

THE INFLUENCE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM ON THE INTERNET MEDIA SECTOR: DEMARCATION BETWEEN ONLINE MEDIA AND OTHER NETWORK RESOURCES

ВЛИЯНИЕ ГРАЖДАНСКОЙ ЖУРНАЛИСТИКИ НА МЕДИЙНЫЙ СЕКТОР ИНТЕРНЕТА: К ПРОБЛЕМЕ ДЕМАРКАЦИИ ИНТЕРНЕТ-СМИ И ИНЫХ СЕТЕВЫХ РЕСУРСОВ

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Current trends in the media environment make it necessary to rethink traditional understandings of the media, and journalism in general. The growing popularity of network resources used as a means to obtain information, along with the increasing competition between professional and citizen journalism, together raise the question of what the media is about the Internet.

This article attempts to establish criteria to differentiate between online media and other network resources. Based on the scholarly literature and expert assessments, we conclude that these criteria include professionalism, self-positioning as media, and the performance of journalistic functions, audience scale, and

compliance with organizational signs of traditional media, as well as the degree of independence. The analysis of social media in the context of these constraints shows that the Internet media sector involves individual segments of the blogosphere, in particular, user blogs that operate on platforms of professional media and blogs functioning on the principle of Internet portals.

Key words: *online media, citizen journalism, blogs, social networks, Internet media sector.*

Современные тенденции развития медиасреды приводят к необходимости переосмысления традиционного понимания средств массовой информации и журналистики в целом. В условиях растущей популярности сетевых ресурсов как средства получения информации и усиливающейся конкуренции между профессиональной и гражданской журналистикой возникает вопрос о том, что считать СМИ в интернете.

В данной статье предпринята попытка установить критерии разграничения интернет-СМИ и иных сетевых ресурсов. Посредством обобщения научного опыта и мнений экспертов мы пришли к выводу, что такими критериями являются профессионализм, самопозиционирование в качестве СМИ, выполнение функций журналистики, массовость аудитории, соответствие организационным признакам традиционных СМИ и степень независимости. Рассмотрение социальных медиа в контексте этих ограничений позволяет заключить, что в медийный сектор интернета попадают отдельные сегменты блогосферы, в частности — блоги, функционирующие на платформе профессиональных СМИ, и блоги, работающие по принципу интернет-порталов.

***Ключевые слова:** интернет-СМИ, гражданская журналистика, блоги, социальные сети, медийный сектор интернета.*

Introduction

The development of technologies in the sphere of information and communication has led to the digitalization of media. This process, as well as active internet penetration, has contributed to the popularity of Internet resources. According to recent reports from Internet World Stats, Internet penetration has exceeded 90% in some countries (Internet World Stats, 2016). In 2010, the audience of network resources in the US surpassed the print media audience in size for the first time. In 2015, the popularity of the Internet in Russia almost caught up with the popularity of television (Igra na operezhenie: internet po populyarnosti dogonyayet televidenie, 2016).

In the 21st century, online journalism has become entirely a component of the media system. Citizen journalism, along with professional journalism, is actively developing in the Web environment by means of blogs and social networks, which, nowadays, serve as its basic tools. Studies show that these alternative sources of information are used for receiving news more often than professional resources (FOM, 2016). New phenomena that rapidly develop in the media environment make it necessary to rethink traditional understanding of both the media and journalism in general. Therefore, it is essential to find out what the media is in terms of the Internet.

This article focuses on scholarly approaches to assessing the differentiation of online media from other network resources.

We attempt to answer the following research questions derived from the scholarly literature and expert assessments:

- What criteria should be applied to identify online media as distinct from the entire network space?
- Are certain kinds of citizen journalism related to, or do they qualify as, online media?

Relations between media and Internet resources: views from Russia and abroad

The concept of *media* in a broad sense involves communication and transmission of various types of information. In this article, the term “media” is applied in the context of mass communication and denotes a mass means of information connection (Zemlyanova, 2004). *Social media* are considered sites, applications, and other platforms that allow users to create content and share it with one another. Concerning citizen journalism, the term stands for blogs and social networks.

The concept of “journalism” is becoming increasingly blurry as new media actively develop and expand. As the British researcher and theorist of mass communications D. McQuail points out, close to the truth is, perhaps, the fact that journalism is a mixed and diverse activity that is performed by certain people and news organizations in accordance with professional standards, but that they must work alongside others – people who represent public views and who not only fail to meet professional criteria but do not even care to do so (McQuail, 2013). Consonant with this assessment, we adhere to one of the most common definitions of *journalism* as activity related to the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information. For this reason, *citizen journalism* denotes the activity of non-professionals

involved in the process of collection, analysis, and dissemination of information.

The issue of the relationship between media and Internet resources¹ remains debated in the scholarship. At the beginning of this century, Russian scholars propounded conflicting approaches to this problem. Thus, A. Akopov believes that “all network space can be considered a form of mass media” where content is created by users in the form of dialogues and conversations. However, the researcher points out that there are publications on the Internet written by professional journalists (Akopov, 1998). V. Voroshilov says that “the emergence of a new information carrier available to a mass of people could not but lead to its transformation into the media” (Voroshilov, 2000).

At the same time, S. Korkonosenko assumes that Internet resources should not be regarded as the media because they “transmit only the form of information broadcasting rather than changes in the nature of communication through the computer” (Korkonosenko, 2002). I. Fomicheva, in her turn, suggests using the formula of American social scientist G. Lassuel in order to single out the media from all Internet resources. She defines the media as projects in which a communicator is represented by a professional journalist and member of a corporation. The content of the media, in turn, is dedicated to society; it is polythematic and multigenre. The channel of information transmission is open and periodic, the audience of online media has an obvious mass character, and the activity causes various kinds of social effects (Fomicheva, 2010: 52–59). Domestic researchers suggest the need to regard online media as projects aimed at informing mass audiences. According to M. Lukina and I. Fomicheva, part of the media system includes resources that

¹ In frames of this article, the term “Internet resources” is used in the broadest sense and denotes various elements of the global network.

position *them* as the media and they act correspondingly (Fomicheva, Lukina, 2010: 63-64). The same opinion is shared by A. Kalmykov and L. Kokhanova: “It is more reasonable to regard online media as projects that position themselves in this way by using traditional media terms (magazine, almanac, newspaper, editorial office, editor, etc.) in the headlines of site sections” (Kalmykov, Kokhanova, 2005). In frames of our expert poll, A. Kalmykov claims that in order to distinguish between online media and other network resources we should also take into account criteria such as professionalism and performance of journalistic functions.

D. McQuail, in his turn, points out that the Internet is a medium of both mass and personal communication. Therefore, new media is as much an institution of private communication as it is of public communication (McQuail, 2010). According to the Norwegian researcher M. Lüders, distinctions between personal media and mass media may be outlined as differences in the types of involvement required from users. Unlike the media, personal communication media are more symmetrical and require users to perform actively as both receivers and producers of messages. Compared to the media, personal media are closer to the de-institutionalized or de-professionalized content pole (Lüders, 2008: 691, 698).

Regarding the expert poll, D. McQuail comes to the conclusion that differentiation of online media from other network resources is carried out on the basis of such criteria as professionalism, mass audience, self-positioning as the media, compliance with organizational signs of traditional media, and degree of independence and commercialization.

German author Klaus-Dieter Altmepfen thinks that online media, in addition to “branches” of traditional media, can be considered a resource that promotes self-observation of society and does not pursue specific commercial interests. In addition,

Altmeyden emphasizes, “when organizational and functional signs of journalism are not implemented, it is not journalism” (Altmeyden, 2000: 123–136). In addition to the core group of news sites (mainstream news sites) – such as CNN, BBC, and MSNBC, Dutch researcher M. Deuze links three more groups of Internet resources to online journalism:

1) sites that index and classify information by categories (index and category sites). This group includes search engines like Yahoo and websites of companies engaged in marketing research. According to Deuze, despite the fact that such resources do not contain a large amount of original content, they offer the audience a possibility to chat and exchange news, as well as links to news sites;

2) meta and comment sites, i.e. resources that specialize in both media and journalism issues and contribute to further professionalization of this sphere. Along with them, the author identifies the “alternative” news sites that, in addition to their own news, publish critical comments on the materials published by the mainstream media.

“Personal blogs, whose authors tell stories based on their own experience and offer readers links to the comments for provoking the discussion of content of other Internet resources, can be classified somewhere between index and comment sites. They tend to offer limited communication to participants (one person expresses his/her opinion on some issues and offers links). However, these blogs contain a large amount of content and provide the opportunity to comment,” says the researcher.

3) sites designed for information exchange and discussion (share and discussion sites); they are “more or less edited platforms”, or group blogs.

Deuze claims that all of these types of Internet resources are related to professional journalism, as their functioning corresponds

to the main aim of journalism in the world electoral democracies, i.e. they provide citizens with the information necessary for the implementation of freedom and self-government (Deuze, 2003).

In view of the opinions presented above, we conclude that the main criteria for the selection of online media from the entire network space are professionalism, self-positioning as the media, mass audience, compliance with organizational features of traditional media, degree of commercialization, and performance of journalism functions. The last criterion requires clarification. As D. McQuail points out, journalism is based on functions of social communication:

- observation of the environment;
- coordination of social units;
- provision of social and cultural continuity.

“The first function is related to journalism itself as it aims at provision of information necessary for the performance of main types of social activities. The second one corresponds to the promotion of social cohesion which is also necessary for a complex society; the third one in its turn refers to transmission of values, culture and identity from one generation to another”, the researcher says (McQuail, 2013).

This approach corresponds overall to the opinions of scholars concerning media functions in the context of the Internet. Thus, G. Lazutina claims that the main global network functions are social (this function leads to the formation of new forms of communicative behaviour), informative, and economic (which is aimed at gaining commercial profit). (Lazutina, 2000: 223–224) M. Lukina and I. Fomicheva in turn single out communicative, informative, and value-regulating functions of online media, as well as socio-organizational and socio-creative functions, the function of forum and channel of social participation, and entertainment

function (Fomicheva, Lukina, 2010: 89–104). Therefore, we assume that the basic functions of journalism in the context of global network include communicative, value-regulating and informative functions. The last one promotes performance of another important task – the formation of an information agenda.

Blogs and social networks in media systems

According to M. McLuhan, the first theorist of electronic communication media to predict the emergence of new communication technologies, “automation affects not just production, but every phase of consumption and marketing; for the consumer becomes producer in the automation circuit, quite as much as the reader of the mosaic telegraph press makes his own news, or just is his own news” (McLuhan, 2003). Starting with Web 2.0 technologies, people were able not only to make news, but also to distribute them on their own. As D. McQuail points out, “the communications revolution has generally shifted the ‘balance of power’ from the media to the audience in so far as there are more options to choose from and more active uses of media available” (McQuail, 2010).

Today, social media are more popular than Internet resources that position themselves as the media. According to research conducted by the “Public Opinion Fund”, 36% of users in Russia read news reports on social networks (or follow the links located there), blogs, and forums. However, in relation to online media, the index is half the number – 17% (FOM, 2016). In 2009, the Universal McCann media agency conducted a survey and interviewed 23,200 respondents from 38 countries. According to the results, two-thirds of Internet users are registered on social networks, 71% of respondents read blogs (Universal McCann, 2009).

Before proceeding to the question of what kind of place is occupied by blogs and social networks in the media environment, it is necessary to define these concepts. *Social networks* denote Internet services aimed at building communities of people with similar interests and/or activities; communication in these communities is carried out by means of internal mail service, forums, or instant messaging (Lukina, 2010). The term “blog” more often refers to a site with regularly updated entries. “Wikipedia”, which is like blogs a product of Web 2.0, gives the following definition for this notion: “A blog is a web site, the main content of which is regularly updated by entries that include texts, images, or multimedia” (Wikipediya, 2016). I. Dzyaloshinsky, in his turn, considers blogs to be platforms for expression in the public space. Any person can act as an information creator. The content does not have any limits either; it can be personal, social and political, business, or specific (Dzyaloshinsky, 2013). Some researchers, particularly L. Braslavets, define blogs as a type of social network. In our opinion, these concepts should be separated; otherwise, the definition of social networks does not include stand-alone blogs. Braslavets agrees that this kind of online diary is not a part of social networks. If it were true, the main principle of user equality would be violated, i.e. readers of stand-alone blogs would be able to comment on the author’s posts, but could not publish their own blogs (Braslavets, 2010).

Therefore, the question of relations between blogs and the media is still controversial. According to D. Domingo and H. Heinonen, “from the perspective of journalism, weblogs can be seen as a new category of news and current affairs communication.” The scholars believe that among blogs of regular users, journalists and media companies, it is possible to single out so-called “journalistic blogs.” “Even if bloggers writing about current events may not feel comfortable comparing their publishing to journalism, we argue

that this heterogeneous group of weblogs, some made by the public, some by journalism practitioners and some by media houses, have something in common that justifies the label “journalistic weblog”. Although they may not strictly follow traditional journalistic routines and conventions, these weblogs have a clear intention to collect, analyze, interpret or comment on current events to wide audiences and in this way perform the very same social function usually associated with institutionalized media,” the researchers claim. For this reason, they subdivide citizen blogs into four categories: 1) journalistic weblogs written by the public outside the media audience blogs; 2) journalistic weblogs written by the public within the media journalist blogs; 3) journalistic weblogs written by journalists outside media institutions media blogs; 4) journalistic weblogs written by journalists within media institutions (Domingo, Heinonen, 2008: 6-7). The last two categories are related rather to professional journalism than to citizen journalism.

As for domestic researchers, they are more conservative about relations between blogs and the media. I. Fomicheva, for instance, classifies blogs along with chats, forums, and social networks as the “discussion platform” and finds it incorrect to regard blogs as the media. However, there is an exception to every rule: blogs functioning as a part of the site that belongs to the media “act on the initiative of owners of the site and are related to its content” (Fomicheva, 2010: 60). E. Sherstoboeva and V. Pavlenko relate blogs to online journalism and consider them to be media if the blogger tends to follow the standards of objectivity, applies journalistic methods used to collect and disseminate information, and publishes the information with a certain frequency; the information, in its turn, goes through editorial control (Sherstoboeva, Pavlenko, 2015).

The main criteria applied for differentiating blogs and professional media by researchers are professionalism of a

communicator, mass of information, frequency, and participation in formation of information agenda, i.e. a function based on the information function and applied for implementation of the value-regulatory function. In other words, the formation of an information agenda is closely correlated with the functions, which form the basis of journalism. The criteria mentioned above – with the exception of frequency – correspond to the criteria of differentiation between online media and other network resources established by us. Let us examine them in detail.

Professionalism. For bloggers, unlike journalists, creation of content is an unprofessional activity. However, it should be taken into account that there are bloggers who, like journalists, document information and disseminate news. Researchers point out that recently there has been a tendency towards professionalization of popular online diaries. “Top blogs increasingly resemble online media, they successfully monetize themselves. Besides, blogs are based on the material written not by one person but by a whole team of authors. This tendency is especially pronounced in foreign blogging. As for the Russian segment, one-author blogs are still at the top, although the content increasingly resembles media materials“, says K. Zuykina (Zuykina, 2015). Speaking up for citizen journalists, we should take into account that the skills these journalists lack are compensated for by functioning features of the Internet which serves as a mechanism for editing messages after the fact (Bowman, Willis, 2003).

The tendency towards professionalization of blogs is also revealed through modern legal realia. In 2014, the Russian government amended the law “On information, information technologies and information protection”, thus obliging the authors of blogs and other popular resources which are used by more than three thousand people a day to observe the Russian media legislation, although these

resources do not position them as publications. Some requirements for the media are extended to blogs in other countries, too. Take, for instance, Germany, where the state treaty on the activities of media service (Mediendienste-Staatsvertrag) requires authors of blogs to specify data sources, provide accurate information, distinguish between news posts and author comments related to them, and visually separate content from advertising (Sauer, 2007). However, until effective mechanisms to monitor and control violations are implemented, it is too early to talk about actual professionalization of the blogosphere.

Mass Information. The term “mass information” denotes all texts sent through journalism channels, which influence the audience (Prokhorov, 2011). Journalism, in its traditional sense, includes creation of texts on urgent socio-political issues (Vartanova, 2014). The current state of the blogosphere indicates that such texts are presented in a number of online diaries as well.

According to a study conducted by the Technorati company in 2011, many respondents read blogs about the tsunami in Japan, social unrest in London, the death of Osama bin Laden, the nuclear crisis in Japan, the Arab spring, and other events on socio-political themes (Technorati, 2011). Having analyzed the Russian blogosphere, experts from the Berkman Centre at Harvard University came to the conclusion that its essence consists of discussions mostly on socio-political themes (Etling, 2010).

The Role of Online Media in Formation of Information Agenda. When readers select a source of news in the web environment, their attention is divided between the professional media, social networks, blogs, and several other resources. According to E. Vartanova, journalism in its traditional sense has lost its monopoly in the production and provision of daily public agendas. She adds, “society also casts doubt on the exclusive right of journalists not

only to gather news, but also to interpret it for the mass audience” (Vartanova, 2014). Along with professionals, citizen journalists are involved in interpreting events, too. P. Ushanov claims that nowadays-functional features of blogs resemble the media functions. Moreover, blogs have started to exert a direct influence on the formation of information agendas (Ushanov, 2014). This statement appears to be true.

The assessment of individual blogs is based on the criterion of compliance with organizational signs of traditional media. For instance, blogs operating on the principle of Internet portals are run, as a rule, not by a single user, but a group of authors. In addition, they have a similar organizational structure. The criterion of self-positioning in such resources is usually not expressed directly. However, it is realized in the structure and form of content representation peculiar to the media. The degree of independence is a very controversial issue in terms of media commercialization. Considering Internet resources as the media, we assume that this criterion should be understood as a desire for objectivity.

According to D. McQuail, the form of the blogosphere reveals a desire to take traditional norms and practices as its basis. “Following this statement, we can assert that the initial and long-term occupation of journalists is not out of date due to the emergence of new technologies; on the contrary, it is supported by resources that withstood the test of time” (McQuail, 2013).

Following the criteria mentioned above, certain segments of blogs can be considered as the media. We believe that along with user blogs that function on platforms of professional media, it is possible to regard blogs operating on the principle of Internet portals as online media, too (e.g. “OhmyNews”, “Wikinews”, “Realno. info” or “HighWay”). D. McQuail and A. Kalmykov share the same point of view. Collective blogs and user news publication projects

are considered as open source journalism, which, in its turn, can be regarded as a part of “organized” citizen journalism (Ageev, 2015; Giesiger, 2007; Lasica, 2003).

Social networks are the least studied phenomena in the media context. As C. Bentley points out, “although social networking is primarily a place to meet friends, it has a growing news media value” (Bentley, 2008). L. Braslavets assumes that the answer to the question of whether to recognize social networks as a new media type or not is “generally more positive” (Braslavets, 2009: 127). However, it is rather difficult to apply the criteria established by us to this segment.

Despite the fact that today social networks are becoming more often a subject to legal regulation (since the law “On information, information technologies and information protection” came into force in Russia, popular groups fell under regulation of Roskomnadzor, obliging them to comply with the requirements of the media), it is still too early to talk about the professionalism of communicators on such platforms. The main function of social networks is communicative rather than informative, unlike the media. Along with open accounts, groups and public pages, there are settings that prohibit or restrict access to some information. Therefore, there is no reason to talk about the mass nature of the information they provide.

The most interesting about criteria application are accounts and public pages of officials and deputies on “Facebook”, “Twitter” and “Instagram” which are often run by professionals who act on their behalf. These accounts and pages contain, inter alia, socially significant information, which is generally considered both reliable and interesting for a wide audience. However, as D. McQuail notes, such segments of social networks fall within the scope of PR-communications and require a separate study.

Conclusion

An overview of scholarship and the opinions of experts has made it possible to single out a number of criteria aimed at differentiating online media from other network resources. These criteria include:

- professionalism;
- self-positioning;
- performance of journalism functions;
- audience scale;
- compliance with organizational signs of traditional media;
- degree of independence.

Most of these criteria are relevant to blogs that function like Internet portals, thus, allowing us to define them as the media. The same category also includes, by definition, user blogs that function on platforms of professional media. Social networks are correlated with current scholarly ideas about the media to a lesser extent. Therefore, “organized” citizen journalism should be viewed as online media.

Application of the criteria mentioned above should be considered as one possible way to distinguish online media from the entire network space. Study of theoretical aspects has shown that no unified approach has been worked out yet to solve this problem. However, today we can observe a tendency outlined in both scientific and practical fields, i.e. new media are supposed to be classified on an individual basis. For example, E. Sherstoboeva and J. Pavlenko follow this tendency with regard to blog demarcation (Sherstoboeva, Pavlenko, 2015). Considering the issue of media legislation, it is necessary to mention the “Recommendation for a new notion of media” adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 2011. In order to identify the media in the context of developing information and communication technologies

and changes in the media system, the authors propose six criteria: 1) intention to act as the media; 2) purpose and underlying objectives of the media; 3) editorial control; 4) professional standards; 5) outreach and dissemination; 6) public expectation. In general, these criteria correlate with those proposed here. However, the document allows for quite a large range of interpretation. Some interpretations relate to several criteria at the same time. This could hinder the process of media identification.

The establishment of consensus on this issue is regarded as an important task not only within the realm of theory, however, but also because a legal framework must be instituted to provide for smooth functioning of new media in the global information space. Consensus on definitions and approaches will accelerate the development of a single statute, which would by necessity include international regulatory standards applying to the field of internet media.

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