

Media theory in Russia: A current wave of fermentation

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Abstract

This article focuses on the changing nature of media studies in Russia. The author explores the ‘ferment in the field’ concept, introduced in the communication research in the early 1980s and developed further in 1990s, 2000s and nowadays by different scholars. The author identifies four actual ‘ferments’ as driving forces of media theory change in Russia, becoming a part of a second wave of fermentation process in global media studies, reinforced by digital transformations. The first ferment is the central role of Moscow city based academic centers in Russian media studies; the second one is the high number and intellectual diversity of regional media studies. The pressures from an actively growing media business, the industry and the labor market, is the third ‘ferment’, and the fourth one is the experience, methodologies and conceptual framework of global media studies. The conclusion is that there is a need for the expanded discussion on the nature and principles of media as a research field not only within the academic community, but with public, media industry professionals, and regulators.

Keywords

Russian media studies, ferments in the field, post-Soviet media transformation, digital media

Contemporary mass media studies as a research area have been globally influenced by contradictory and divergent trends of the development of a modern society as well as by rapid digital transformations of the media landscapes and journalism. For many scholars, it is clear that the interrelations between the society and media in the context of digital revolution have become

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deeper, more complex and sophisticated, although they have stimulated more broader interactions and interconnections between the society and media (Athique, 2013; Lindgren, 2017). As early as at the turn of the 2000s, these developments forced media scholars to reconsider conventional theoretical assumptions about mass media, their social and industrial nature, traditional institutions and audience, its need and demands for media. Scholarly approaches to the character, principles, aims and operation effects of journalism, and media have been drastically revised (Van der Haak, Parks & Castells, 2012; Hallin & Mancini (eds.), 2012; Rheingold, 2006; Zemlyanova, 2010).

Like several decades ago when in 1960 – 1970s media developed as an essential social institute under the influence of multiple social processes and forces, scholars claimed about new ‘ferments’ in the media studies (Gerbner, 1983) today’s scholars in their work to conceptualize digital media and their interrelations with a society and people call for new ”ferments questions about the present and re-articulate future alternatives” (Fuchs, Qiu, 2018: 220). Thus, the need for further discussions of the origins, current state and prospect of media and communication studies has been recently re-emphasized by the international academia.

Search for the field?

In the 2010s, the discussion on major theories and concepts of Russian media studies has been intensified; moreover, basic conceptions, terms and even the very object of study started to be debated (Gorokhov, 2012; Lazutina, 2012; Prokhorov, 2012; Fomicheva, 2012). This is not surprising because the debate about the research field has been rather hot in many countries. As Nordenstreng put it, “thought-out this half century the field of media studies has expanded perhaps more that any other academic field apart from computer science and biomedicine” (Nordenstreng, 2004: 8).

This is also true of Russia. Over recent years, Russian academic community has extensively discussed both the boundaries and subject of media theory and media studies. Many research centers at universities and educational institutions hold All-Russian conferences on this topic (in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Voronezh, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk). Academic journals (Moscow University Journalism Bulletin, *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta. Series 9. Philology. Asian Studies. Journalism, Voprosy Teorii i Praktiki Zhurnalistiki*) and other core scientific periodicals published theoretical articles aimed not only at producing new knowledge but also at discussing the renewal, reconsideration and reassessment of the existing one.

As concerning the ‘ferments’ of the Russian media studies, it is obvious that the three major social ‘fields’ – that of media industry, media research and education – have been the most influential in challenging the old – Soviet and early post-Soviet paradigms. To be more precise, it is a social interaction between the fundamental theory, the industry with its actual practice determined by commercial interests, technological challenges of production, the changing regulation and in addition based on its own block of applied, instrumental empirics and analytics, and the higher professional education, whose legitimacy must be confirmed at each stage of media technological development (Vartanova & Lukina, 2014).

Undoubtedly, this interaction has resulted in a number of contradictions existing in all industrial contexts and professional areas in all countries and at all phases of modernity since the establishment of industrial production and the rise of higher education. The general context of the discussions on media theory which have been taking place in the Russian society from the 1990s, was certainly defined by the post-Soviet transformations with their numerous social and cultural consequences. In terms of understanding media, it was a growing inconsistency between the theoretical notions of the media by the academic and educational communities, on the one hand, and the actual functioning of the media as an industry, labor market and professional sphere, on the other. These discussions were also indicative of the attempts by Russian media scholars to consolidate their efforts in working out joint approaches and shaping the identity of Russian media studies. For instance, in 2011 an All-Russian discussion platform, the National Association of Mass Media Researchers, was established as a move to produce a forum for debates and collaboration.

Nevertheless, these efforts have yet resulted neither in a well-developed research area nor in a unity and joint identity among Russian media scholars (Dunas, 2016). This is obviously related to the complicated historical way of the transformations of Russian media and journalism studies. While in the 1990s the Soviet research paradigms were almost totally abandoned and mechanically replaced by the most popular foreign ones and in the 2000s the question of accepting and adapting the foreign experience came to the fore, today there is an apparent need to move away from borrowings and clearly formulate the ferments and basic foundations of the of Russian media studies.

‘Ferments’ in Russian media studies

It would be incorrect to neglect the richest experience of the Russian media studies in 1990s – 2000s, when the research was flooded by previously unused and even unknown foreign media academic thesaurus and concepts. Still,

today there is a clear need to have a well-balanced, critical and at the same time innovative approach to the updating, upgrading and further development of media theory in Russian academia. As several authors argued, media and communication studies do not exist in a vacuum, but respond to different challenges in and outside academia. The use of the 'ferment' approach to highlight the need for contentious examination of communication research and to have a 'meta look' at what is going in the media studies is definitely relevant to the emerging national schools in the field (Nordenstreng, 2004, Fucks, Qiu, 2018). Thus, defining the present state of the Russian media studies, several 'ferments' are important to be mentioned.

The first ferment is the central role of Moscow based academic centers in Russian media studies. Since the 18th century, Moscow, the capital, the political heart, economic hub and cultural leader, has historically accumulated enormous intellectual resources. The foundation of the Moscow Imperial (now State) University in 1855 provided the excellent conditions for the development of national fundamental science. It is hard to overestimate the role of Mikhail Lomonosov who, being an encyclopedist, also laid the foundations for Russian humanitarian knowledge and the theoretical basis of journalist' and editor' ethics (Lomonosov, 2011).

Today, the Moscow school of media studies is surely one of the most well-known Russian research schools not only in the country but also abroad. This is historically related to the high visibility of the Faculty of Journalism of Lomonosov Moscow State University in the international academic associations and to its leadership in all-Russian educational process due to its role in setting-up and developing educational standards for Russian journalism education as well as to its role in theoretical studies. Currently the Moscow school of media studies is rapidly expanding due to the emergence of new centers for journalism education and media studies in the Russian capital, which considerably raised its profile.

The second ferment is a high number and intellectual diversity of regional media studies. Such centers are extremely valuable in terms of their original and regionally driven research angles of socio-cultural circumstances for journalism and regional media systems. The St. Petersburg school, which emerged from the academic environment of the Faculty of Journalism of Leningrad State University, holds a unique place in Russian media studies. Due to its fundamental theoretical normativity and adjusting the latest foreign theoretical approaches to digital media communications in the Russian environment, it has undoubtedly retained its national significance (Korkonosenko, 2010; Puyu, Bodrunova (eds.), 2013). Understanding of research representing numerous

Russian schools of media studies is essential for both appreciating the variety and originality of approaches and identifying the “common denominator” for the national Russian media studies (Chernov, 2013).

The third ferment is represented by pressures from an actively growing media business, the industry and the labor market. The academic environment itself would be unable to produce new knowledge without reliance on empirical data and industrial realities of newsrooms, professional managerial and corporate journalistic communities. Fundamental science would be able to conceptualize and theorize with a support of empirical data generated by industrial analysts, corporate research structures, sociological services and media measurement companies. Notably, it has been already reflected in industrial reports and collections of analytical articles produced for the industry managers. Although these publications are far from theoretical science and academic culture of research, they are not only producing industry analytics but also develop the conceptual framework of the emerging processes and phenomena.

In this connection, as a challenge for media studies one should mention industry reports on the state and trends of the periodical press, television, radio, the Internet and the publishing industry, which have been produced with support from the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications. Another example are the series “Russian Advertising Yearbook” published by the Russian Association of Communication Agencies and the series “Theory and Practice of Media Advertising Research” by the Analytical Center Video International (Veselov, Kolomiets (eds.), 2011; Veselov, Kolomiets (eds.), 2012). Such analysis is not always produced within the framework of classical theoretical investigation but representing high-quality analytics of the media industry it lays a sound foundation for further theoretical exploration.

And, lastly, the fourth ferment is the experience, methodologies and conceptual framework of global media studies. In the years of the Soviet Union, Russian researchers positioned themselves as the academic opposition to foreign theories. After 1991, they started to extensively explore and accept theories, concepts and methods adopted from foreign, mostly Anglo-Saxon research. As a result, Russian media studies were enriched with the works written by our foreign colleagues and our academic school acquired fame in the global academic space (Thussu, 2009).

The 2010s brought into focus two new circumstances. First, in the context of the scientific and cultural globalization it became obvious that national circumstances and ‘path dependency’ were relevant concepts to almost all national schools of media studies. And this is why there is an across-the-board need not so much for an adaptation but for a national reconsideration of global

theoretical frameworks. Second, media studies in various countries undergo significant changes, renovation and search for adequate scientific answers to the digital transformations of the media (Fenton, 2009). Consequently, Russian scholars are also faced with the need, shared with foreign colleagues, to join in the global process of critical reconsideration of the media thesaurus, concepts and theories.

These four actual 'ferments' are becoming even more visible in the course of digital transformations of the Russian media and need to be put in the context of the national and global media studies, which both are now at a challenging but exciting stage of new "fermentation", (Fuchs, Qiu, 2018), or identity search, as D. Dunas put it (2016).

Expanding the discussion on the nature and principles of media as a research field one should take it beyond the bounds of the academic community and, communicating with a wide public, discuss the conceptual and terminological framework of the media as a social institution whose understanding is important nowadays for digitalizing societies. Perhaps, it is time to start collaboration with media industry professionals, regulators; educational environment and even the general public to clarify terms, concepts and identity of Russian media operations.

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