

JOURNALISM IN RUSSIA: WHY ITS FUTURE LOOKS UNCERTAIN

ЖУРНАЛИСТИКА В РОССИИ: ПОЧЕМУ ЕЕ БУДУЩЕЕ ВЫГЛЯДИТ НЕОПРЕДЕЛЕННЫМ

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The diversity of media processes in the modern society makes them very difficult to study. Contemporary changes in the information space, through the development of computer technologies, put on the agenda issues related to media professional guidelines. These prerequisites stimulate debates within the academic community on various aspects of mass communication theory. One of the most important of these issues circulates around a clear identification of such kind of mass communication as journalism.

The political evolution in Russia has always prevented the development of the journalism process. It occurred due to many limitations imposed on the media. The modern political context keeps provoking Russian journalism which seems to be more than before absorbed by other types of mass communications, such as PR and advertising. Does this situation threaten society in general, and the media community in particular? What are the prospects for journalism in Russia? These issues look pivotal in relation to the theory of mass communication. Paying attention to the possibilities of Russian journalism to survive in current conditions, the author tends, to some extent, to anticipate its

future, which is important for building an optimal model of training of journalists.

Key words: *mass communication; information space; journalism; objectivity of information; political relations.*

Многообразие масс-медийных процессов в современном обществе влечет за собой сложности их восприятия. Качественные изменения информационного пространства, посредством развития современных компьютерных технологий ставят на повестку дня вопросы, связанные с профессиональными ориентирами масс-медиа. Эти условия активизируют полемику в академической среде по поводу различных аспектов теории массовых коммуникаций. На общем фоне одним из важнейших остается вопрос о возможности идентификации такого вида массово-информационной деятельности как журналистика.

Оценивая эволюцию медиaproцесса в России с момента возникновения печатных СМИ, становится очевидным, что политическая среда, складывавшаяся на всех исторических этапах, мешала развитию журналистского процесса. В нынешних политических условиях отечественная журналистика продолжает терять свои традиционные очертания, «вымывается» из СМИ, «поглощается» другими видами массово-информационной деятельности. Является ли эта ситуация ущербной для общества вообще и медиасообщества в частности? Какова перспектива существования журналистской профессии в России? Эти вопросы, являясь предметом рассмотрения в данной статье, выглядят важными применительно к теории массовых коммуникаций. Акцентируя внимание на возможностях журналистики в условиях нынешнего развития информационной сферы, автор стремится в какой-то мере предвосхитить ее будущее, что немаловажно для выстраивания оптимальной модели подготовки журналистских кадров.

Ключевые слова: *массовые коммуникации; информационное пространство; журналистика; объективность информации; политические отношения.*

Introduction

The transformation of the information space in Russia over the recent years has undergone significant changes. On the one hand, partisanship of the media became more obvious than before following the fundamental transformation of the political spectrum of society and, correspondingly, of the media content. On the other hand, the make up of the information space seriously affected the development of new technology, which led to the prevalence of social media. Nowadays millions of people create blogs, webpages, live journals, and become simultaneously their own authors, editors, and designers. This provokes a totally new media reality being incompatible with its previous legacy inherited from not further than 15–20 years ago.

New circuits of information space amplify debates on different aspects of the theory of mass communication. It actively concerns Russian humanity science. With regard to communications new concepts appear in sociology (Lazutina, 2004; Mel'nik, 2006; Korkonosenko, 2010), politics (Prokhorov, 2007; Uchenova, 2009), psychology (Oleshko, 2006), history (Kovaleva, 2000; Strovsky, 2001), economics (Gurevich, 2004; Ivanitsky, 2010), etc. It is already impossible to speak about a static media system in contemporary conditions; the system itself is changing due to an increasing number of public needs and interests stimulating a growing number of media trends. Speaking about it Svitich raises an issue concerning the integration of media processes (Svitich, 2002). Along with it, tough debates continue on classifying the blogosphere given its convergence in terms of modern development. Diverse media practices in modern society make their theoretical frameworks and professional perceptions more complex and contradictory.

New media trends have fundamentally diversified the media landscape and led to the formation of a unique information space. In these conditions, many media actors start feeling a new identity. In addition, unique content based on illustrative and technological possibilities of the new information environment made media sphere pervasive and break-

ing formal borders. Thanks to the modern practice of collecting, processing and delivery of information, the world itself has finally become a “global village”, as Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan noted (McLuhan, 1964) following research investigations of many of his followers (Galtung, 1971; Toffler, 1990; Stehr, 1994; Castells, 2000, 2004; Thussu, 2006).

The current changes of information space while confirming the rapid development of technological progress, put on the agenda issues related to professional media guidelines. They concern, in particular, media freedom and responsibility as well as the relationship between journalists and the audience. A creation of new information space has also drawn attention to specifics of main communication trends: journalism, public relations and advertising.

One of the questions being envisaged as extremely important not only for the media theory, but also for its practice is identification of one of these trends: journalism. In modern conditions journalism seems to lose its traditional background and jeopardizes to be “absorbed” by other types of mass communication. Does this situation look detrimental for the society as a whole, and media community in particular? What is the future of journalism in Russia? Does it have a chance to prosper? These issues are strongly applicable to the theory of mass communication. Paying attention to the possibilities of journalism to exist in terms of the renewed information space, the author tends at some point to anticipate the future of the profession of journalism, which is important for working out a suitable model of its new mode of functioning.

Journalism as a type of mass information activity: content priorities

Before one would assess the prospects of journalism in Russia, they should define its specificities within mass communication activity (which, as noted above, also includes advertising and PR). Many media practi-

tioners still do not understand the fundamental differences between the above types of communication. Meanwhile, without this understanding, ethical principles of the journalistic profession become gravely undermined and this originates from a lack of public trust to the media as such (Korochensky, 2005).

Both journalism and other information spheres are focused on gathering, processing and the dissemination of socially-oriented information. By coincidence, over many years this definition has applied only to journalism, without referring to PR and advertising, which, in fact, are also centered on fulfillment of these functions. Consequently, the essence of journalism cannot be defined only to these limited things. Journalism as a specific form of knowledge is aimed at the full cognition of life. The object of journalism perception is centered on the entire social system (Korkonosenko, 2001), and the focus of this activity is a comprehensive social environment generating diverse problems and contradictions but being investigated on principles of fairness, accuracy and completeness of information (Kovaleva, 2000). Thus, a dominant mission of journalism is to draw attention to the issues of public interest which can be reached, first of all, through discussions initiated by journalists and shared by the audience. Thereby, views of ordinary citizens and experts can be represented in the media content providing the audience with all pros and cons which look as a prerequisite of a journalistic objectivity. This defines the essential difference between journalism and other types of mass communication.

In practice this difference between journalism and other types seems to be conditional, because a wish of any actor to cover facts and events objectively can not avoid subjectivity as such. However, by its origins, journalism stimulates the development of civic interests, under which all actors have equal access to information and discussion. Against this background, the essence of the PR and advertising is mostly defined by corporate interests that inevitably reduce the social significance of these activities in their implementation in practice. According to Kovaleva, journalism is not only public but also a creative domain, while the oth-

ers represent, at some point, a set of information technologies, based on modeling reality (Kovaleva, 2001). Therefore, journalism as a whole seems to be less partisan, when compared to other types of mass communication and information promoted by them.

All this makes the genre differences in relation to journalism and the other types. Partisanship, as their integral feature, leads to a deficiency of analytical genres aimed at problematic knowledge of reality (which, in turn, becomes a main component of journalism). PR and advertising texts tend to be more trivial and predictable, which to some extent, illustrates a “technological” approach that is much less obvious while looking at journalism. The creation of PR and advertising information also requires creativity, however, it is less demanded compared to the journalistic stuff due to collective interests of texts being produced.

On the basis of the above mentioned parameters of journalism it is obvious that the implementation of this profession is difficult in any society. In addition, its evolution depends on a number of specific factors: national frameworks of social and political life, traditions of media culture, state priorities of the media sphere and others. Therefore, the role and place of journalism in modern countries are different. What are the possibilities of its functioning in Russia? In order to understand this it is necessary to apply to historical regularities of the media evolution as a backbone of contemporary media tendencies.

Journalism evolution as a reflection of the political tradition in Russia

Journalism in Russia has always been at a disadvantage in comparison to other types of mass communication. This was due to the entire tenor of political life, which, in turn, in any country depends on the relationship between the government and society. By tradition as such, the author understands a long-term evolution of public priorities, worked out by everyday practices and diverse forms of cooperation between state

institutions and major social groups. These relationships in Russia have traditionally been developed on the basis of the hard-coded authoritarian rule being imprinted by state priorities and the behavior of society.

Authoritarianism of political relations manifested itself, in particular, in suppression of the individual. This factor stimulated the distinction between Russian reality and that one which progressed in Western European countries, where the idea of individual liberation laid deep roots as early as in the XVIII century. In Russia, the government was not naturally growing from civic society being recognized as an important element of the political system (as it was in the leading Western countries), but the society itself made very weak and often even clumsy attempts to escape from the vigilant care of the state. These attempts were constantly thwarted from “above”. Hence, various forms of social solidarity in Russia for many centuries could be developed only with great complexity, and those that did occur, were thoroughly patronized by the state.

The political background was forming the “nature” of the Russians being distinctly servile to government. At the same time it gradually matured protests that led to massive riots, uprisings and later terror. This stimulated eagerness of the authorities to *centralism* as the type of state management. The idea of centralism, on the one hand, kept the country from separatist sentiments, and, on the other one, formed a comprehensive dependence of society on the authorities. According to Russian émigré philosopher Leontovich, throughout its entire history Russia showed the world “a sample of a police state”, that limited the rights of an individual and informal organizations. Even after the abolition of serfdom in 1861, writes Leontovich, the nature of social relations in the country has not changed significantly: the monarchy remained intact, and this initiated the development of the absolutist state (Leontovich, 1995).

It is noteworthy that the Soviet regime, for all its specificity, produced quite similar forms of interaction between the government and society. It has found itself in the nature of power that looked like a complete result of the Russian tradition (Berdyayev, 1990; Obolonsky, 1994). Authoritarianism manifested itself, in particular, in the formation of the cult of the

Communist Party and in brutal suppression of dissent which intensified already existing archetypes of mass consciousness and behavior, albeit in a different social environment. Those ones included laudatory rhetoric and an emphasis on political symbols which generated transformation of human behavior (Pocheptsov, 1994). A set of archetypes of consciousness was making perception of the world more simplistic which originally could be fruitful for the development of journalism.

A brief excursion into the evolution of cooperation between Russian government and society makes possible to see feasibility of this type of communication. The authoritarian development in the socio-political system led to media dependence on the government. The appearance of the first-printed newspaper *Vedomosti* in December 1702, edited for nearly a quarter century by Peter the Great and a long-term absence of private press as well as numerous censorship regulations confirmed the close relationship between the existing political structure and capabilities of the written word. As a result, Russia has actively developed the state press, which never existed in other European countries. The subordination of the media to the powers determined the realization of their managerial functions through active publication of various government documents. However, it is worth noting that a formation in the second half of the XIX century of the private press, and then, already in early XX century, of the outlets of political parties. However, the main media vector was determined by the interests of the state and government institutions.

Under these conditions journalism suffered severe hardships, it often was substituted by propaganda and PR actions initiated by the authorities. Journalistic guidelines were shaken even more after the establishment of the Soviet regime. The overwhelming majority of the domestic media have become the party bodies, putting them at the mercy of decisions “from above” and determining the lack of criticism towards the state and party decisions. In those circumstances it was impossible to speak about an objective perception of life as the main priority of journalism. Although editorial staffs tended to encourage a feedback from the

audience, discursive issues could not go beyond officially permitted limits which were strictly controlled by the political system. True, the years of Khrushchev's "thaw" and Brezhnev's "stagnation" saw the examples of more real journalism which for the first time since 1917 commenced to be absorbed with investigative priorities. However, these approaches did not determine the main information trend at that time. As a result, journalism as a profession aimed at objectivity and active involvement in diverse interests of people was still in short supply. Editorial staff, for the most part, readily complied with the party instructions and demonstrated political servility, which historically evolved in our society. The situation began to change overwhelmingly only under Gorbachev's glasnost, when party levers of media management began to gradually weaken.

Assessing the evolution of the Russian media process over the last three centuries, albeit very briefly, it is worth emphasizing that the political environment in all historical periods prevented personal opinions, which seems to have been a reflection of collective mentality. It was elaborating weakness of civil society and a specific media role being supportive to the "collective" principles of management. In these circumstances Russian society could not consume culture of independent dialogue and to elaborate respect to discussion as the main form of reaching truth. Brought up on the authoritarian tradition, Russian media could actively duplicate habitual algorithms of mass behavior.

Content tendencies of the contemporary Russian media as antipodes of journalistic realization

The long-term authoritarian relationships between government, society and an individual have significantly influenced media in post-Soviet Russia. Journalistic implementation was still hampered. Despite an overall transformation of the administrative system and, apparently, a departure from the Communist ideology, familiar political counterparts were left almost untouched.

This applies primarily to the system of governance and control. Attempts to distort this system in the early 1990s gave birth to chaos in various spheres of public life, that in the future, already during the presidency of Vladimir Putin, led to a desire of apparatchiks to centralize power. In the 2000 the Russian political system started to get modified. The country was divided into federal regions and subjected to radical changes including the transformation of the current electoral system, which made bodies of government fully controlled by the Russian President and his administration. Simultaneously, the government tried to limit growing of political activity of population, through organizational and legal measures. The first half of 2012 was marked with police dispersals of protest marches (mostly in Moscow) organized by the opposition. Along with it, two Federal Laws – “On Amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences” and “On Meetings, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets” were adopted. Its content was prohibitive to any civil initiatives.

These factors have had a significant impact on the content of the Russian media. We should mention three key points which affected the national information space, due to the growing influence of the state apparatus and the restriction of rights and freedoms in Russian society.

Firstly, concentration of media capital in the interests of the ruling powers became more obvious. Nowadays, pluralism in the field of mass information almost faded away, which became totally different to the situation of the 1990s when media rigidly competed with each other. Besides, the process of media redistribution in favor of pro-governmental structures (such as Gazprom) was actively developed. Along with an administrative pressure on the media took place the process of unequal funding. Today only media founded by the authorities have stable financial support unlike those ones founded as private enterprises. This process is especially noticeable in the regions. For instance, except for *Novaya Gazeta na Urale*, all regional and city outlets in Ekaterinburg, Tumen, Kurgan are firmly controlled by officials regularly instructing editorial offices what and how to write. A similar situation affects many regional TV-channels, too which is leading to information distribution in favor

of state structures. Thereby the audience is absorbed with one-sided and streamlined coverage of the most discursive issues, and this contradicts key principles of the formation of civil society.

Secondly, media partisanship of the media became more noticeable following the above dependence of editorial staffs from the powers. It was especially evident while evaluating how Russian media covered most important incident, such as sinking of the Kursk submarine and the motor ship “Bulgaria” (2000 and 2011), seizure of hundreds of hostages in the Moscow theater on Dubrovka and at Beslan school (2002 and 2004), flooding of the town of Krymsk in the Krasnodar Krai (2012) and many others. The coverage of these events was somehow chaotic and constantly filled up with incomplete and therefore contradictory information on a number of victims and measures made by the authorities towards the tragic situations. A lack of objective information became evident regarding not only extreme situations but everyday life. The Russian media almost ceased to analyze the situation in Chechnya and became less investigative on facts of theft, corruption and lawlessness as feeling themselves unsafe in disclosing these situations. All this is still leading to the loss of a “responsible” information and media status as a public institution.

Thirdly, under the impact of current policies media keep changing quality of information being fulfilled now, to the very much extent, by PR-technologies instead of the journalistic stuff. This process mainly occurs due to media dependence on power structures and a lack of a stable ethic between the mass media and their founders. Although the existing Russian Media Law does not enable someone to interfere in the editorial policy, this principle is not respected in practice. Under these circumstances the media often distribute so-called “ordered” materials which look like the journalistic stuff but in fact have nothing to do with it. This situation is most evident during the electoral periods. It is remarkable that the current Election Law strongly prohibits journalists from expressing their opinions on officially registered candidates, although it is in conflict with the Media Law, which advocates freedom of speech. As a result, Russian society has a limited access to the pivotal information about the current political process.

In analyzing this situation many Russian media researchers note the manipulative influence of various political institutions interested in achieving narrow goals. There are a lot of manipulative methods being used by the powers against “disobedient” editorial staffs. These methods are extremely diverse and include both open pressures and restrictions including the closure of media as well as the telephone “right” (following direct instructions given by officials or owners to editors by telephone), and personnel policy towards media from a founder or proprietor, etc. Sometimes the Russian authorities resort to even forms of repressions which were repeatedly demonstrated during the 2000s, particularly against NTV broadcasting company and some other editorial staffs.

It indisputably undermines media responsibility to society and the existence of civically oriented media (Dzylashinky, 2001; Rusakova & Spassky, 2004; Lozovsky, 2011). For this reason the media themselves can not become full-fledged actors in addressing social issues. This originates a special media language functioning everywhere which is looks detrimental for social environment (Chepkina, 2000; Babenko, 2004; Kazarin, 2008). The current environment in turn, does not provide room for the full development of the journalistic process. Although the latter does not cease to exist but makes modern media space more detrimental and disintegrates editorial activity. Contemporary social conditions in Russia significantly infringe the journalistic profession compared to other types of mass communication. This wholly penetrates into the “nature of things” and is being reflected on the most important manifestations of everyday life.

Conclusion

The contemporary situation in modern Russia appears critical for society in general and the media community in particular. As has been stressed, certain political limitations shrink objectivity of information, without which it is impossible to hold meaningful social and econom-

ic policies and to overcome Russia's backwardness from the developed countries. This can only be achieved through open and informed debate concerning those challenges facing Russia and Russians to enable a chance for the best informed decisions to appear as well as an informed populace. It is unlikely to happen as long as the state regards information as a possible threat to its existence, and is something to be controlled in order to prevent this scenario from happening, and that the Russian people continue to passively accept the status quo.

At least two reasons should be called for to explain the complexity of the development of Russian journalism. One of them is a historical tradition of the relationship between the state and the media, which initiated a certain level of professional journalistic culture. Many generations of journalists were growing up within a certain perception of life, without regard to its conflicts. Many media still continue to limit debates, and this is reducing public reflections on main social and political issues being covered by the media.

The second reason emasculating journalism can be explained by limited media pluralism. Most media are strongly dependent on power structures affecting them administratively and financially. The Media Law does not restrict monopoly on media ownership. As a result, a limited number of owners (usually close to the state structures) have a massive impact on the audience. Finally, it is necessary to develop measures that ensure an access of journalists to information. Because of their absence, the thesis of responsible journalism to society still looks rhetorical and complicates the feasibility and moral status of the journalistic profession.

The above mentioned reasons make media objectivity difficult. Russian media's dependence on the powers makes impossible to see them (at least, now) as non-partisan public institution. In this connection, the term "journalism" relating to native media market should be mentioned cautiously, and not be used as a synonym of such definitions as mass media and mass communication.

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