

Media futurology: “Journalism of sense” and robotization of media industry

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Abstract

The author focuses on the development of media futurology as a separate research field, and argues that it can be used for more detailed description of changes taking place in media production and journalism today. According to his forecast, there is going to be an unavoidable reduction of journalists engaged in the production of technologically simple news content due to robotization of mass media. At the same time, there still remains a demand for journalists specializing in more complex types of activities: interpretation of events and comprehension of the reality.

Keywords

Media futurology, futurology, future, media production, robotization, media education, the mission of journalism, the end of journalism

Introduction: The urgency of media futurology

Thinking about the future of journalism and its perspective is not a new topic. For example, at the beginning of this century Joseph B. Atkins, John C. Merrill and their colleagues were trying to observe contemporary trends in their paper “The Mission: Journalism. Ethics and the World” (Atkins, 2002). However, at that time various kinds of influence upon journalism and media, including political and finance pressure, marketing influence, which transformed journalism into public relations, etc. were in the main focus of researchers’ attention. At the end of 2010s, the development of new media and rapid growth of user generated content made some researchers speak about “the end of journalism”, meaning the end of the traditional “serious” and ethic journalism (Ashton, 2008:

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Jacobson, 2013; Miller, 2009). The influence of new technologies upon media sphere and the society was discussed even by such a well-known theoretic of mass communication as Denis McQuail (McQuail, 2013). In spite of it at the end of 2020s we see that earlier forecasts of media and journalism's development didn't take into account such factor as robotization of the humanitarian sphere. Meantime this trend is likely to change the discussion about the existence of journalism as a mission, a profession and even as a kind of human activity.

Mediasphere is coming across with strengthening crisis phenomena and it highly requires the emergence of such a direction of knowledge which can be called media futurology. Nowadays mass media are not only included in political, economic, social processes, they are a part of our being. Therefore, issues that at first sight should only "concern industry" experts – media consumption, economy of the media, relations between media and power – are actively researched by a wide range of scholars. At the same time there is a shortage of academic research that would prepare us to an approximate understanding of the future of mass media and journalism with the help of foresight methods.

Today we can observe the results of want of information about the future: the expansion of the World Wide Web inexorably destroys the traditional media economy with deficiency of content and channels of its distribution, leads to increasing difference in styles and ways of media consumption among different age and social groups. On the one hand, it further complicates the work of media organizations, especially small ones, and, on the other hand, strengthens the continuing fragmentation of society into different information worlds (Boltz, 2011: 15). How successful is the strategy of maximum content customization in these conditions? Or is it better to work with certain, but numerous age groups, for example, only with retired people? These and other questions remain unanswered.

However, the development of media futurology is possible even under these conditions: the lack of sectoral foresight research within the media industry is partly compensated by wide variety of works studying the development of various social, technical and economic processes in which the mass media are involved. On its basis, some predictions can already be made. Undoubtedly, this method does not allow you to make attachment to time (to say, when exactly one trend can be changed), but at least it allows identifying key trends and trajectories of movement. That means that media organizations and higher schools training personnel for the mediasphere have some extra time to find solutions.

Such studies are particularly relevant for universities, because it is impossible to adapt students to work they will face in the future in the labour market if we rely only on past experience and the current problems of the media industry. So, we should play ahead of the game. But, unfortunately, now the future (perspective 5-10 years) does not represent an interest of both theorists and practical workers. Firstly, for understanding that fact, it is enough to get acquainted with the topics of scientific conferences which are held by the departments of journalism: the focus is on the history of the press and the trends including in the current agenda. Secondly, attempts to speak with practical workers about the future also do not lead to any success. In March, 2015 the Department of Journalism of the Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk held the 1st interdisciplinary conference “Siberian Media Space 2020”. Representatives of three Siberian universities took part in this conference: Siberian Federal University, Novosibirsk State Research University, Tomsk State University, Higher School of Economics, as well as media managers and journalists from one of the most media developed regions of the country and representatives of regional authorities. One of the results of the conference was the statement of the fact that not only do the representatives of the media industry not have a vision of medium-term prospects, but also an understanding the reason behind those thoughts about it, although today the Krasnoyarsk Region is one of the few regions of the country with partly “programmed” future: in 2019, the World Universiade will be held in Krasnoyarsk.

Robotization of media production and fact journalism

The contemporary process affecting all spheres of public life is the development of the technosphere. The influence of this factor is so total and strong that we no longer think about it. And it does not cause much concern. As Norbert Boltz notes (2011: 64-69), today even wars are conducted not by people, but by machines which are organized by means of communication between themselves, and the pilots of passenger liners do not “fly” in the former sense of the word: they are just managers. And in fact, today the same managers, “controllers” of technological processes are representatives of many professions.

In a certain sense, now we are witnessing the realization of Galileo’s idea of the mathematization of nature. After all, the digitalization of reality with the help of modern technologies has led to the results which the researcher Scott McQuire exactly called the replacement of people by numbers and the rewriting of nature by technology as industrial mechanisms are supplemented by information ones. At the beginning of the second half of the 19th century, the spatial experience of man was enlarged due to events that took place somewhere far away, and the

gap between the way of life centered on one place and the new forms of being was shortened. Then the man achieved more success in overcoming his own physical limitations. And the emergence of the cybernetic paradigm after the Second World War, as well as the emergence of the idea of creating a cyborg – human-machine – significantly changed the relationship between information and matter. Moreover, the proposal of the scholar to abandon the paradigm about the representative role of the media is still concerned to be relevant. More specifically, to abandon the assumption that the media is something separated from the external world and thus it is reproduction. S. McQuire (2014) points out that nowadays the media has become something that McLuhan called the human environments. Even the movement around the world is connected with the crossing of different media streams and participation in them. McQueer emphasizes that neither the house, nor the street, nor the city today are inconceivable apart from the media apparatus which redistributes the scale and speed of social interaction.

Today the technosphere began to invade even the humanitarian fields traditionally considered to be exclusively human. And one of these spheres is the mediasphere. The development of information and communication technologies changes the ways of mass communication, changes the ways of media consumption and the media landscape itself. The agenda consistently includes the question: if the process of searching, treatment and dissemination of information is increasingly becoming more automatic do we need professional mediators who participate in the process of mass communication in the future? If so, what should they do, what is their being?

The answer to this seemingly purely futurological question is necessary to be found now, because for journalists the process of labour automatization is much more crucial than for many other specialists, because it is a question of preservation or disappearance of the profession. Once the technique has already replaced the “young ladies” who used to provide telephone communications. This process has just started: the American media use robot programs to create news reports (*Los Angeles Times*) and automatic fact-checking of politicians’ speeches (*The Washington Post*). One of the technological platforms for making analysis of data and creating a textual description, for example, is offered by *Narrative Science Company*. It conducts a direct analogy between the program and the calculator relieving the calculation process. And at the forum “Media of the Future”, which were held in Moscow in 2014, experts not only explained to the Russian media community the key role of technology for the survival of the mass media, but also introduced the concept of “journalism of drones”. The idea of this concept is the following: an operator and a correspondent are replaced by

a special aircraft with HD cameras. In November 2015, the company “Yandex” announced that robots will be used for writing news.

The question of survival of journalism in the era of robotics would not have been such a hot topic today, if international media corporations and several western funds hadn’t tried to plant universal model of fact-based journalism in different countries for such a long time. After all just this model is often portrayed as most objective and correct. Within the framework of this model (and the genre system related to it) most journalists are given the role of dispassionate “registers of reality”, and only a few authorised have the right to interpret these facts, to make them into a single picture of reality. Professor R. Mack Chesney (2009) writes about the results of implementing such professional standards in the US media: many problems cannot be covered in the framework of this paradigm. To mediate any social problem, there must be at least two sources of information, experts for example. If they refuse to discuss the problem, the journalist is powerless. And those journalists who are allowed to explain the reality, as a rule, are incorporated into the elite, and it is advantageous for them to maintain *the status quo*. So as a result, as McChesney stresses that the American media today broadcast only a picture of the world of those who belong to the middle and rich classes.

For journalism developing within the framework of the “service provider” model, the problem of robotics really raises the burning issue of the displacement of human labour by machines. After all, if the main task of the basic mass of journalists is collection, verification of facts, their packaging and distribution, their replacement by automated systems is not only appropriate, but also desirable in a certain sense.

Firstly, drones, robots, surveillance cameras and DVRs are much more objective than humans: they are deprived of emotions. The data of video surveillance systems and DVRs is complete documentary evidence, in contrast to subjective descriptions of reality by eyewitnesses. The statistics on the users’ behaviour on the Web, space transference of persons (which can be monitored with the help of geolocation systems) also looks as objective. And, probably, in the nearest future this information will be used by robots when answering classical news questions “who?” and “where?”

Secondly, programs are easier to be managed for creating an appropriate picture of events. There is no need to spend money on persuasion, motivation or solving numerous ethical dilemmas. It is enough to modify the scheme of the selection of events to create the proper “agenda”. Thirdly, the workforce productivity of machines is much higher: computers can work 24 hours a day, so they can replace several people at once. Fourthly, a lot of modern

computer programs are automatically taught systems. So in the course of time such programs will be able to solve more sophisticated problems and will be able to gain “experience” from their work. And what is a critically important robots can easily be dismissed without any observance of the Labour Code.

While main obstacles to the rapid implementation of this scenario are the cost of such systems and the fact that the present programs work only with a limited number of types of news. Today, the major obstacles for the rapid implementation of this scenario are the cost of such systems and the fact that current programs function merely with a limited number of types of news. With news that can really be written by applying the same algorithm, operating with wide digital scope (weather, market quotes, sports news, news about RTA). But one way or another every program is improving and is falling in price. Therefore, journalism simply registering events is doomed to be replaced by robots. And the topic of “the end of journalism” discussed by theoreticians and practical workers in a certain degree confirms this as far as the incomes of many mass media in different countries of the world obtained from the sale of news do not cover the cost of their production, which involves expensive human capital.

But nevertheless the replacement of people with machines in news journalism is already taking place. As financial analysts of RBC admit robot programs are also used to read news lines. “The readers of news in the financial markets are not people at all, but machines. It is computers that analyse headlines and news in an automatic mode and instantly give out cue for buying or selling on predetermined algorithms”.

“Journalism of sense” as a way of preserving the profession

The current existing trend can be described as follows. Only yesterday when journalists creating mass information, competed with journalists only. Today they compete with each other and the audience also involved in the process of creating and distributing messages. And tomorrow they will be competing with each other, with users, and with drones (from computer programs to complex devices that fix fragments of the world around us).

Theorists, as well as some practical workers, indeed are preparing to compete with machines. Ideologists of modern media assert that mass media employees are obliged to know programming languages. Now not only the metropolitan universities but also the regional universities of Russia have started to teach multimedia journalism, the teachers are being upgraded. However, in spite of all advantages of this approach, one thing is still obvious: it is senseless to compete with a computer in terms of data processing speed.

It is important to bear in mind that the journalism of “facts/events registration” is not the only direction of development. As E.P. Prokhorov (2003: 46-47) wrote: a journalist works with different types of information and we define certain genres depending on it. Factual information is the basis of all information genres and namely is the result of “registration of facts”. But a journalist can also work with prescriptive information describing the desired future and related to ideals, idealized notions, as well as with values and ideas about the world and society. The comparison of factual with the prescriptive information allows us to create evaluative and normative information which to describe how everything should be, what to do to solve the problem situation and achieve the desired future?

However, people themselves need more than naked facts. It is important for each member of a society to any extent not just to get an “objective description” of what is happening. He also wants to know who and how value the events, to which desirable future the majority of our society or at least the reference groups for the individual are seeking for. And this is one of the fundamental human needs, which was once proved by E. Noel-Neumann (1984), who explained that an individual’s study of opinions of those groups to which he belongs is one of the mechanisms of human survival in society.

In the nearest future, both robots and ordinary users will not be able to competent work with prescriptive, evaluative and normative information. Many journalists lack of skills, life experience, flexible mind or mature opinions to compare one event with another, to search for cause-effect relationships, to estimate of what is happening. That is why the robotization of information journalism, depriving the work of simple “fact collectors” in some ways dispenses journalism from routine. Robotics returns it to its origins, when a journalist was not just a “recorder of reality events,” but a public figure, a thinker.

The demand for “journalism of sense” (we call it this conventional name because a journalist within the framework of this model will increasingly try to find the sense of events, separate opinions besides establishing simple facts) will remain because it works with something, which is impossible to “sew” in the computer code, namely: with thought forms, metaphors, insights and many other things that are connected with creative process, and it is not fully understood even by creators themselves. After all, only hard news can be written according to a scheme above all existing journalistic genres. Interesting reports, sketches, analytical materials, interviews can be obtained if an author relies not only on algorithms but also on the sensory perception of the real world. And it can be proved by the mere fact: for more than a hundred years of existence of journalism as a profession, small numbers of textbooks have appeared which

train specific methods of creating materials in various genres. Existing books are mainly focused on how to shape any available data in a text but not on what actions the journalist should take to collect information. In other words, journalists learn to “feel the sense” of reality, to understand what information will be most expressive and important. It can be reached only by communicating with experienced colleagues and using their own trial and error methods.

There are many other fundamental reasons for the development of “journalism of sense”. The first is the complication of social processes affecting the media sphere. Social diffusion in contemporary society may lead to digital divisions, to asymmetry in media consumption. As a result, different groups of people find it difficult to understand the same obvious facts: they are interpreted and contextualized depending on many factors that create the image of the world of a particular community. It means that the need for mediators will grow. Such intermediary will help these communities adequately understand each other in order to avoid mutual destruction.

The second reason is the devaluation of the picture of the world that physics has been dictating to us for a long time, which is expressed in the idea of the mathematization of nature and is understood as a mechanism, a device. Of course, this picture of the world still exists and stimulates the development of the technosphere, supports the hopes of some people that even a society can be controlled if one understands the laws of this “mechanism”. And it prevails even in the mediasphere, where, as G.L. Tulchinsky (2013: 41-54) called “the marketing of humanism” can be noticed. It is a process in which all values are organized horizontally with no hierarchy and even the transcendental is turned into a market segment. But today a new, postphysical picture of the world begins to manifest itself, within which physics is reconciled with metaphysics, and different trajectories are possible, and development is nonlinear. And in the framework of this new paradigm a journalist who actively works with a mental scheme that modifies the perception of the real world by creating images and thought forms can be seen even as a kind of urban “shaman”, a Jedi that cannot be replaced by a machine.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper the author described some strengthening crisis phenomena in journalism due to development of the technosphere. However, robotization in media turns us to fundamental topics: what is a human, what is creativity. And journalism is a field, where not only technologies of finding facts, data and their verification take place. This is a profession, where tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) plays an important role in finding stories, interviewing people, searching for new senses and other activities. Interaction of technologies and

a human was a topic of 2st international conference “Siberian Media Space 2020” in Krasnoyarsk in November or 2017. And the participants of a panel discussion founded, that there was a return from technologies to a human in majority reports. Understanding that robotization in media forces departments of journalism searching for such practices of interaction journalist with reality, where he can’t be changed on computer technique (Zorin, 2017).

Reorientation of the industry from journalism of facts to “journalism of sense” is a great challenge. First of all, this is a challenge for universities. The whole point is that we need to look for tools to change the consciousness of graduates of the school, which does not teach to comprehend the world around us and to receive information about this world, partly turning people into “bio robots.” We need to work not only with the development of traditional media competencies (information search, fact-checking, ability to work in a team, etc.), but also with the development of the emotional and sensory perception of the world. Unfortunately, this work cannot be reduced to a revision of curricula or to the introduction of new disciplines. Here, the understanding of the professional mission should be brought in the limelight. Either it is just a “service”, or it is a kind of “Way” that allows you to remain people and help others not to become cyborgs. The alteration of consciousness is impossible without awareness of responsibility for the consequences of their decisions and actions as well. Only theoretical acquaintance of students with problems of deontology is not enough: journalists (as well as managers) cannot be taught without training in real conditions on real people. This idea can be explained by reference to the already used metaphor. A Jedi is not someone who waves a plasma sword, but one who is fully aware of his connection with the Force and is able to control it.

Anyway, both now and all the times the most vantage place is among people, who can be called creators or rulers. Those who cannot just react to events, but are able to bring into being something new.

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