

MULTIMEDIA TEXT IN JOURNALISM: AN ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN MASS MEDIA

МУЛЬТИМЕДИЙНЫЙ ТЕКСТ В ЖУРНАЛИСТИКЕ: АНАЛИЗ РОССИЙСКИХ И АМЕРИКАНСКИХ СМИ

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This article presents the results of a complex analysis of the multimedia content of U.S. and Russian media outlets. The research aims to distinguish specific features of multimedia stories as a new type of media text. The results of the research point to the fact that multimedia, as a special technique for presenting information, can be used in various genres. The author challenges the myth that multimedia cannot be used in the creation of analytical journalistic materials.

Key words: *multimedia journalism; multimedia text; polyphony of reality; multimodality of perception.*

В статье даны результаты комплексного анализа мультимедийного контента российских и американских СМИ. Проведенное исследование направлено на выявление специфических черт мультимедийных историй как нового типа медиатекстов. Результаты работы указывают на то, что мультимедиа как

особая техника подачи информации может использоваться в разных жанрах. Автор также пытается развеять миф о том, что мультимедийность не может использоваться при создании аналитических журналистских материалов.

Ключевые слова: мультимедийная журналистика; мультимедиа; полифония реальности; мультимодальность восприятия.

Introduction

Contemporary mass media are trying to convey their messages using a variety of sign systems. Technical innovations in the field of communication have affected the media immensely. Traditional media develop Internet versions and upload various content in order to follow the trend and keep pace with rapidly developing online portals. As a result, we see the emergence of a new field — internet journalism. It has the same functions as the mass media during the “pre-digital age”, however, it uses new expressive means.

Multimedia have become a common feature of media products in the online era. At the same time, not all works published on the web-pages of mass media outlets can be described as multimedia. We find there a lot of static texts and illustrations, which are very much the same as in analogue print media. Real multimedia content is characterized by several distinct features: modularity, interactivity, hypertextuality, non-hierarchical structure and a combination of a variety of sign systems (Van Dijk, 2004).

Although multimedia journalism is a widespread topic in media studies, there are very few research studies that adopt a profoundly theoretical approach to these phenomena. Most academic studies are devoted to technical characteristics of multimedia. There is, however, another problem. A number of theorists and practitioners express certain skepticism towards multimedia products. Some of them even compare

such products to a segmented patchwork, united only by the Internet. However, this is entirely untrue and contradicts the very concept of multi-media.

In order to achieve a deeper understanding of multimedia as a phenomenon used in journalism, we turned to different multimedia stories published on the web-sites of Russian and U.S. media. Our attention was drawn to this format in particular as it is gaining popularity and, according to many practitioners, represents the height of the creative endeavor in any convergent newsroom.

Hypothesis and methodology of research

Before starting research, we developed the following hypothesis:

Multimedia materials are oriented towards the reproduction of the so-called “polyphony of reality” and are designed with regard to the special feature of human perception called multimodality.

We will attempt to define these two terms, which have not as yet been introduced into the theory of communication.

Polyphony of reality is a characteristic of the objective world, which disseminates information using different channels (visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory).

This specific characteristic of the objective world has never previously been described terminologically, but it has been noticed by many scholars from different fields of study. We should note that the famous Soviet psychologist A. N. Leontyev spoke of a phenomenon close to this one. He introduced the term “image of the world”, which he defined in the following way:

“The world doesn’t consist of light, colors, vibrations...warmth, cold... It has its’ characteristics and is represented in these properties... only in the process of world perception through these modalities ... i.e. not as a complex of sensations, but as a reality, which “speaks” of itself in the languages of these sensory modalities” (Leontyev, 1975).

It should be stated that the term “polyphony” has a long history and has been used in different fields before it was introduced to the field of communication studies. Obviously, initial usage was connected with musicology, where this term had the following meaning:

“Polyphony – a type of harmonized music, which is based on the simultaneous development of two or more melodies (voices)” (Vasyukova, 2001).

From the field of musicology the term was introduced in literary studies. In his famous work the theorist M. M. Bakhtin defined a polyphonic novel as a novel, which is dialogical and presents “several independent voices” (Bakhtin, 1994). Later, the term attained a broader philosophical status and gradually was adopted by communication scholars. Nonetheless, usage of the word is still random.

The term multimodality of perception is more widely used in research and is a common notion for contemporary psychologists. It can be defined as follows:

Multimodality of perception – the capacity of human beings to receive information about the outer world using all end-organs (visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory).

Elaborating on our hypothesis, we should make a significant clarification. In the world of media addressing several senses at one time is not a novelty. The case of TV, for example, can be considered a prototype of multimedia. Furthermore, even print texts with descriptive writing may appeal to several senses, although only through recourse to imagination. In short, multimedia is not unique in this respect. We should also note that multimedia has a long history, and that the combination of sound, image, text etc. has been used for decades in culture and communication. However, contemporary digital multimedia products have several advantages and differences in comparison to older forms. They allow the interactive usage of these products and produce a stronger immersive experience¹.

¹ The article is based on a wider research study, where print media with descriptive writing and multimedia were analyzed in order to prove that both forms may convey polyphony of reality and may address different senses.

In order to test the hypothesis above, and to consider different aspects of multimedia in journalism, we conducted a complex analysis of ten multimedia stories: 5 materials from the Russian news agency *RIA novosti* and 5 materials published on the site of the U.S. newspaper *The New York Times*. All of them corresponded to the regular definition of a multimedia story: journalistic material presented in a non-linear form with the use of various media platforms – verbal text, audiovisual means – which thus create a multidimensional picture of the event or topic covered (Loseva, 2010).

The specific choice of empirical material was determined by several factors. We wanted to show that multimedia materials can be used on various media platforms. The use of multimedia means is not confined to a specific media type. The online environment allows any kind of media outlet to create stories using multimedia storytelling. The influence of convergence on different media leads to the fact that newspapers, wire agencies and TV channels use the same multimedia genres such as audio slide shows, photo galleries etc. The usage of one special format in all the cases (in each multimedia story) helps avoid methodological difficulties. We should note that in our research study we are analyzing the **online content** of newspapers and a wire agency. All the materials represent a media text, and thus justify a comparison of the two.

The inclusion of materials from a foreign media outlet is connected with the fact that in Russian contemporary media practice multimedia stories are not that widely used.

The total number of materials can be explained by the main goals of our research, as we were charged with conducting a very thorough analysis of each media text and finding marked regularities in their creation. Each journalistic material was analyzed with regard to the topic it touches upon, its genre, its composition, the particularities of the disposition of different elements of the story on the web-page, and the meaning of each part of the story.

The second stage of analysis was concerned with the polyphonic nature of each multimedia product. We tried to define what means are used to convey different kinds of sensory information (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile). All the data were documented in Table 1.

Table 1

Matrix of the research work

| Means of conveying | Sensory impressions | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| | Visual | Auditory | Gustatory | Olfactory | Tactile |
| Audio | - | 3* | - | - | - |
| Video | 6 | 4 | - | - | - |
| Photo | 5 | - | - | - | - |
| Infographics | 6 | - | - | - | - |
| Verbal text | 6 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 3 |

**The numbers signify how many different sensory impressions were conveyed.*

Results

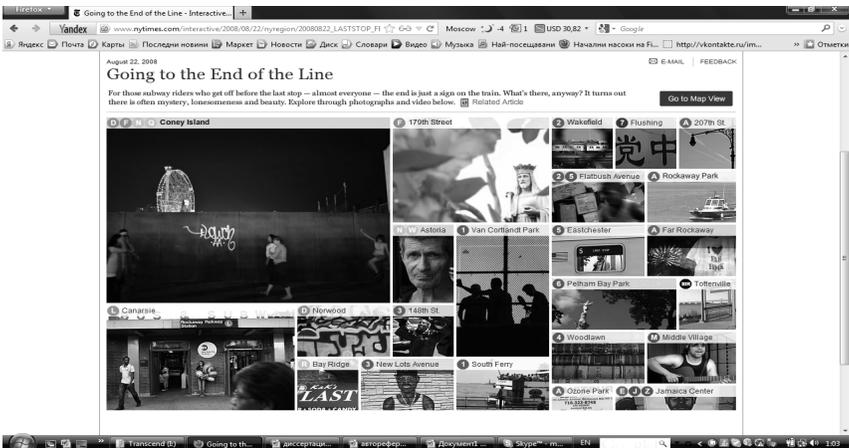
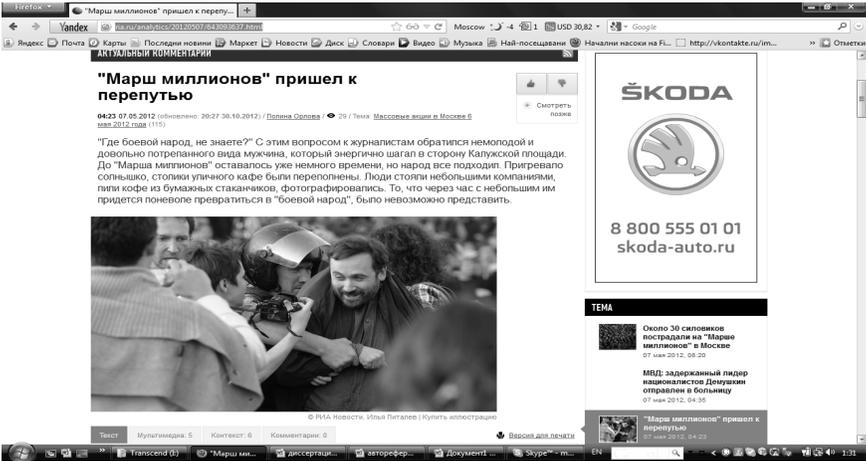
Analysis of ten selected multimedia stories from the newspaper *The New York Times* and the news agency *RIA novosti* allowed us to prove our hypothesis; however, it was specified and made more exact. We also managed to come to another very important conclusion. As the analysis shows, multimedia content preserves all the features of a journalistic story regardless of its novelty and apparent unconventional method of information presentation.

Moreover, we prove that multimedia materials can be used in various genre forms. Despite its evident orientation towards entertainment, multimedia content may be used in an analytical manner. This was shown in the analysis of both U.S. and Russian media texts. It also should be noted that not all genres are equally convertible into a multimedia material. For example, a feature story may be visualized easily. However, a report from a press conference may not represent good material for a multimedia piece. Besides, it is important to highlight that the composition and structure of a multimedia story are highly dependent on the specific features of the concrete story, as reported. There are no universal solutions when it comes to

constructing a multimedia piece. For instance, one story may consist of two photo-galleries, one embedded video and one static photo and another story may be comprised of four separate photos, one video and an audio podcast. This also applies to the representation of the story on the web-page.

Figure 1

The structure of different multimedia stories from The New York Times and RIA novosti



As we can see from the figures above, the interfaces and the composition may be different: very standard and straightforward or more complicated and whimsical.

We also found out that the usage of multimedia leaves an imprint on the methods of the journalistic work, the structure of a material and the expressive means used. All the media texts analyzed had distinct features. Their design was based on a modular principle, in addition to which they were highly interactive.

It should be stated that work with multimedia content requires from a journalist not only special technical skills, but also the ability to visualize information, to see this or that situation in various dimensions, bearing in mind the strong and weak points of each medium (verbal text, audio materials, video clips and photos). This brings to the fore the role of a multimedia editor, who should possess the above-mentioned skills and qualities, but also should be able to formulate the correspondent's task in a clear manner and to construct a multimedia story in a professional way. In this respect a multimedia reporter or editor is well served by having a directorial vision. In the course of our research we came to the conclusion that multimedia materials bring together the expressive means of all previous types of mass media (print text, radio material, TV report) and are oriented towards information visualization.

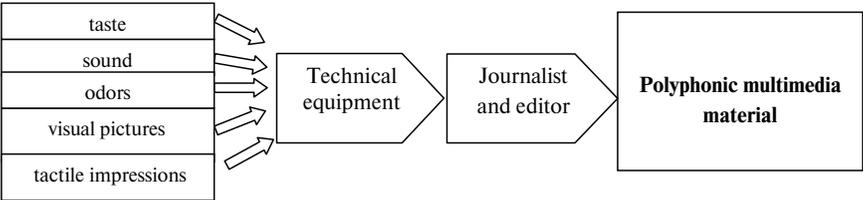
Another important point that, although multimedia journalism changes the specific characteristics of journalistic work, transforming the creative process immensely, it is oriented towards the same basic rules that are common for quality journalism in general – accuracy, objectivity and information balance.

Analysis of empirical material from the U.S. publication *The New York Times* showed that foreign media are more experienced in creating multimedia content (this is evident based on the comparative analysis of the structure of the materials of *RIA novosti* and *The New York Times*, their content, etc.) As a result of different experimentation, we may see the emergence of different hybrid-genres. However, their analysis was not included in the list of our goals.

Polyphony of reality as a special feature of the objective world is conveyed with the help of various multimedia techniques. At the same time the very products conveying polyphony become polyphonic. This process is quite complex. At first the whole variety of sensory impressions is transformed to a digital format with the help of special equipment (video recorder, sound recorder, photo camera, etc.) After the digitalization of the impressions, we receive something that can be called a digital imprint of reality. Then the editors and journalists select the most interesting material and construct a multimedia material. As a result, a whole variety of sensory impressions is transformed into a new media material and coded in different sign systems.

Figure 2

The process of creating multimedia content



You may note that the following scheme could be applied to works created previously on TV. But if we analyze the process of multimedia creation, we may see some differences. They are quite obvious if we look at the process of creating multimedia products in contemporary convergent newsrooms. With the advent of new technologies, multimedia editors and multimedia reporters have managed to create stronger immersive experiences for the audience.

It should be stated that multimedia materials still cannot reflect the whole variety of impression a person faces in everyday life. For example, gustatory and olfactory impressions can be expressed only in the text and reproduced by the imagination. However, this doesn't contradict our hypothesis. Multimodality of perception doesn't mean that we always

use all five senses. In this case, “multi” means many, i.e. more than one. The same applies to polyphony of reality, which implies that the world around us consists of different sign systems. Clearly, multimedia doesn’t use all sign systems, but it definitely uses more than one, employing a variety of sign systems.

The reproduction of the polyphony of reality is not a goal in itself, but a means to achieve specific results. Multimedia materials create a sense of presence for the Internet user. Besides, a multimedia story in most cases cannot be created without on- the-spot reporting, which means that journalist must go to the place where the story unfolds. One may argue that this all applies to any kind of reporting. But we assert that, with the advent of the Internet, journalists tend to use more and more wire services in their work and archive footage instead of primary sources and exclusive video materials. Multimedia stories imply that journalists need to turn to primary sources, which makes the material more objective and emotionally charged.

Having analyzed all the journalistic texts, we found that the reasons for turning to multimedia as a technique may differ significantly. We identified six basic reasons:

1. Forming a feeling of presence at the scene;
2. Achieving empathy;
3. Achieving the “hook” effect;
4. Telling a complicated story using a technique easy for perception;
5. Underlining the factual accuracy and trueness of the story;
6. Highlighting the story is exclusive.

The last motive is used not in all multimedia materials, as some of them are created with UGC (user generated content).

In our research we also came to challenge the myth, that multimedia may not be used for creating profound analytical materials. If a journalist wants to create a high-quality piece of content and is guided by the principles of balance, objectivity and completeness of information, then he may use multimedia technique to achieve this goal.

In conclusion, we note that in contemporary Russian internet journalism multimedia is used mainly for entertainment purposes. However, as the results of our next paper will show, multimedia as a technique may be used for creating high-quality content in various genres for the achievement of different results. An orientation towards the reproduction of the polyphony of reality allows the journalist to show the Internet user not only how to make snapshots of life, but also how to capture things that lie beneath the surface.

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