Transformation of newsroom work in the digital era

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Abstract

The authors have conducted several in-depth interviews with Russian reporters. The results show that new technologies have substantially changed many aspects of journalistic work: particularly the search for information and newsmakers, communications among colleagues, genres of media texts have transformed. Changes have not significantly affected the size and structure of editorial boards. The practice of working from home has not gained ground either.

Keywords

Introduction

Journalism is one of those fields of human endeavor which have undergone a radical transformation in response to new technologies. Since the late 1990s, the Internet has gradually developed into a key environment for collecting information, publishing materials and interacting with colleagues. Social networks, which became popular in the late 2000s, have drastically increased both the number of authors appealing to the mass audience and the volume of the produced content, forcing journalists to search for new ways of competing for audience attention.

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The ongoing changes are in the centre of journalism researchers' attention. However, the focus is either on the systemic transformation of the media industry (Lukina, Fomicheva, 2005; Lukina, 2013; Amzin, 2016; Baranova, 2014), or on the new formats of journalistic products (Ulanova, 2017; Sotnikova, 2014; Lukina, 2009; Amzin, 2013), or on the media strategies under new conditions (Viren, 2009; Galustyan, 2012; Smirnova, 2013; Polynov, 2017). The research "Online Journalism: Adaptation to the Changing Reality" conducted in 2017 by Mail.ru and including 28 interviews with online project executives is also devoted to media survival in the digital environment[2].

It has been acknowledged that in the context of the online environment materials should be prepared differently (Vyrkovsky, Liubimtseva, 2015), journalists should be managed differently (Vyrkovsky, 2013; Vyrkovsky, 2015) and students of faculties of journalism should be taught differently (Kornev, 2016). The role of social networks in information search and journalistic product promotion has also been acknowledged (Razumova, 2014; Dyachenko, 2016).

However, the technology of journalistic work has been studied much less, with the emphasis being either on journalistic products (Baranova, 2014) or on the discrepancies between the innovation claim and the actual situation attributable to inertia and journalists' unwillingness to change the work rhythm and undertake additional duties, as well as to inter-generation conflicts in newsrooms (Kallioma, 2011; 2013; Lischka, 2015). It was found that a typical response to editorial changes consisted in managers' attempt to "optimize" journalistic output at the expense of creativity (Gade, Raviola, 2009); Weezel, 2009).

This research aims to investigate how new technologies have influenced the working process of modern Russian journalists, which of these technologies are actually used, in which form and what the results are. The working process was considered as a whole, from searching for themes, collecting information and communicating with newsmakers to requirements to journalistic skills, changes in newsroom structure and relations with colleagues and superiors.

Methodology

The hypothesis of the research consisted in an assumption that under the influence of new technologies all aspects of journalistic work have changed: information collection, communication with newsmakers and colleagues, writing copy, requirements to journalists' professional skills and competencies, genre structure of media texts, newsroom structure, attitude to working from

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[2] https://media.mail.ru/#about

home and engaging freelancers, managerial style and performance evaluation criteria of journalistic work accepted in a particular media outlet.

The research was conducted in spring 2017 using the method of in-depth interviewing. The respondents were journalists who had been in the profession for no less than 10 years. This eligibility criterion was applied to enable the interviewees to compare their current working process with the previous ones and discern the innovations more easily. The respondents were selected among staff of leading print and online publications, the most top-rated according to the Mail.ru[3] and Mediaskop[4] companies and the most cited ones according to the Medialogiya company[5] (National media, n.d.). An additional criterion for selecting a media outlet was its reputation and recognition in the professional community.

All in all, 24 interviews were done with journalists from 17 media outlets: the Interfax, TASS, Regnum and Bloomberg (Russian service) news agencies, the Kommersant and Rossiyskaya Gazeta newspapers, the RBC, Russkiy Reporter, Forbes (Russian version) and Vokrug Sveta magazines, the Life.ru, Vzglyad, Dni.ru and Secret Firmy online publications, The Russia Today and Moskva 24 television channels and the Ekho Moskvy radio station. The involvement of staff members of audiovisual media and the Russian service of one of the leading world news agencies made it possible to expand the context of the research, although the main focus was on Russian journalists who write texts.

This sample does not allow to identify the quantitative regularities revealing the prevalence of these or those practices in the work of modern Russian journalists. However, it enables one to detect qualitative shifts in the working process of media workers. Even in view of different technical equipment and technological advancement of Russian newsrooms, it is possible to assume that the working methods used in the most innovative ones will soon become, or are becoming, generally accepted. This is why the research leads to the conclusion about the changes in the professional culture of modern Russian journalists under the influence of new technologies.

Results

Presenting the results, it is reasonable to focus on the most significant changes in journalistic work. The conclusions will be supported by respondents' utterances

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[3] https://top.mail.ru/Rating/MassMedia/

[4] http://mediascope.net/services/media/media-audience/dannye_issledovaniy_auditorii_smi/

[5] http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/federal/105/ http://www.spark-interfax.ru/ru/about

with a specification of the kind of media where the respondent worked at the time of being interviewed and the respondent's status. The particular media outlets are not mentioned because the corporate rules of some of them require journalists to secure the top executives' approval of what they say; it was decided not to do so in order to make the journalists feel free to speak about the real, not ideal, state of affairs.

The results are organized in several sections: newsroom structure, communication among staff, communication with newsmakers, information collection, genre structure of media texts, requirements to journalists' professional skills and competencies, working from home and staff motivation. This allows to demonstrate the changes in journalists working process on each aspect of this process.

Newsroom structure. Here, the main change is the emergence of technical departments, responsible for various aspects of work on the website. It was found that while the creative editorial team does not change numerically or shrinks in response to the economic crisis, the technical departments have grown in size over the past years and in some media outlets they are numerically comparable with journalistic ones.

"Now we have video operators, programmers, promoters, designers, artists, desktop publishers" (the editor of a newspaper).

"The staff has been augmented by those working with the Internet and social networks. Web designers, SMM experts. There aren't any new journalistic positions. The old ones have dropped in number" (the editor of a magazine).

"Some newcomers attempt to analyze large volumes of data using new technology and thus facilitate the work of writing journalists freeing them from fiddling with databases and collecting statistical data. These are staffing positions, too: big daters, data miners" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

"An important figure of a website managing editor has joined the team. He determines the face of the publication in the enormous digital world. We have some new editors who don't know anything about the essence of our work but they have transformed our content into a website form. Now there isn't any magazine newsroom, there is a system of website channels, and the heads of these channels are the newsroom's organizational units. We also have a video producer and experts in website infographics" (the editor of a magazine).

Another important change is an actual fusion of the offline and online parts of the creative editorial team, which means that all the journalists work for the publication's website.

"The newsroom used to be divided into digital and paper. Now these have fused together, and there are just people who use paper to do the packing" (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).

"We don't see any dividing line between the newspaper newsroom and the website newsroom. It is a single department writing for both the website and the newspaper" (the editor of a newspaper).

Similar processes occur in those cases when there is a formal division into the website newsroom and the print publication's newsroom.

"The website has a special editor with a team of journalists and members of support staff. But newspaper men work for the website, too. In the website newsroom, there are no authors of the needed profile, so the load is on the print newspaper's team. The team has to appoint a man on duty, who, for a day, falls out of the process. And this is our pain in the neck. In fact, everybody works in this way, except those who can afford a large staff (the editor of a newspaper).

Communication among staff. The main change here is a shift of communication to social networks and messengers. Most often, the respondents mentioned Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp, where closed groups and chats are created. Today, it is standard practice for journalists sitting at neighboring desks to communicate by writing instead of talking.

"Now it is much quieter in the office. Staff members used to shout to each other. Any correction or problem was discussed aloud, and this was very disturbing. Through a messenger, you can give a task in writing and receive a written answer without distracting others. If afterwards the journalist hands in his text and the editor criticizes him for a mistake, the conflict can be easily solved because we can go back to their correspondence and find out whether the editor's task was set incorrectly or the journalist failed to understand it. It is always clear from the correspondence who is to blame" (the editor of an online publication).

"A chat in a messenger is the main tool of our trade, and planning meeting are no longer relevant as they last   hours a day   days a week. Everyone is always involved. People who don't care normally quit" (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).

Communication through messengers has actually replaced phone calls and email correspondence.

"Inside the newsroom, we have a Telegram group where announcements are published. We also have department groups and technical groups. Everything is done through Telegram. Suppose I want my news item to be illustrated. I used to email designers but now I post my task in our corporate Telegram group, and a disengaged designer takes up the task" (the correspondent of an online publication).

"As far as I can see, all communication has moved to Facebook. People no longer use their phones to make calls. It sometimes happens that on Tuesday you open the messenger and see that on Monday someone sent you an urgent message. On Monday you had no time to enter the messenger but it didn't occur to the sender to make a call. He believes that you must keep in touch all the time and every time you phone squeals you must check it. This is why I'm always on alert" (the editor of a magazine).

Communication with newsmakers. This communication has also largely moved to social networks and messengers. Journalists hunt for newsmakers and contact them through social networks and make requests to press offices and receive press releases through messengers.

"Facebook has become a communication channel. Many newsmakers choose to write you on Facebook. Emailing is very rare. Some time ago they asked to send our questions to their corporate email address. Now I don't even know these addresses and sometimes I don't even know their phone numbers" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

"It is possible to communicate with some newsmakers on Telegram. Then they respond faster. Previously, you had to make a mobile phone call but the newsmaker could be busy and fail to answer. Now you write, and if the question is simple enough and requires a Yes/No answer or just one sentence, they normally respond promptly (the editor of a newspaper).

"If you subscribe to Telegram MFA, you don't have to enter the MFA website, Twitter or Facebook MFA. You can read MFA news on your phone with all the links. There are closed Telegram channels, where anonymous sources post valid or invalid news (the editor of a newspaper).

"Having emailed a press release, press offices may promptly write you in the messenger: "Look, this is also interesting". Besides, I send my questions through the messenger or ask them to be on alert because I have made a request" (the correspondent of an online publication).

The respondents made a point that today even budding journalists can find high-profile newsmakers and contact them and that the problem of finding the required phone number no longer exists. This is so due to social networks and messengers and to such journalistic services as Nutcall.com (a phone database for newsmakers containing more than 60 thousand contacts) and Pressfeed.ru (a service publishing journalistic requests to which concerned public relations professionals can respond).

"In terms of searching for contacts, social networks and services like Nutcall are very helpful: one can find phone numbers without turning to colleagues and

making corporate phone calls. This facilitates the search and saves time. And, which is most important, you spend less effort on preparatory work: searching for people, searching for contacts, first acquaintance, making an appointment" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

"Our journalists use the Pressfeed service, which provides experts in various fields in response to a journalist's request. A journalist can choose someone he hasn't known before, which broadens the range of opinions for commenting events" (the editor of a newspaper).

Information collection. A major innovation in this area is a wide use of online services providing access to documents or an array of data. Many respondents considered working with these services to be the main way of collecting information.

"Now we have new databases such as regulation.gov.ru and kartoteka.ru, where data on legal entities can be found. Or the judicial statistics database. Some time ago they didn't exist, and I simply can't imagine how one could do the things we do today. For instance, revealing connections between companies" (the editor of an online publication).

"The first thing I teach newcomers is to use the Spark database[6]. This is a primary database everyone must be able to work with. The second one is Rosreestr. Now it is extremely important. Even if you write about an IT company, it is essential to understand its location and where its plants are situated" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

"Besides, the attitude to information from social networks has drastically changed. It used to be regarded as potentially inaccurate and calling for verification and confirmation from official sources while today information from social networks can be used without any.

*"Someone can learn from Twitter about his/her dismissal, and journalists learn about it in the same way. Another situation: suppose I write about cultural events. A producer posts in his blog: "We have started shooting the film". This may be a starting point for my news it*em (the editor of a newspaper).

"Let's consider a basic case. Suppose there is a statement about an emergency. Previously, we publicized such a statement if it came from an official source. Now a statement can be published on Twitter, and following the rule of two or three sources we can conclude that the emergency event is real if several users post similar photographs or videos. This means that approaches to work have changed. Users are coming to be information sources no less reliable than official ones" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a news agency).

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[6] https://top.mail.ru/Rating/MassMedia/

Genre structure of media texts. The respondents talked not so much about new genres as about the modification of the existing ones. A general observation was that the text size has shrunk. Some distinguished a new type of reader interested only in headlines. The main genre of media texts is still news, which prevail in the information flow. Besides, it is common to provide multimedia support to website texts.

"Texts tend to be shorter. The media continue to publish large materials but only - % of people read them, mostly those who make decisions. And all the rest read only headlines without going any further. People used to pay rubles for their newspaper and wanted to get as much information as possible for this money. Now information is free, and readers spend less than a minute on a website looking through headlines. In the future, there will be more pictures, photographs and videos. Already now, it is considered that a text must be accompanied by a photo gallery and videos. Promptness will be more important than quality: when the news is published immediately but with a lot of mistakes. On the other hand, longreads are still in demand. This is something you can make a name with (the editor of a news agency).

"An apparent trend is making texts shorter and sacrificing content to promptness. Suppose an event happens at the beginning of the day. Our website publishes on the news feed a short message compiled from the material provided by news agencies. Then it asks the newsroom for comments as it is not commissioned to call experts. The comments that arrive are selected, edited and added to the original text. At a certain point, it is decided to write a full-fledged news item. The news item is published, let's say, at p.m., before the evening peak hours. But if we later look at the readability statistics we'll see that the winner is the first, compiled message. The most important thing is promptness, talking heads aren't in demand. It is very much the same as on Twitter. And if the reader is much interested he'll find comments by himself" (the editor of a newspaper).

Another evident trend of news journalism is adjusting texts to the requirements of news aggregators in order to attract readers through these channels.

"You have to adjust the news you write to Yandex News or some other news aggregators, which show the readers only the first line, and you understand that you must squeeze something important into characters" (the editor of an online publication).

Yet another innovation is presenting the same information in different forms: from short announcements to a long text or multimedia materials. Notably, this is done by one and the same journalist in charge of the topic.

"When newspaper journalists publish an interview in tomorrow's issue they themselves warn the website when the interview should go online, send it to news

agencies and redraft it preparing very short messages for the website. Then the website promotes them on social networks. Thus, several platforms are saturated with the same information" (the editor of a newspaper).

"*When you think of a feature you simultaneously think of several other possibilities. You can post on the website a short video with the protagonist provided you have recorded one. You can add some photographs and a reporting element you haven't used anywhere. A separate news item can be made, too. In fact, you grind content and package it in different formats*" (the editor of a magazine).

While preparing the material, the journalist makes a choice not only from the text genres but also from the text form and the multimedia form of material presentation.

"*Genres are closely interwoven with the types of perception. If there is an accident, you must respond immediately. It is pointless to spend   minutes writing a big news item. If you don't know any details you write a short news item. Having the details you write an extended news item with a background. If you see that readers would also like to watch a video you go to the scene of the event and do online streaming. The pride of place goes to perception. You make choices looking through the eyes of users*" (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).

Large materials invariably become multimedia ones. In addition, the requirements to the quality of such texts, to the opportunities of attracting readers increase.

"*The longreads a la Forbes have become multimedia because no one will choose to read online a tome of , characters. To sell the reader a long piece, you must write it as a story, with lots of live descriptions, otherwise the reader will get bored and quit after, characters. Therefore, the advice "make it more dramatic" is no longer a compulsive requirement. It is quite reasonable if you want to detain the reader*" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

Requirements to journalists' professional skills and competencies. Here the qualitative changes stem from what was said above. First and foremost, journalists must possess skills of searching for information and presenting it on the Internet.

"*The skills of working with data are absolutely essential. One must be able not only to write texts in Word but to master new programs. There are services where you enter your data and icons and create your own product in the form of infographics. This used to involve the work of or people; now one journalist is enough*" (the editor of a news agency).

"*The journalist must certainly know how to use the computer, how to use Word. But he must also know how to use the whole system known as admin*

panel which is engaged in publishing news items on the website" (the editor of a magazine).

The traditional journalistic competencies (information search, selection and evaluation and text preparation) have been supplemented by new ones. These are the need to work faster, the need to make decisions as to whether the material should be presented in the form of a text or in the multimedia form.

"Ten years ago, the journalist used to be a person who walked through a dark forest with a torch. Today, the journalist is a person who is sitting on a mountain of gold choosing relevant information sources from among a range of sources, whose number has significantly increased on the Internet. Previously, if you needed a company's report you had to write them a letter while now you simply have to do a proper Google search, which takes seconds. This "mountain of gold" immediately raises the ante. People must search promptly and evaluate critically" (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).

"One must be able not only to produce and convey content (a text, a photo, a video) but also to set priorities. For instance, if I am at a meeting with an interesting speaker it is me who makes a decision on whether to do an extended interview or just shoot a short video and send it to the newsroom in order to establish the topic for the news feed" (the editor of newspaper).

"The number of letters the journalist must write in a day has increased. Such is the pressure of the new competitor, citizen journalism. If we don't make a news item in an hour and a half, we'll hopelessly lag behind, we won't have time to share, no one will read the material" (the editor of a newspaper).

"Some time ago, the information I happened to get could be saved for a rainy day. Now I must send it to the website as soon as possible. This is a matter of different competencies. This teaches you to be more diverse. The journalist has to be able to write fast, not only coherently and lucidly. To focus on the essentials not only in a long story but also in a short message consisting of two paragraphs" (the editor of a magazine).

However, the respondents believe that journalists have not become and are not becoming "universal", i.e. equally able to produce text content and audiovisual content. Moreover, this "universalization" is no longer targeted at, unlike the skills of producing content for different platforms: the print publication, the website, social networks.

"In Russia and worldwide, there used to be a popular assumption that there existed a "universal" journalist who could take a photo, make a video, collect some data for infographics. It goes without saying that he could write a text and send it rolled in one with the completed multimedia product. The concept has failed. It was found out that people who write well are usually quite mediocre in dealing

with visual materials. It is doubtful that a brilliant photo correspondent will bring you good videos from an event because he can do either one thing or the other. Now the concept of "universalization" applies to the people who package the content in the office. The point is that these people are supposed to be multimedia editors of content for the Web. I mean everything: websites, mobile applications, social networks and digital channels" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a news agency).

"In large media outlets today, journalists have to be versatile in terms of formats: they must be able to write a short news item or a longread, or compile a gallery. Profile versatility is not needed because there are profile experts. For a beautiful multimedia story, you don't have to take photographs yourself. If it is a question of make up, there is someone next to you who can do it perfectly well" (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

Working from home. In spite of technical possibilities, media outlets are reluctant to abandon newsrooms and allow the staff to work from home. Almost everywhere, working from home is an exception because of a staff member's illness or family circumstances. The respondents attribute this to the fact that when people work from home communications are not prompt enough, productivity decreases and the team spirit is gone.

"This is not a matter of technologies. I do know that it is possible to prepare a text remotely. We all work in this way using Telegram for communication and Google Does for simultaneous work. It's a matter of personal contact and ease of interaction. It's much easier for me to interact with someone who is standing in front of me" (deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

"People working from home perform much worse. Those working in the office, in a team, exhibit a higher efficiency. At home people get distracted: they may watch TV or cook. Some simply can't make themselves work. Working in the office is better because people live in each other's pockets. They exchange information, contacts. Work socialization is very important. When someone works remotely he doesn't see the goal. It would be more convenient for the employer to have staff members working from home. He wouldn't have to pay the office rent or for the telephone line. Yet I don't think that remote working is a near term prospect. This is related to our set of mind and to the fact that we have very few effective employees able to work from home" (the editor of a news agency).

"If someone works from home or, say, from Bali, there is a possibility that a piece of urgent information sent through messengers will reach him later than it should. If you're in the office you can simply shout to a colleague asking him/ her to make changes to the lead-in. In the first situation, the communication will certainly take longer. This is a trifling thing but it may become an obstacle if you urgently need something to be done. As today's competitive environment is very

demanding, any delay may cost us a large part of the audience" (the editor of a television channel).

"Some news editors ask my permission to work from home on this or that day but they must give their reasons for that. Actually, they can work remotely because remote access to the admin panel is available. Working in the office is a tradition, a kind of inertia" (the editor of a magazine).

Not much has changed in the engagement of freelancers. The respondents explain that the freelancer must be trusted. Editors won't accept materials from strangers because either it will take much effort to verify the information or there is a risk of reputational and legal consequences for the publication.

Staff motivation. In this part, we had an opportunity to evaluate work results through the material's popularity statistics. The key criteria are viewings, scrolls and shares.

"You open your article and see , viewings; three hours later – viewings; in the evening – as many as, viewings. Plus social shares. The correlation between shares and viewings is indicative of the text's popularity. This is an extremely motivating thing because people see the results of their work, they develop a drive. This real-time thrill was familiar to those working in news agencies: who will launch the news   minutes earlier. Now it is possible to see and trace everything in real time on Yandex News – who is the primary source, who is the winner. In terms of technologies, it's a great thing" (the editor of a magazine).

However, the respondents acknowledge that the viewings and links on social networks as they are do not indicate high-quality work and that the pop theme will always be in greater demand than serious matters.

"A new wages model is being tested according to which not only the number of clicks determines the payment but also the extra value of the news items. It is unfair when someone who has written about tits and ass and received   thousand viewings gets a bonus payment while someone else who has discovered an exclusive story, a niche story, and received only   thousand viewings doesn't get anything" (the editor of a newspaper).

For clarity, the most important changes in journalistic work are shown in Table 1:

<div align="right">**Table** 1</div>

Changes in Journalistic Work

Aspect of journalistic work	Key changes
Newsroom structure	Fusion of the traditional media newsroom and the website newsroom. Arrival of staff members and emergence of departments responsible for the technical part of the website and material presentation on different platforms
Communication among staff	Using messengers to collect requests and give tasks. Using Google Docs for collaborative work at the text
Information collection	Using databases and registers, social networks and messengers as information sources and channels of communication with newsmakers
Genre structure of media texts	Decreasing the text size to "headline journalism", multimediality in presenting large materials, repeated presentation of the same information in different forms (a news item, a quotation from an interview, a recorded interview with the protagonist, a large material and the like), adjusting to the requirements of news aggregators
Requirements to professional skills and competencies	A need to possess skills of working with databases and applications for information processing, to be able to search on social networks and verify information, to be able to create infographics, to be able to quickly prepare materials for different platforms (a print publication, a website, a social network, a mobile application)
Working from home	This has not become widespread not for technological but for psychological reasons
Staff motivation	Awarding bonuses for the material's popularity with readers and social network users

Discussion

The conducted research gives the chance to understand profoundly the changes taking place in newsrooms and to imagine a modern journalist, the way he works, what he is required to do and what journalism students should be prepared for.

The hypotheses on the changes in almost all aspects of journalistic work have been confirmed. The two exceptions are that working from home has not taken root and that the "universalization" of journalists is less true of audiovisual content production and more true of content packaging for different platforms. Putting these two things aside, journalists have started to work faster and the requirements to the technical literacy of staff members have increased. Social networks and messengers have turned into the channels of communication with newsmakers, the information search environment and the platform for publishing and promoting journalistic materials.

It is obvious that the speed of changes varies. Not all newsrooms work in the way described above. In fact, the researchers selected interviewees from market leaders, i.e. highly professional and technically well-equipped newsrooms operating in a competitive environment.

The next desirable step is to conduct a quantitative analysis of the prevalence of these or those practices in Russian media. Besides, it is preferable to combine interviewing with observation. Interviewing has its disadvantages: people do not remember everything and tend to resort to wishful thinking.

Lastly, it should be taken into account that this research reflects instantaneous reality, and a few years the picture may drastically change. For instance, many respondents pointed out that a number of services (such as messengers) had come into life 2 or 3 years before and now they were the main working tools.

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