

LOCAL NEWSPAPER IN MODERN RUSSIA: SPECIFICS OF DEVELOPMENT AND MAIN TRENDS

МЕСТНАЯ ГАЗЕТА В РОССИИ СЕГОДНЯ: ОСОБЕННОСТИ РАЗВИТИЯ И ОСНОВНЫЕ ТЕНДЕНЦИИ

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The present article is devoted to the condition of newspapers in small and medium sized Russian cities in 2010. It covers a number of topical issues, including: do local newspapers strive to reflect the most important problems of towns, to what extent do journalists and editors of local newspapers feel independent, how much are local newspapers ready to react to modern technological challenges, how effective are its ways of communication with the readers, what are the economic conditions of the editors offices of local newspapers, etc. This article is written based on a survey of 153 respondents in 66 editors' offices from 55 Russian towns.

Key words: *Russia; local press; the journalist in a local newspaper; the problems of a local newspaper.*

Статья посвящена состоянию газет малых и средних городов России в 2010-х гг. В ней затрагивается ряд акту-

альных в этом контексте вопросов, в том числе: стремится ли местная газета отражать наиболее важные проблемы вашего города; какова степень независимости журналистов и редакторов местных газет; насколько местная газета в состоянии отвечать на современные технологические вызовы; насколько эффективны ее формы коммуникации с аудиторией; каковы экономические условия работы редакций местных газет и др. Статья подготовлена по основным результатам опроса 153 респондентов в 66 редакциях 55 российских городов.

Ключевые слова: Россия; местная пресса; журналист местной газеты; проблемы местной газеты.

Introduction: the press of medium and small towns in Russia

The smaller towns traditionally are of great significance for Russia. The number of towns in the state is 1099, of which 155 were medium sized (with a population from 50 to 100 thousand people) and 780 small sized towns (with a population up to 50 thousand people). These smaller towns account for 85% of all the municipalities in the state, and their population is 27,310,615 (28% of urban population).

They historically developed as settled centers, important not only to urban agglomeration, but also for its outskirts. They are the gatherings of social, economic and cultural life of the region. Municipal authorities, educational and medical institutions, transport hubs, and trade establishments, which are used not merely by urban residents, but also by rural population, are situated there. Mid-sized and small towns contain Russian history, folk culture, folk craft, traditions, and customs. Undoubtedly they

are the most significant segment of the area for information and communication of the country and the regions. At times the local press is the only informer about the life of the town and the district.

The researchers specify various possibilities for the development of less populated towns in Russia depending on their location and resources. In general, these towns are the most organic environment for business, especially for smaller ones.

In this respect, successful functioning of a local press has a particular significance. There are no precise statistics on newspapers in smaller towns, but some data are available regardless of town types. According to the figures of the Foundation for Information Policy Development (FIDP), 2,884 (77%) of 3,741 newspapers are municipal editions founded by a municipality or (and) a territorial entity of the Russian Federation (Kolesnik, 2012). The statistics show that this sector of mass media is growing fast. Over the last 30 years, the number of local newspapers has increased dramatically: in 1989 there were 490 of them, now it approaches a sevenfold increase of 4,000. The circulation of newspapers has increased for this period as well.

The information above emphasizes the necessity of a federal program that shall be consistently implemented to support this category of cities. Such a program was first adopted in 1996 and for the second time in the middle of 2005. However, the federal level still lacks a coherent concept stipulating the function of medium-sized towns and especially small ones in Russia as well as their economic and socio-cultural role. Even high-ranking officials have made statements about the weak potential of small towns. Opponents of this viewpoint demonstrate their objections. Without the policy of preservation and development for this category of settlements, the processes of stagnation, depopulation, and degradation will further

spread to a greater or lesser degree through most cities and rural settlements outside the major agglomerations; tens or hundreds of small towns and thousands of rural settlements will become completely uninhabited. Demographic and economic processes of “desertification” will affect a number of historically populated and economically developed regions of central Russia, the Volga area, the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East.

Obviously, the government has recently changed their point of view, considering the Ministry of Regional Development of Russia has been currently discussing a drafted concept of the federal targeted program for economic development and improvement of living standards in small towns of the Russian Federation between the period 2015–2020. This program aims to create proper conditions for the development of a real economy in small towns and add to their marketability.

The researchers believe that in order to overcome difficulties and to ensure prospects of development for medium-sized and small Russian towns, both enlisting state support and enhancing self-development resources are necessary. The former shall be based on the well elaborated and consistently implemented nationwide program, and the latter will rely on a competent urban administration (town management) and an effective municipal government. Successes in various aspects of life in these towns will be unachievable unless the potential of their citizens is realized.

The research problem: the main trends in today's local Russian newspaper

The successful performance of local press has a particularly special significance. Although there are no accurate statistics on

newspapers in mid-sized and small towns available, there are figures available without a breakdown by city type.

The local print occupies a fundamentally important place in the media landscape of Russia. Unfortunately, nowadays this resource is surely underestimated, as evidenced by the 2013 All-Russian Congress of municipalities, where, in the course of the discussion about important problems faced by municipalities, the essential issues of the local press were never raised. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the local press must and is able to promptly inform the public about local troubles, engage civil society in the deliberations, and search for solutions. Newspapers in average-sized and small towns have very important communicative functions as a consolidation of the local community, infrastructure development, economic, socio-cultural potential of cities and regions, and contributions to solving specific problems of citizens. The local press performs a vital task of preserving journalism, which is close to the people's requirements and needs, and incorporating basic Russian values.

The local press has an essential function in the media environment of Russia. However, its value is underestimated these days, and insignificant attention is paid to its development. The local press must and can inform the population promptly about local problems, draw the civic society to their discussion and find ways to solutions.

The detailed analysis of the practice of newspapers in smaller towns, including scientific research, may contribute to improvement of their activity, and raise their role in the life of urban residents. Nowadays there is an obvious lack of such research, notwithstanding interesting and useful projects are available, for instance, those fulfilled by the Trust of Public Communications Policy Development (TPCPD) in 2006 (Munitsipal'naya pressa, reforma mestnogo

samoupravleniya i natsional'nye proekty, 2006), 2008 and 2012 (ibid). Various highly influential scientific publications (Tulupov, 2011) are dedicated to this subject (see e.g.: Kasyutin, 2011; Svitich, Shiryaeva, 2006). Typically research of the regional press is conducted without distinguishing it as a part of smaller towns. The research focused on the special role of local newspapers must be considerably updated to keep up with the changes that take place in the Russian media system.

In this respect, we find it important to study what the main trends and factors of evolution of a modern local newspaper in Russia are, and what would be the mechanisms of increasing its role particularly in the development of small and medium-sized towns and of the Russian regions as a whole.

Our main research questions are:

- How successfully does a Russian local newspaper perform in present-day conditions?
- Does a local newspaper strive to reflect the most important problems of the town?
- To what extent do journalists and editors of local newspapers feel independent?
- To what extent is the local newspaper ready to react to modern technological challenges?
- How effective are its ways of communicating with the readers?
- What are the economic conditions of the editors' offices of local newspapers?

In order to answer these questions we explored the attitude of the chiefs of editors' offices and journalists towards the position of newspapers in average and small towns, their problems, and their development prospects by means of a questionnaire method.

The specific character of the research methodology “Newspapers of medium and small towns in Russia in 2010s”, which is provided in this article, is the *sociocentric approach*, i.e. is the maximal consideration of social context, which demonstrates the range of problems that are typical nowadays of medium-sized and small towns. The comparative analysis of the feedback from the newspapers’ representatives allows the model of the issue and the degree of its implementation to be presented more on a case by case basis. The model was supposed to assess the opinions of the editors and journalists on a number of different aspects. The research method involves the polling of managers and journalists. Altogether and 26 federal districts (one in four, in average) were involved in the selection. A balance of varying areas of the Russian Federation (provinces, territories, republics, national areas) and part of the national communities (approximately 30%) is sustained. The following is included in the selection: 26 federal districts of the Russian Federation; 55 towns, 66 editors’ offices, and 100 journalists and 53 chiefs of editors’ offices. 153 people were questioned in total.

The main results of the research

One of the most important objectives of this research was to reveal the opinions of small town editors and journalists about the objectives that are covered by their publications (*Table 1*).

Table 1

**Answers to a question: “What are the most important objectives
of your issues today in your opinion?”
(as % of the number of respondents)**

Very important objective	%
Informing of the most important events in the life of a town	96
Drawing public attention to the topical issues in the life of a town	83
Contribution to developing a feeling of a small motherland, belonging to the life of a town, community spirit of urban residents	77
Promotion of positive values, moral and ethical education	73
Informing of the decisions and actions of municipal authorities, informational support of decisions of municipal authorities that are of great importance for a town	68
Arrangement of public discussions on important issues of the life of a town, expression of the public opinion	68
Social protection of people, help in specific life matters	64
Forming public opinion	63
The advisory role, publication of practically useful background information	59
Contribution to the development of cultural and historical traditions	56
The educational role, widening of horizons, increase of a cultural level of the audience	56
Contribution to social and economic development of a town	55
Control over the activity of authorities	52
Contribution to the development of municipal government, civic society	52
Assistance in the communication and establishing of mutual understanding among different layers, groups of urban residents	45
Ideological, political orientation of the audience	32
Distribution of promotional information	31
Informing of the most important events in the life of a region	27
Informing of the decisions and activity of state authorities of a higher level	18
Assistance in recreation and entertainment of the audience	17
Informing of the most important events in the life of the country	12
Miscellaneous	—

As the data demonstrates, the most important objective is still informing the public about the most significant events occurring in a town (96%). The respondents believed that drawing the public attention to the topical issues of a town (83%) and contribution to developing a feeling of a small motherland, belonging to the life of a town, and increasing the community spirit of urban residents (77%), the next objectives of importance.

Interestingly, the entertainment of the audience is considered to be one of the least important objectives (17%).

After generalizing the information about the objectives, it should be mentioned that editors and journalists of newspapers in smaller towns consider everything to be important that is connected with the local community and the concerns of its residents, which corresponds with the peculiarities of this type of press.

The respondents were also asked a special question, which was meant to evaluate the attention that is really paid to certain objectives. The answers to this question revealed that the objectives that the editors and journalists consider significant are conveyed more successfully in their opinions.

The answers of journalists revealed that only two objectives are fulfilled quite comprehensively: informing of town events and covering the activity of governing bodies. The others are implemented insufficiently at the moment. The main reasons for that, according to the respondents, are connected to the deficiency in financial, technical, and staff supply (e.g. this is connected with the reduction of staff, increase in the amount of work of every journalist, reduction of proficiency of journalists, etc.).

Current affairs in local newspaper today

The objectives of a newspaper are naturally implemented through the content of publications. As soon as the contents of local newspapers

are primarily formed based on issues of a town and the life of its people, the research takes into consideration an open question about the most essential problems of a town that the newspaper publishes (*Table 2*).

Table 2

**The answers to an open question:
“What are the most important problems of your town?”
(as % of the number of respondents)**

Answers	%
Unemployment, industry is destroyed, township-forming enterprises and big production works are closed, decay of agriculture, lack of working places, lack of working places for the youth	50
Communal services problems	31
Population decline and ageing, shortage of personnel, flow of population to big cities, young people continue living in places they get the education, no places for leisure activity of the youth, apathy of the youth, migration policy	25
Lack of municipal improvement (insufficient development of the infrastructure, small part of taxes remains in the municipal budget)	22
Low remuneration, low standard of living	18
Bad condition of roads and transport	18
The condition of the culture and education, low level of culture, the condition of architectural monuments, insufficient attention to the historical legacy	14
Public health services	14
Incompetence and staff scarcity among the city leaders, corruption, closeness of authorities, red tape	13
Budgetary deficit of town councils, economic instability, the lack of investment, investment projects in the industry and agriculture, reduction of financial receipts into the budget	12
Shortage of places in day-care facilities	5
Staff scarcity among the police, lawlessness, crime	4
Apathy, depressiveness, alcoholism	4
Poorly diversified economy, small and mid-sized business are not developed	4

It's remarkable that the respondents pointed out the same subjects that are highlighted by experts conducting research on this situation in average and small towns (i.e. the staff of the local editorial offices clearly understands the real social context that a certain editors' office works within).

After the main enterprises were shut down, the major problem in smaller Russian towns became unemployment: the youth have no places to work, so they move to big cities. The problem of a decreasing population and an ageing population is tightly connected with the loss of jobs.

The research shows that editors and journalists clearly realize the problems of their towns, the interests of local residents, and the town's needs. They aspire to arrange the contents of newspapers in accordance with the most critical aspects of life.

The subjects connected to the daily routine of an ordinary person are considered top-priority topics for newspapers of mid-sized and small towns, yet those subjects are what the national press in Russia pays little attention to. Among these subjects are housing and utility sectors; construction and renovation of municipal housing and roads; operation of municipal transport; ecology; municipal improvement; human services; and operation of educational, medical, and cultural institutions (i.e. exactly the subjects that are the most burning for the residents of these towns and they must be in the center of attention of the authorities).

Solving these problems depends on the work of the authorities, as well as the work of law enforcement agencies, and crime prevention, which is something that the urban environment cannot be safe and comfortable without.

A town's economy, development of the production sphere, industrial enterprises, small and mid-size businesses, the sector of employment, development of a labor market, and job creation

take quite an important place, since these aspects are limited in the majority of smaller towns.

Unfortunately, the historical themes of a town, region, and tourism development are at the end of the list. Meanwhile, the development of these domains by means of drawing the attention through the press could help some towns, especially small ones, find the resources for the acquisition of their economic potential.

The audience and the forms of intercommunication with it

Local newspapers are really close to their audience, since they are aimed at all audience's groups, and they have mass amounts of readers. But according to journalists, the audience is mostly middle-aged adults and seniors with a secondary education background. Journalists and editors of newspapers believe their newspapers are insufficiently popular among the young audience, which is certainly not exclusively a problem of the local press. At the same time, the reasons for this are connected with the tradition of urban Russian newspapers focusing on adults.

Special youth newspapers were available almost in every town, however, now, especially in small towns, there is only one newspaper per town as a rule.

The journalists of local newspapers, primarily in small towns, know their readers fairly well and that is why they do not experience a severe shortage of knowledge about the audience's interests and preferences.

The research has allowed connections between the local press and the audience as well (*Table 3*).

Table 3

**The answer to a question: “What ways of regular connection with the audience do you use?”
(as % of the number of respondents)**

Answer options	%
Consultation of the visitors of editors offices	76
Connection through electronic mail	70
Reading letters to the editor	65
Face-to-face meetings with readers	49
Social networking sites	34
Forums on a newspaper website	31
Arranged meetings with readers (readers' conferences, festivals, round tables, away editors offices, etc.)	25

As the answers demonstrate, the editors still receive the readers in editorial offices in the same traditional way, and it is the most popular form of communication (76%) along with letters from readers (65%). At the same time the modern forms of communication – connecting through electronic mail (70%), social networking sites (34%), and forums on newspaper websites (31%) are a large part of the communication with the audience. Answers received for questions about how often journalists use social networking sites reveal that only 14% do not utilize them, and about 60% use them on a daily basis or twice a week.

The potential of town residents influencing the content of a paper is seen as an important issue (*Table 4*).

Table 4

**The answer to a question: “Do you think the common town residents have the possibility to influence the content of your paper?”
(as % of the number of respondents)**

Answer options	%
Yes, significant	56
Yes, but insufficient	31
No	8
I don't know, no answer	5

The answers to this question are generally positive, although one third of the respondents think that these possibilities are insignificant.

Generally speaking, the results show the actions of the editors' offices in the intercommunication with town residents. Knowing the attitudes and needs of different layers of the population better is still insufficient, it is important to involve this information in the newspapers' content more actively, to make it apparent to the public.

The degree of journalistic independence

The freedom of the press and professional independence of journalists is a basic condition for the efficiency of the socially conscious press. Questions about the professional independence of journalists were usually asked in social research conducted at the Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University

from the beginning of the 1990s (Svitich, Shiryaeva, 2006). The comparison of the journalists' answers on this subject displays some positive progress has taken place in recent years, but it is still insufficiently important (*Table 5*).

Table 5

**The journalists' answers to the question:
“Please, evaluate the degree of freedom of journalist's independence
in your town, based on your personal experience
or from your communication with colleagues from
other editors offices”**
(as % of the number of respondents)

Answer options	2013	2006
Journalists are free enough, independent	24	21
Experience certain restraints	53	51
As a rule, do not feel free or independent	17	27
No answer	2	1

Editors feel freer than journalists. More detailed answers were received about people or things that abridge the freedom of editors and journalists (*Table 6*).

Table 6

**The answers to the question: “Who or what, in your opinion,
mostly abridge professional independence of journalists?”
(as % of the number of respondents)**

Answer options	2013	2006
Financial dependence	39	61
Self-censorship, “inner editor”, own stereotypes of thinking	39	32
Authorities	29	18
Founders	24	42
Fear of being pursued for straightforward releases	17	4
The chiefs of editors offices	15	*
Sponsors, advertising spenders	8	3
Owners	7	*
Pressure from different organizations, institutions	6	4
Insufficiency of their own professional expertise	5	*
Pressure from the audience, public opinion	4	*
Miscellaneous	3	*
No answer	3	1

*This option of answer was not available in the research in 2006.

Financial dependence and self-censorship take the primary positions of the answers, especially in newspapers of medium-sized towns. Also the freedom of journalists is definitely restricted by the chiefs of editors' offices. After calculating the influence of the authorities, founders, and owners together, this issue will take first place. In comparison with the research of 2006, financial dependence today is less significant than self-censorship.

Economic condition of the editorial offices of local newspapers

Since the economic factor is determinative in the state of today's press, some questions are dedicated to this subject. The general question about the state of editors' offices showed that 22% defined it as good, 57% as average and 21% as poor.

The answers of editors demonstrate that the main source of income of editorial offices is advertising (70% of answers) and subscription (57%), and 64% of editors of medium-sized towns chose subscription. 30% said that the source of budget is state and municipal financing. Thus, the perception that the local press in Russia fully depends on state financing is extremely exaggerated. A lot of newspapers are considered commercially successful and maintain their financial needs primarily by means of advertising and partially by subscriptions.

The research indicated that editorial offices hardly use potential sources, e.g., the funds of civic and social organizations, sponsorship of private individuals, or readers' charitable contributions. The proportion of secondary business information (printing of literature, forms, business cards, post cards, etc.) is not too popular.

In general, 60% of editors defined their papers as cost efficient. Without doubt, many editors' offices experience a shortage of funds. This, in turn, affects almost all the sides and conditions of work in editors' offices: quantity of employees, their proficiency, remuneration, in-service education, business trips, and the ability to purchase modern technical facilities as well as their integration into the work process.

Local newspapers and processes of convergence

One of most topical objectives of the research is to reveal the ways advanced digital technologies are introduced in local newspapers and the degree of their integration within the developmental trends of the modern media.

The answers of the chief editors and journalists show that these processes in Russian local newspapers are rather active. The content is primarily provided in the Internet. Although a small part of content is prepared for radio, television, and even for portable media, these forms of media convergence are not specific to newspapers of small towns.

In accordance with the answers, the issues presented in this research reveal 85% of information is posted in a certain form on the Internet. It is natural that the processes of media convergence are faster in newspapers of medium-sized towns: 54% of answers of their representatives say that there is an independent web version of an issue (only 29% in small towns). Almost 70% of the respondents checked the box “the multimedia content: photos, audio and video materials are ‘posted’ on the site” (only 29% in small towns). 20% of editors and journalists of newspapers in medium-sized towns informed about the practice of preparing the content for TV(11%) for radio releases (7%), and for portable media. All these forms have a smaller presence in newspapers of small towns.

Education, gender and age of the employees of editors' offices

In this research, the situation of the personnel was studied in the context of the media environment's development of a town.

In that regard, the editors of issues were asked a question about how they estimate the situation with journalistic personnel in their town.

Unfortunately, 69% of editors say that there is shortage of journalists in a town, and 60% believe that their proficiency is not sufficient.

Judging by the answers of editors to this open question along with reports in newspapers, there is a need, for example, in columns, analysts and observers. Without doubt, photographers, web-designers, and representatives of other professions that use digital technologies are in demand.

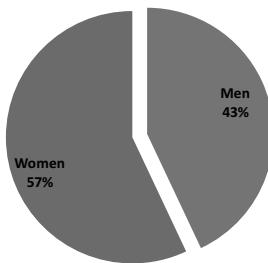
The large majority of journalists in local Russian newspapers have a higher education (85%). But only one fourth of journalists have a higher journalistic education. The most widespread type of education is philological and pedagogic.

The age configuration of the employees of editors' offices is insufficiently balanced, according to the opinion of chiefs of editors' offices: 40% of editors said that ageing people prevail in their offices. The most efficient and expert age in this profession from 40 to 49 years is a complete "gap".

The research also demonstrated that fundamental changes happened in the ratio of male to female personnel within the last years: there were 85% of women among the polled journalists. While approximately twenty years ago, 65–70% of men worked in newspapers, and now the situation is the opposite. It is indicative that the percentage of women among the chiefs of editors offices is a little less than among the journalists (53%), but nevertheless, they prevail over the men (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1

**“Gender structure of the chiefs of editors offices
of local newspapers in Russia”
(as % of the number of respondents)**



Thus, the research confirmed that the process of feminization of journalism as a profession was very concentrated in Russia over the past years. This was connected with a range of objective factors: during the restructure at the end of the last century, men quitted editors' offices because journalists' salaries were extremely low and they were unable to support their families with this money. At the same time the research dispelled a myth that women play an unimportant role in the media management in Russia: the proportion of the chiefs of editors offices is substantial and it is very likely to continue growing.

Conclusion

The research emphasizes that the editors and journalists of the towns of Russia are willing to work actively to satisfy the information and communication needs of their audience, assist the

development of their towns, and increase of the people's wellbeing. Vast successes are attained in the development of local newspapers in 2010s: they became more technically equipped, obtained digital technologies, and utilized various computer programs that widen the possibilities of editorial offices in the formation and presentation of newspaper content. Public relations are used in their work; the advanced technologies of modeling are used, design improves, and newspapers are issued in color more frequently. Related to convergence processes, all of the newspapers are fully published on websites. However, these processes are developed irregularly today as their arrangement depends on the financial situation of editorial offices as well as personnel proficiency. Editorial offices extensively use opportunities to attract people to public discussions about important town issues, both in traditional forms and on the Internet. However, the polled editors and journalists claim that newspapers reflect the interests and attitudes of different groups and layers of a population insufficiently. In accordance with the estimates of the employees of editorial offices, ageing people prevail in the real audience, and that is why the objective of attracting young readers is particularly stressed, which is associated with their interests considering content formation and introduction to specific pages, supplements, attachments, columns, etc. Comparisons between past research show that the situation connected with the information independence of journalists generally has improved.

The data received from the research allows us to make a conclusion about a certain exaggeration of widespread opinions that small-town newspapers are monetarily dependent and survive on government subsidies. The main sources of income are revenue from advertising and subscriptions, as editors stated. The research also confirmed that the process of feminization of the journalistic

profession recently has been very in Russia. As a result, about 85% of journalists in local newspapers are women. At the same time, the research dispelled a myth that women take an insignificant place in Russian media management: there are more female chiefs of editors than male in local newspapers.

According to the results of our survey, the most important factors for the future of local newspapers are the level of economic development of a town, financial material and technical provision of editorial offices, the legal and economic status of urban newspapers, social control of the society, focus on the needs of a population and demands of the audience, the formation of information policy by founders and owners, the provision of proficient editor personnel and efficient editorial management.

In general, the evaluation of the research output leads us to the conclusion that a local newspaper in Russia is not only alive, but it is also extensively developing and pretty eagerly demanded by its audience. The journalists of local newspapers, despite economic and other difficulties, are upbeat and ready to continue working on satisfying the information needs of its audience and contributing to the development of their towns.

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