principle to online newsroom managers and is used not only to breaking news coverage.

Online content is regularly constructed for various different electronic devices – mobile and smart phones, tablets and other mobile gadgets *(www.vedomosti.ru, www.kommersant.ru, www.ria.ru,* etc.*)*.

Online content is packed for multimedia platforms which is probably one of the most serious novelties in Russian media. This fact proves that Russian professionals as their foreign counterparts think about new information strategies for attracting audiences with new practices for the consumption of information (*www.ria.ru, www.kp.ru*, etc.).

Content managers pay more attention to interactivity of their sites for both levels: content production and content consumption as well. The new channel allows to personalize the content with regard to the needs of the user who chooses stories according to his or her interests and has the possibility to work with the content by means of comments, ques-

tions, creating their own content (posting video, photos, etc.). Exploiting of user generated content is one of the main online media achievements which in some cases are considered as equal to that created by journalists. Such forms of co-working with audiences are materialized by means of different related services such as social networking, emails, online interviews, blogs, forums, voting and so on. Surveys and ratings are used for defining social position and preferences of all the site users. Forums are used for discussion of different issues; blogs make possible communication between different representatives of the audience. Recently *Facebook* and *Twitter* services have been also included in the list of editorial communication tools. We can find successful examples in *RIA Novosti* site *www.youreporter.ru* which in 2010 was awarded one of the main National prizes of Runet.

New conditions for media to work online oblige editorial offices to operate carefully with audiences, study their tastes, information preferences, behavior patterns. Russian experts advise media companies to distinguish precisely their audience niche, understand their demographic parameters, social profile, life style and habits, and special features of their media behavior. Several companies, national ones and units of global, work in the Russian Federation in the field of custom market Internet research and offer their services, among them there are *TNS Global (www.tns.global.ru), GFK-Rus' (www.gfk.ru), FOM (www.fom.ru), Levada Center (www.levada.ru),* etc.

There are also several global trends that would sooner or later affect Russian media industry and will distinguish the next stage in online media development.

The first one concerned content monetization. Several units all over the world announced charging users for digital content. However, according to some experts content monetization faces serious difficulties connected with reluctance of young users to pay for the content. Teenagers consume increasingly more media products, but they are not ready to pay for them, the report of *Morgan Stanley Research Europe* (Sredstva massovoi informacii Rossii, 2011) says.

The second one could probably arise in the local Russian press as it happened in Britain where batch of sites were launched all over the country to serve needs of hyper local communities. The authors of the project state that this idea is focused on the local inhabitants — ordinary people, who would be able to create their profiles, publish news and use websites as photo and video stocks, form groups for discussion, exchange comments and files, send emails to each other. It is assumed that these sites will be open also to business communities and advertisers as well as to ordinary people (Internet-SMI: Teoriya i praktika, 2010). If it happens in Runet such kind of sites may become serious competitors to local newspapers.

Another trend demonstrates that Internet original media become very attractive for professional journalists. All start-ups that appeared during financial crisis of 2008–2009 become interesting to advertisers and create serious competitive conditions for traditional media. For example, in 2009 a new online media project *slon.ru (www.slon.ru)* announced in the statement that it intended to compete with print media in the field of comments and analytical articles that had always been a prerogative of the quality press. Editorial article which described in its mission a comparison between online and print media stated: "Almost all our journalists, designers and photo editors are former employees of print media. For most of them the work in *slon.ru* is their first online experience. This is a voluntary decision of the project. We hope to transfer some methods which are more characteristic for the print editions. We would also like to demonstrate to our colleagues from the print media that the borderline between the things they do and online journalism has faded".

The next challenge is the influence of news business mainstream by information created by citizen journalists. Their emergence is connected with the users' desire not only to receive news, but also to write, comment, form communities, discuss actual topics and form their own agenda following their own interests. The possibility to participate in content production — this is the main effect of the revolutionary phenomenon, which appeared due to transparency, interactive possibilities and democratic potential of the Internet as communication and information plat-

form, where anybody could publish posts, comments etc. This phenomenon is widely used by the steady Internet users − for example, active bloggers from the popular *LiveJournal*.

Publications from blogosphere influence media mainstream but user generated content (UGC) is totally different from regular media content because do not represent results of professional journalistic work − to generate a verified information. The penetration of citizen journalism into media content is more and more vivid during breaking news, crisis situations, and when the access to information for some reasons is limited. The well known examples in Russian media are connected with the bomb attacks in Moscow underground, accident at the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric power station, the so-called color revolutions in the post-Soviet countries and other events and stories when peoples' voices participated in agenda setting.

Although professional media in Russia use bloggers' postings and encourage bloggers to contribute as authors and participants of communication, the quality of their posts is criticized by the journalism community. One of the main arguments in favor of the traditional media is the verified data and for that reason the trust of the audience is higher. That is why bloggers who are struggling for the attention of the audience try to improve results of their work, and create their own media projects which pose high standards to the quality of texts *(www.chascor.ru)*.

The competition between professional journalists and bloggers shifts to the media business sphere. There are cases when active content production in social networks was blocked in order to prevent competition with traditional media. We can name examples in the sphere of sports media where the distribution of photo and video created by users during sport events could be a serious competitor to professional journalism information. On the other hand, collaboration with bloggers and payments for their content has become a common managerial practice of media organizations.

However, the most significant trend of the recent years is the growth of the online advertising market and the afflux of advertisers into the Internet environment. Since 2010 it demonstrated the faster growing in comparison

to "old" media and increased (+56%) compared to TV (+18%), and print (+6%) (Rossiiskaya periodicheskaya pechat': sostoyanie, tendencii i perspektivy razvitiya, 2012). However, the online advertising market of Runet has serious problems connected with the fact that advertisers measure the efficiency of the sites using only quantitative indicators of the traffic. This fact creates favorable conditions for traffic purchase which still is not condemned by all media players. Those media which are able to buy traffic do that.

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