

Regional TV content in the process of transformation: From syncretism to multimedia

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Abstract

The article is devoted to examining the condition of the regional television in modern Russia within the framework of digitalization of broadcasting and multimedia development. The mosaic, syncretic nature of television can be considered using the method of morphological analysis which was developed in one of our previous works (Miasnikova, 2010). While a weekly programme grid (theoretically, but not always in practice) is viewed as a stable system of programming elements, a real TV programme looks like a constantly changing set of broadcasting units that is created based on characteristics of human perception, daily needs of the audience, in accordance with the policy of channel programming, as well as the business interests of its founders and owners. This set is in constant motion while a television programme exists as the main unit of TV broadcasting. This paper analyses, how the regional TV content has been specifically transformed lately under the influence of the processes directed towards the development of multimedia platforms. Obviously, in the near future there will be a radical reformatting of all regional Russian television. One of the ways to solve the problem is to take advantages of multimedia. The paper studies the successful experience of collaboration of the TV company 'Studio 41' with the Internet channel ETV in Yekaterinburg (Russia) and gives a recommendation for purposeful training of specialists (including television journalists) in the multimedia sphere.

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Introduction

The fragmentary, mosaic nature of television is defined by the concept of 'syncretism', which means the unity of disparate fragments, different in content, form, tempo, rhythm, emotions, etc. Under the mosaic of television, we understand the combination of various elements of a TV programme, i.e. different kinds of TV shows: informational, entertaining, artistic, educational, etc. Besides, this mosaic also concludes in constant movement and interaction of its 'fragments'. Full syncretism is achieved very rarely. Regional TV content has to transform, adapting to new conditions. So, in the paper we will consider specific examples and try to analyse this matter, based on our method of morphological analysis, as well as methods of empirical observation and interviewing.

TV syncretism and the method of morphological analysis

The social psychologist Abraham Mohl proposed the term 'mosaic culture' (Mohl, 1973) to denote modern culture in general. The nature of television as a mosaic created 'from the world of journalism and politics, books, Broadway and the arts' was defined by Canadian scientist M. G. McLuhan (McLuhan, 2007). He characterized the syncretism of the phenomenon studied by the terms 'synesthesia', denoting the united life of feelings and imagination, and 'tactility', by which the interaction of feelings was understood. American researcher A. A. Berger characterized television as an ever-changing mosaic (Berger, 2005). The mosaic nature of television was fixed by scientists-semiotics R. Barthes, D. Bell, U. Eco, Ch. Peirce.

In our country, the terms 'synesthesia' and 'syncretism' relatively screen arts were first applied by Sergey Eisenstein (Eisenstein, 1964). He also saw the origins of the synesthetic abilities of screen creativity in primitive syncretic 'diffuse-complex' thinking. Victor Shklovsky, describing television as a 'resurrecting word', stressed that it revived something long forgotten by our culture (Shklovsky, 1983). Later, Valentin Mikhalkovich proposed to consider television against the background of previous cultures (Mikhalkovich, 1998). Olga Nechai noted that television 'seems to be returning to a new round of civilization, at a new technical level, to the forms of syncretic communication that existed at the early stages of human development'. (Nechai, 1981). Leonid Kozlov, calling television 'a new form of spectacular culture,' advised 'to carefully study all of its 'pre-artistic' traits and features' (Kozlov, 1976). And then he also drew attention to the fact that 'the television spectacle should be viewed

primarily as a flow, as a change and alteration of heterogeneous structures, as a multisyllabic and non-closed duration, as a multifaceted mirror of the real life flow surrounding man' (Kozlov, 1976). One should not separate individual programmes in this 'flow'. The researcher also revealed that it is the variety of performances (from academic and artistic to stadium) that requires the most diverse ways of responding from the audience on television.

Researchers Vsevolod Vilchek and Yury Vorontsov also mentioned the ability of television to create a syncretic, multidimensional, three-dimensional image of reality, where the same event can be shown both documentarily and by staging techniques (Vilchek & Vorontsov, 1977). Kirill Razlogov found layering and roundaboutness in a set of forms and headings of the programme, giving a certain 'depth' to television space. According to his observations, this layering manifests itself in a combination of direct reporting with the most complex variants of a consistent transformation of reality; and in the appearance of a new type of screen structures, conditioned by the necessity of decorating the 'voids' in broadcasting (inserts, announcements, advertisements); and in the combination of reproducing individual works with a commentary; and in the structure of these works themselves (telefilms, telecasts), that includes various techniques, even degrees of convention (Razlogov, 1982).

As we can see, television clearly demonstrates the undivided unity of spiritual (internal) and material-practical (external) activity-related operations. These operations alongside some others create, correspondingly, internal (modeled in consciousness) and external (structurally and signically represented) forms. A study of television syncretism with satisfactory efficiency can be carried out with the help of the above-mentioned method of morphological analysis. It consists in studying (taking into account various categories of the morphology of television) a multi-layered broadcast space at all major levels of its morphological structure, as well as all the products of creative activity that give this space the form in which today's real television exists. Theoretically, the study of television syncretism allows us to reveal the essence of television and to identify it as a socially creative communication activity of a special, syncretic type. And in practical terms – it should help to improve the processes of TV programming and communicating with the audience.

Situation analysis

These days the noticeable changes are taking place within the Russian TV space. The set of generic, specific, genre, style, problem-thematic and programme elements of a TV programme, demanded by the audience, is significantly reduced. Programme syncretism is being actively destroyed. The Feds do it in

pursuit of profit and quite consciously. The regions are forced to act this way under the influence of circumstances. First, during the creation of the All-Russia State TV and Radio Company holding, now – in connection with the cancellation of the plan for the creation of the 3rd multiplex in Russia, originally intended for regional TV companies.

The audience is noticeably fragmented, it is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. The audience leaves large channels and comes to cable channels and decimeter networks. Small thematic TV channels draw viewers away from the big ones. Russian federal channels rely today on a limited set of genres and formats, they demonstrate a direct opposition of similar programmes to one another, simple and rigid broadcast grids, as well as a large amount of advertising. They follow the same rigid, market, so-called competing TV programming model. The bet is made on serials and game shows. Information is replaced by propaganda. Educational and artistic programmes disappear from the programme grid. They are replaced by entertainment slots. On the air, there is a general increase in the volume of recreational genres and formats, such as reality shows, reality-show experiments, comedies and their variations.

At that, the ‘First Channel’ still uses more complex structured broadcast grids. It demonstrates a slightly larger variety of forms. But here, along with the information and publicism, there is an extensive array of entertaining shows, games, music, humor and propaganda formats. The channel is functioning as a large commercial enterprise. Unfortunately, the main state channel ‘Russia 1’ is also forming its broadcasting policy on the same frankly market-oriented scheme. Advertising also plays an important role on it, along with serials and shows. Moreover, universal channels tend to use the same patterns (First, Russia 1, NTV), as those that declare their narrow thematic focus, for example, STS or TNT. These channels, spared from traditional news – the ‘milestones’ of the TV programme, substitute art with entertainment, limit their artistic broadcasting in favor of crime-entertaining series, a small number of outdated feature films, rude comic formats and trivial reality shows.

In all these cases, preference is given to a winning, easily recognizable, familiar form. But such content, unfortunately, happens to be vapid, primitive and tendentious as a rule. The same formats wander from one channel to another, and the necessary, useful genre forms disappear from the air.

A rare exception among the thematic channels today is ‘Culture’. Moreover, ‘introducing itself as the first national thematic channel in Russia, “Culture” has become the first universal channel, while the others at the time of its appearance could be called thematic channels of ‘hot’ accidents and no less ‘hot’ entertainment, – Litvintsev notes (Litvintsev, 2007). That is, the channel

‘Culture’ has more opportunities to vary its forms and types of programmes due to the fact that it is free from advertising. As a result, it preserves genres forgotten by others (such as television plays, literary readings or TV-lessons) and cultivates modern popular genres: talk shows, games and serials, including documentary and animation.

The range of genres and formats is narrowing at the regional stations as well. But, as it was said above, it is forced to change. The television content of the regional Russian stations, many of which originated in the early 1990s, during the commercialization of broadcasting and the creation of small private companies, definitely leaves much to be desired. Today, there are absolutely no artistic, educational, analytical programmes of these stations’ own production and almost everywhere the news, genres of advertising and PR dominate. Moreover, the local product is frankly meager and unsightly.

The reasons for the crisis of regional TV channels are explained by different reasons. Some associate it with the unprofessionalism of channel creators, with the transformation of the entire system of our television because of the future transition to digital broadcasting, with outdated equipment, with the need for technical ‘re-equipment’ and at the same time with the lack of funding, with the dependence on local authorities and private media business. As a result, today the regional channels tend to reduce air time; it also leads to the disappearance of their own programmes, the outflow of qualified personnel, and the decline in the quality of content. The former full broadcast TV-companies are experiencing financial, technical, personnel crisis in Russia.

Searching for a way out

Today it is obvious that in the near future there will be a radical reformatting of all regional Russian television. Igor Mishin, the founder of Yekaterinburg Channel 4, sees four ways out of the situation. The first is to cooperate with the local branches of the All-Russia State TV and Radio Company. The second is to agree among themselves on the creation of one hundred percent programmable powerful regional channel with the best programmes. The third variant is to go to the cable channels. The fourth is to become an Internet TV and take advantages of multimedia. ‘Let’s imagine, that there are no regional TV companies on the air, but there are local editions on the Internet. Its number of views will immediately increase. Now they are scanty, but not because of their bad work, it is because the need for local information is satisfied with traditional channels, which are 20 years old. And what if they do not exist? Hence, there is an interest. Especially TV receivers themselves become aggregators of content from different environments, a person will not care at all, they will no longer clarify,

from where the signal comes to them. Journalists who will remain working in their cities will work in these Internet editions, saving their professional skills, and if they could not work on the air, they would begin manifest themselves on the web' (Vyugin, 2013).

Today the situation in Russia is unique like nowhere in the world. A lot of Russian towns with a population of 30 thousand people have their own airtime television companies. There are hundreds of television studios that shoot interesting stories, documentaries, films, entertainment and children's programmes, receiving money from advertising, either from local authorities or from a wealthy sponsor who pleases his/her self-esteem this way. But there are too many stations like these. Their number exceeds the needs of the audience. In addition, because of their low power, they can't compete with large channels and their demonstratively entertaining content. The Russian model of the regional company, which has morning prime, evening prime, some special projects on topical or nostalgic topics, is clearly out-of-date. And it is simply impossible to programme differently many of our regional companies today. Modern television simply ceases to function as a full-fledged programme. The regional TV stations are no longer capable to realize the round-the-clock broadcast. They also can't rely anymore on the old network partners, who they worked for a long time with. Sooner or later these partners will leave them, because as a result of digitalization they will not need the regional stations.

But nobody can afford to keep a separate channel in the region at the level of any federal one. Everyone understands that it will probably be necessary to unite. However, the model of such an alliance has not been worked out yet. Other scenarios for further development of media assets are also proposed: under the control of the regional authorities, in the form of paid broadcasting, transition to the Internet. Such an experience is already taking place in Yekaterinburg, and it is successfully tested in the world.

ETV is the Internet channel in Yekaterinburg, which is now taking part in a successful Internet project: the collaboration with the 20-years old TV company 'Studio 41'. Today 'Studio 41' (also known as '41 Channel') broadcasts on air only 3 hours a day along with its network partner – the channel 'Domashniy'. ETV creates its own products in 24/7 format. Moreover, some of the content is purchased, and some are made by grants. According to the general director of '41 Channel' and ETV Vladimir Zlokazov, the association of media assets, belonging to the same owner, is the most reasonable way in terms of saving money.

April 24, 2018 has become the second birthday for the ETV Channel, as on this day the major changes in both the nature of the broadcast and the content of

the Internet channel were announced. After a serious analysis of the channel's rating, the broadcasting timetable was changed. For example, the daily repetitions of useful and musical programmes, not claimed by the audience, were cancelled. But the music programme itself, where local musicians performed, remained. The programme with the participation of animal lovers and the animals of the Yekaterinburg zoo, with which the channel had been successfully cooperating for a long time, also survived. The programme entitled 'Guests of Yekaterinburg' continued to appear. Some programmes were transformed, but their teams remained the same. The changes didn't touch social programmes entitled 'Cuisine' and 'The taste of life', beloved by the audience. In some cases the airtime of documentary projects and original programmes, especially those that attracted spectators, was changed.

But the main thing was the increase in the volume of information broadcasting. Thanks to the cooperation of the ETV and '41 Channel', news began to issue in an updated format. Vladimir Zlokazov says: 'Why are we doing this? We do not have enough airtime on '41 Channel' in order to give as many details as possible about the events that take place in Yekaterinburg... We need to tell how it happened, get the opinions of experts and viewers <...> And it is necessary to add emotions' (More air and broadcasting on Yandex, 2018). Now the programme entitled 'Major news of Yekaterinburg' is released simultaneously on the air of '41 Channel' and on the Internet channel ETV. Moreover, the ETV's news anchors also work on the air of '41 Channel'. The whole team of the news anchors consists of seven people. But, there are only two of them in the frame every evening, in the same way it usually happens on all world TV channels. This is done not only to change the picture on the screen, but also to discuss the events in a live dialogue.

In addition to the premiere of the two leading ones, the length of the programme itself also increased, and now it lasts an hour. Changes also affected the work of reporters. The timekeeping of the slots increased, which required journalists to study the topics in greater depth. There are direct inclusions. On the site of ETV, where the information programme goes live, there is a feedback option. Thus, the news anchors have the opportunity to answer questions from viewers. And those who watch the news not only on the site or on the YouTube channel, but also on TV, can share their opinions on the phone. Traditional voting is preserved. Now the powerful information and production service ETV is also involved in the preparation of the content for newscasts. Topics covered in the newscast are discussed in 'The sum of opinions' programme on ETV. The fact is that the specialists cannot get more than five minutes during the information programme. And the programme entitled 'The sum of opinions' on ETV gives

an opportunity to discuss the problem in a more detailed way. Generally, the benefits of Internet broadcasting are being used.

The news anchor Alexei Fayustov says: ‘This is a very cool format, it gives a field for discussion. We can discuss the news, express an unpopular point of view, argue or just express emotions. We used to work alone, but here we are a couple. And we need to feel each other. It comes only with vast experience, with the hours on the air’ (Varkentin, 2018). This amazing innovation of the regional channel provides the anchors with a unique opportunity to inform the news and immediately discuss it on the air. Multimedia is initially focused on a dialogue and communication with users. ‘This will allow viewers to get a full picture of the day, but in an ideal scenario it is to form their attitude to what we will talk about, what we will show. And to compare their opinion with what is trendy today <...> The transition to a new format allows us to show more shades of an event’, – that is how Fayustov explains the essence of the changes (Varkentin, 2018).

As you can see, ‘41 Channel’ and ETV successfully present themselves as city media, uniting traditional television and global Internet opportunities, which allows them to submit content in various forms that are attractive and convenient for the audience. In other countries, this experience has been tested for some years already. The changes have been going on lately ‘at such speed that everything has changed more radically than in all previous years’, – says Carey Bergland, the reporter for the news editorial office of NBC-4 (USA, California). – Today you do not need to wait for the news: it can appear on the web-site, on the cable channel – anywhere. We must change, because the former principle (‘wait until our 6-hour issue’) does not work anymore – people do not want to wait. Then you need to understand how to deliver the news to them, for example, transforming our stories for a web-site’ (WEB-TV NBC-California..., 2011).

In this case, a legitimate question arises: how do the stories for a network differ from the television ones? Some journalists keep the texts unchanged, others write only for a web-site, supplementing stories with photographs. Nowadays journalists have to build their work at several levels: editing texts, posting online, broadcasting on air. And while the news release depends on some definite time, the information on the web, on the contrary, can appear instantly. Moreover, this information should contain a local angle of the event to make it interesting to the inhabitants of a particular region. News on the web can be stated more broadly than on television, and then supplemented. The main thing for a journalist is to inform more and faster. ‘On the web, it’s good that there are no specific standards of presenting information, unlike conventional

TV methods, where the standard structure is well-known', – says Jonathan Lloyd, the online editor of NBC. – The web has more flexibility <...> This is the 'beauty' of the network that complements TV'. (WEB-TV NBC-California., 2011). The information that is not included in the main newscast is called 'raw news' and is offered to bloggers. 'So today's audience, having a huge choice, is extremely dispersed' (WEB-TV NBC-California., 2011), – says Bob Long, the vice-president and director of the news editorial.

Moreover, the audience is very active, as it produces news itself. After all, multimedia are designed for the dialogue with the user and also for the experiment. As a result, the former attitude towards the web as a certain billboard is changing. Now it becomes clear that 'a web-site can attract an audience to the station itself, that a website is part of the same news organization', – Jonathan Lloyd concludes. And 'the relationship between web journalists and television journalists is changing toward mutual understanding' (WEB-TV NBC-California., 2011).

Conclusion

So, the form of 'existence' of air television is the programme. The study of the laws of TV programming and programme policy of a particular TV channel or separate parts and blocks of programme content is extremely important for winning the sympathy of the audience, which is increasingly leaving today for information in other media environments. It is equally important to comprehend content the internal structure of television in terms of the content, presenting it theoretically as an integral universal system of stable morphological categories that are in the process of their functioning in certain hierarchical relations with each other. In practice, the diverse programme units that make the TV content look like a motley mosaic, which we define by the term 'syncretism'. However, as this article shows, today, Russian TV media, as well as the whole world of television, observe significant changes. The audience's demand for a more or less harmonious set of TV programme elements is noticeably reduced. Television ceases to function as a full programme. The regional TV stations are no longer capable to fulfill the round-the-clock broadcast. They lose their old network partners.

The cable channels and decimeter networks beat the large broadcasters. The Internet becomes a real opportunity to save editorial staff, working in different regions of Russia. The audience is noticeably fragmented, goes into small niches, on specialized platforms. There are no previous mass audiences, as it was several decades ago. Mostly, modern television sees more opportunities for its survival and development in multimedia, which allow to present information with the help of various media platforms, audio-visual and text and become

a way out and salvation for regional broadcasters. Its capabilities have not been mastered and adequately studied yet. It is necessary to study and master them as soon as possible. Besides, we need to start a purposeful training for specialists (including journalists) of a broad profile to prepare them for work in new multimedia conditions.

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