

Artículo de investigación

Regional Mass Media: From Self-Censorship to Mythmaking

Региональные средства массовой информации от самоцензуры к мифотворчеству

Medios de comunicación de masas regionales: de la autocensura a la creación de mitos

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https://elibrary.ru/author_items.asp?authorid=525432**Abstract**

This article aims to solve the following scientific problem: to study the ways of interaction between mass media, audience and authorities used in regional practice. The relevance and scientific significance of solving the above-mentioned problem lies in the fact that modern mass media exist in a dynamically changing social space. The main objective is to determine how fully events of the political and public life of a country or region are reflected in the daily practice of regional mass media. Based on the analysis of print media, the authors of the article consider the authenticity, completeness and objectivity of the information worldview created by journalists of the Arkhangelsk Region. The contractual mechanism of information services used by authorities forces journalists to resort to self-censorship and non-disclosure of socially important information, which leads to the creation of media myths and the loss of professionalism, as well as changes essential characteristics of journalism. It is indicated that it is much more dangerous for this profession to

Аннотация

Научная проблема, на решение которой направлена данная работа, — исследование способов взаимодействия средств массовой информации, аудитории и власти, применяемых в региональной практике. Актуальность и научная значимость решения проблемы состоит в том, что современные СМИ существуют в условиях динамично изменяющегося социального пространства. Цель работы – определить, насколько полно отражаются события политической и общественной жизни страны и региона в повседневной практике региональных СМИ. На основе анализа печатных изданий рассматривается достоверность, полнота и объективность информационной картины мира, создаваемой журналистами СМИ Архангельской области. Договорный механизм информационного обслуживания органов власти вынуждает журналистов прибегать к самоцензуре и замалчиванию общественно важных сведений, что приводит к созданию медиамифов и утрате

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consciously distort the reflected reality by emphasizing some events or certain aspects of the displayed phenomena and concealing others, i.e. manipulating mass consciousness through non-disclosure. Non-disclosure not only erases, destroys and eliminates facts, but also creates a mythical, distorted and unreliable information worldview.

Keywords: information provision, non-disclosure, self-censorship, media myth, regional mass media.

профессионализма, меняет сущностные характеристики журналистики. Указывается, что намного опаснее для профессии сознательное искажение отражаемой реальности путем акцентирования, подчеркивания одних событий или отдельных сторон отображаемых явлений и замалчивания других, то есть манипулирования массовым сознанием путем умолчаний. Умолчание не только вычеркивает, уничтожает, устраняет факты, но и творит, создавая мифическую, искаженную, недостоверную информационную картину мира.

Ключевые слова: информирование, умолчание, самоцензура, медиамиф, региональная пресса.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende resolver el siguiente problema científico: estudiar las formas de interacción entre los medios de comunicación, el público y las autoridades utilizadas en la práctica regional. La relevancia y el significado científico de resolver el problema mencionado radica en el hecho de que los medios de comunicación modernos existen en un espacio social que cambia dinámicamente. El objetivo principal es determinar cómo se reflejan plenamente los eventos de la vida política y pública de un país o región en la práctica diaria de los medios de comunicación regionales. Sobre la base del análisis de los medios impresos, los autores del artículo consideran la autenticidad, integridad y objetividad de la visión del mundo de la información creada por los periodistas de la región de Arkhangelsk. El mecanismo contractual de los servicios de información utilizados por las autoridades obliga a los periodistas a recurrir a la autocensura y la no divulgación de información socialmente importante, lo que lleva a la creación de mitos mediáticos y la pérdida de profesionalismo, así como a cambios en las características esenciales del periodismo. Se indica que para esta profesión es mucho más peligroso distorsionar conscientemente la realidad reflejada al enfatizar algunos eventos o ciertos aspectos de los fenómenos mostrados y ocultar otros, es decir, manipular la conciencia de masas a través de la no divulgación. La no divulgación no solo borra, destruye y elimina hechos, sino que también crea una visión del mundo de la información mítica, distorsionada y no confiable.

Palabras clave: suministro de información, no divulgación, autocensura, mito de los medios de comunicación, medios de comunicación regionales.

Introduction

It is relevant to consider regional mass media from several perspectives.

First, the regionalization of media space is accompanied by globalization over the world and federalization in Russia. In this regard, it is important to consider the correlation between these processes. Globalization makes the world, including the information one, more open. At the same time, it increases the strive for localization, regional identification and preservation of one's way of life.

Second, scholars determine the activities of mass media as relatively stable social factors forming a regional identity. A regional identity implies a harmonious combination of the individual self

and the individual's inclusion into a regional society. According to the sociological approach, a regional identity is adequately defined as a result of cognitive, axiological and emotional understanding of the individual's belonging to a regional community manifested in creative activities for the benefit of this region, solidifying its position and role in the system of territorial communities, forming the image of this region. The formation of regional identity is a complex and two-way process. Thus, it is crucial to analyze forms of interaction between a regional newspaper with its readers and the choice of the audience.

This article aims to solve the following scientific problem: to study the ways of interaction between mass media, audience and authorities used in regional practice. The relevance and scientific significance of solving the above-mentioned problem lies in the fact that modern mass media exist in a dynamically changing social space. In this case, there is a change in relations of media editors, their audience and authorities. In this connection, there is a logical need to revise the principles of organizing a mass-communicative process. The problem-oriented objective of this article is to analyze the regional media space of the Arctic region from the viewpoint of the specific interaction between mass media and the audience and reveal factors of communicative successes and failures in dealing with the audience.

The main objective is to determine how fully events of the political and public life of some country and region are reflected in the daily practice of regional mass media.

Methods

The study material comprises articles of two main social and political newspapers of the Arkhangelsk Region, including the private newspaper "Pravda Severa" and the newspaper "Arkhangelsk" founded by the administration of the Arkhangelsk Region. "Pravda Severa" comes out on Tuesday and Saturday in eight pages of A3 format (circulation of 8,000 copies) and on Wednesday in thirty-two pages (circulation of 20,000 copies). The newspaper is distributed in the Arkhangelsk Region (population of 1.2 million people). The weekly newspaper "Arkhangelsk" is published on twenty-four pages of A3 format (circulation of 6,000 copies). It is distributed only in Arkhangelsk (population of 350,000 people).

While working on the article, we used the following methods: content analysis and continuous sampling method.

The main directions of the content analysis of media materials are the study of changes in the systems of values, attitudes, motives of people's behavior, the newspaper content, characteristics of the editorial policy, the impact of any given message on the audience, social modifications, public opinions, the assessment of events, total media attention to certain problems and the frequency of appealing to these problems. The formation of attitudes and values is a defining direction in the analysis of journalistic materials. We chose the identification of problem-related

themes, keywords and value-based judgments as defining aspects of the study of newspaper regional texts. The approach to media texts as evidence of social reality suggests that it is necessary to conduct such an analysis of journalistic materials.

Results

The Russian provincial journalism was formed almost a century later than the metropolitan one and lagged far behind it in the development of certain genres and journalistic techniques due to insufficient literary forces and censorship conditions (Anronova, 2008: 119).

The concept of "regional mass media" ("regional print media") has not been established in the theory of journalism. It is characterized by terminological instability: the terms "local", "provincial", "peripheral" and "regional" are used as synonyms in relation to provincial, regional and local (inter-provincial and interregional) journalism (Ovsepyan, 2005: 278). The fundamental principle in the allocation of this type of mass media is territorial distribution. However, some scholars suggest including informative and functional features into the type-forming group and considering them alongside geographic ones. The criterion of content is understood as the connection between the problem-related information policy of a periodical and the life of the urban community. The functional purpose of urban mass media is to form a communicative environment (the level of consciousness and being) as an important factor in the sustainable development of any given city (Ivanova, 2005: 6). We regard the first feature as extremely vague and duplicating the notion of "degree of closeness to readers", while the second feature seems to be significant and closely related to functions of regional mass media. Thus, the formula of a high-level mass periodical is being formed. French media specialists (practitioners and theorists) introduce the term "closeness" (Sharonchikova, 2006: 271-286).

This concept is analyzed in the work of Yu.Yu. Solomonov concerned with the regional print media of France. The author notes that the statement about the absence of a target audience in French daily regional newspapers is not entirely true. In fact, this audience is not united by political, social, cultural, age and other features but rather by a common place of residence. This territorial unity of the audience has its advantages for newspapers. First, the population of each region has its own traditions

and way of life, which local print media takes into account. Second, provincial mass media focuses on local news and issues that are important to most people living in regions. This trend lets more fully implement the "concept of closeness to the audience", which serves as the basis for choosing the most interesting publication for most readers. The concept of "closeness" is interpreted in a broader sense: "close information" means "concrete facts that relate to the daily life of people". Thus, it is news related not only to the region where certain readers live but also to their personal concerns, problems, interests and experiences (Solomonov, 2003: 72-125).

Attention to regional news denotes the increasing maturity of society at the regional level and possible improvement of trust in local government (Vershina, 2006; Beglov, 2002: 92-93; Bykov, 2003: 15; Voronenkova, 2011: 458-459, 462; Galkina, 2008: 105-106; Gerulya, 2001: 6.8; Ivanishcheva, 2011; Mikhailov, 2004: 184; Makeenko, 2003: 79).

Regionality is defined through the metropolitan/federal ratio. While determining the regionality of mass media, scholars consider its exposure and the presence/absence of appeal to the metropolitan audience. Modern urban newspapers hold a strong position in urban information space and represent a special system of periodicals united by the main categorical feature – locality (distribution territory). However, the functioning of these periodicals and newspapers is greatly influenced by founders and established relations with local authorities, which makes urban print media less pluralistic in terms of ideological and political parameters (Palenkov, 2010: 11-12).

The scientific literature distinguishes many functions of urban newspapers (informative, analytical, organizing, social (integrating), educational (enlightening), entertaining expressed by advertisements and references). Thus, it is evident that urban newspapers are multifunctional (Winniczuk, 2009: 24).

The information worldview created by journalists is sometimes far from reality since they constantly decide what information to convey and how to do it: to inform the audience about something unusual, typical or the most interesting. The subjective approach to selecting facts is not the fault of journalists but is rather inevitable. It is much more dangerous for this profession to consciously distort the reflected reality by emphasizing some events or certain

aspects of the displayed phenomena and concealing others, i.e. manipulating mass consciousness through non-disclosure.

Discussion

Regional print media about events in the capital

The content analysis of regional Arkhangelsk periodicals and newspapers issued in the fourth quarter of 2011, 2012 and the first, second and third quarter of 2013 demonstrated that they contained almost no information about Moscow events of December 2011 after the elections to the State Duma and events of May 2012 after the presidential elections. Readers of these newspapers were not informed about the election observers "For Fair Elections", the "white ribbons", "#OccupyAbai", the "March of Millions", the "Bolotnoe case" and Pussy Riot, the Dima Yakovlev Law and Foreign Agent Law, the verdict on Navalny's case and other events that stirred the whole world and were of great importance for the political and moral development of Russia. There are different evaluations of the significance of the above-mentioned events. The problem is that the periodicals under study did not even mention these events.

Only the regular author of the "Weekly Review of Events" (the newspaper "Arkhangelsk") once mentioned the "charismatic leader of nationalists – Navalny" (October 27, 2011), devoted only one phrase to "attempts to revolutionize protest actions" (March 1, 2012), shortly commented on "some legislative upheavals against non-commercial organizations" (July 11, 2012) and turned against Pussy Riot comparing this punk band with Herostratus (August 15, 2012). While analyzing "Pravda Severa", we managed to find in one of the "Editor's Columns" a reference to protest actions "that give no result" (July 24, 2013), a reader's comment on "public outrage" caused by Navalny's sentence (September 4, 2013) and an interview on the opposition movement with the former First Secretary of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (October 30, 2013). These fragmentary evaluation data do not explain who did what, when, where and how, i.e. there is no information about the above-mentioned events.

According to the Federal State Unitary Enterprise "Pochta Rossii Arkhangelsk Branch", residents of Arkhangelsk subscribe for 1,500 copies of "AiF", 500 copies of "Komsomolskaya Pravda", 400 copies of "Rossiyskaya gazeta" and just twenty copies of "Kommersant", "Novaya

gazeta", "Izvestia" and "Vedomosti". "Rospechat" stands and stores receive 3,000 copies of "AiF", 200 copies of "Komsomolskaya Pravda", 160 copies of "Novaya gazeta", 140 copies of "Kommersant" and 30 copies of "Izvestia". "Rossiyskaya gazeta" and "Vedomosti" are not sold by retail. "1000 sovetov", "Pravda Severa", "Moya prekrasnaya dacha", "Zavalinka", "Poleznaya", "Pensionerskaya pravda", "Domashnya zhizn", "Zdorovyi obraz zhizni" and "Zhizn" have the largest subscription circulation. There is a reason to believe that subscribers of these newspapers do not read other periodicals and receive information about Russian events not from the Internet but from television that spreads propaganda, delivers information incompletely and one-sidedly. Consequently, the audience in the region possibly has no clue that opposition movements are taking place in the country, civil society is waking up, volunteer communities are becoming more active, people are showing civic and political activity, etc.

However, more often regional mass media behave and look more ignorant than readers expect because they also listen to "Ekho Moskvy" on the Internet, watch the "Dozhd" TV channel, read "Novaya gazeta", "Vedomosti", "New Times" and "Kommersant". It seems that journalists of the Arkhangelsk editions have preserved the ability and desire to ask questions, consider and evaluate what is happening around. The problem is that these processes happen in the editorial "inner workings" rather than the pages of periodicals. Like in the Soviet times, no one gives reporters a list of what can be written and what is prohibited, this truth is always comprehended on a trial basis: they perfectly catch the signals coming from "above" and act accordingly.

The effect of the "spiral of silence" discovered by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann also manifests itself in the process of reflecting reality by means of mass media. Silencing certain newsmakers, the overwhelming majority of mass media squeezes them out of public space and turn these people into political outcasts (Krasilova, 2010: 27). Another preterition in the "Pravda Severa" and "Arkhangelsk" newspapers is the mayor of Arkhangelsk who does not exist judging by the content of periodicals. Regardless of the explanation of this phenomenon, it is important that journalists act unprofessionally, while refusing their readers the right to know what the mayor of Arkhangelsk elected by citizens does, what good or bad he did for the city, what he plans to do, how he evaluates the work of his

employees or local business. In fact, journalists conceal socially important information from the audience.

It should be noted that the mayor of Arkhangelsk suddenly disappeared from pages of the newspaper "Arkhangelsk" in the fall of 2012 when the founder (the regional administration) removed the editor of this newspaper. The previous editor mentioned the mayor on all the pages and on different occasions: on the sports ground, at school, on the construction of a motorway, bathhouse, children's playground, on a fair, etc. Under the new editor, photo illustrations remain the same. The only difference is that the governor instead of the mayor inspects construction sites, leads the train and launches digital television.

Regional print media and contracts on providing information services for the government

Like the initiation of double standards in mass media, preteritions have both conscious and unconscious reasons. The preconditions for unconscious non-disclosure include the influence of the author's preconceptions on the selection of facts and the choice of sources, as well as the need for the prompt collection of information. The reasons for deliberate non-disclosure can be the affiliation of a journalist to one of the interested parties (for example, a political party); personal career, financial, business and other interests; pressure from the editor or founder, etc. (Labush, 2011: 55). The list of unconscious reasons can be complemented with self-censorship (not as an ethical restraint but the manifested instinct of self-preservation). The conscious reasons also include contracts on providing information services for the government that are widely practiced by formally independent periodicals. The essence of such loyalty agreements is taboo on the dissemination of information that contradicts "party and government policy". It is not necessary to write about authorities positively, the main thing is not to write something that they may disapprove of. Thus, journalistic texts lose the truth, i.e. not opinions and assessments, but facts. They are eliminated and crossed out either by internal or external censors.

The Arkhangelsk Regional Assembly of Deputies also uses a system of contracts with mass media, which requires large budget funds. In 2013, out of eleven auctions for the fulfillment of the state order announced by the representative authority of the region seven were "for the right to conclude a state contract for the provision of

services to create and distribute ... materials on activities of the Arkhangelsk Regional Assembly of Deputies" for a total amount of more than 9 million rubles (the executive authority spends ten times more on public relations). In contrast to the City Council of Deputies, the city hall of Arkhangelsk does not have an agreement on providing information services with regional periodicals. Therefore, not a word is written about the mayor.

The law on public procurement stipulates numerous conditions under which one participant can take part in an auction, as well as conditions under which a state contract can be concluded without announcing an auction. The genre, topic and content of material are not stated. However, employees of the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media (in legal terms, the "excessive act") allow themselves to write "applications" for the editorial board that state what the future publication should include, what words the governor should quote, what information to emphasize, etc. Such applications can be sent to editors of the private newspaper "Pravda Severa" which is under control of a media holding close to the regional authorities.

Authorities refer to contracts on providing information services for the government to explain the unofficial list of taboo topics, the disappearance of sharp critical publications, investigative journalism and disclosure. It is clear that journalists will never make critical publications as this may entail a break in contractual relations, and the income of regional socio-political periodicals from contracts for information services, "paid-for" materials and hidden image advertising is the main income of mass media. For example, the editors of "Pravda Severa" at one time obliged journalists to prepare such publications under the threat of disciplinary punishment in case of refusal.

The amount of print space and budget money allocated for stories about activities of governmental bodies is growing. Sometimes up to 80% of newspaper (non-advertising) space is reserved under such agreements, even the discussion of pressing issues of public life is published on a commercial basis. Contrary to the law on advertising, these publications are not recognized by readers as an advertising product (prices for publishing texts without an advertising marker are much higher). This integration of journalism and public relations happening in all the regions of Russia (contracts are typical) does not meet any resistance of media workers. At the same time, the Russian

Union of Journalists has already started an expert study of this problem, although it is already clear that such service agreements contradict not only the goals and meaning of journalism but also the Mass Media Law (Nikitinskii, 2013: 67) and the Journalist's Code of Professional Conduct.

Working for the money received for their services, journalists are forced to talk about the second side of the contract either positively or *nothing*. When there is nothing to say, they have to organize "good news", compose fairy tales and myths about the region leaders. The journalists of the analyzed newspapers as the true heirs of the northern storytellers Pisakhov and Shergin often tell their readers not what they see, but what they want to see. N. Berdyaev's words spoken back in 1939 are still relevant: "Modern myths are characterized by a consciously organized lie. They are not naive. It will sound pessimistic, but one must admit that a lie is the foundation of organized society" (Berdyaev, 1939: 273).

Regional mass media and the public image of regional authorities

People have the need to create idols and sometimes they fall under the spell of – not only an outstanding, strong personality but even a "monarch for a day". The periodicals under study constantly publish photographs of the governor (there can be two or three images in one issue taking almost half a strip) and his unremarkable statements that are not commented on or subjected to any critical thinking. When mass media begin to praise a person leading the regional government who does not have any social achievements and merits for the region solely by virtue of their position, print media create another myth about the "good uncle" who came to make the life of people better.

We present some results of the content analysis of the "Pravda Severa" newspaper. In December 2012 and January 2013, 25 periodicals and 37 materials on the work of executive authorities were published, including 14 articles that either contained features of a press release or were actual press releases. In January 2013, there was also a special issue on the activities of the regional government. During two months, the periodical gathered 87 statements uttered by officials of executive bodies, including 53 quotes from the governor. Some of them were just anecdotal like the note called "A fir cone is the same as a milk mushroom": "Last Saturday we collected cones with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forest Industry Complex... One employee of the ministry climbed a pine tree and

harvested the crop right in his pocket" ("Pravda Severa", January 29, 2013).

Citation and mentioning are currently the most "trendy" components of the positive image of authorities. At the same time, provincial newspapers still devote their spreads to submissive and laudatory publications in the style of the Soviet press illustrated by several large photographs of the governor ("Pravda Severa", December 25, 2013).

In addition, the governor is making a name for himself by speculating on Joseph Brodsky exiled for a year and a half to the village of Norinskaya in the Arkhangelsk Region in the last century. In the spring of 2013, journalists claimed that the governor initiated the project to create a museum (Arkhangelsk, March 21, 2013), but the following fall they recollected themselves and noticed that the project was invented by the mass media of Arkhangelsk and the governor only supported this idea because everyone knew the truth (Arkhangelsk, October 10, 2013). To prove this statement, editors of regional newspapers of the Arkhangelsk Region had to plant potatoes and trees near the half-ruined hut where the poet had lived at the direction of the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media. However, this task should have been done by workers of agribusiness or the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Short reports about sessions of the regional Assembly of Deputies are the only source of information for readers of "Pravda Severa" where they can learn that local forest and agro-industrial complexes are massively shut down, other enterprises evade taxes, roads are not repaired, fraud and long-term construction flourish in the housing development sector, up to 50,000 people leave the region annually (with a population of 1,200,000), veterans are going to be deprived of benefits, and people with disabilities will not enjoy "accessibility" programs, etc.

Conclusions

Therefore, myths are created through non-disclosure. Non-disclosure not only erases, destroys and eliminates facts, but also creates a mythical, distorted and unreliable information worldview. "The myth does not conceal anything and does not advertise anything, it only deforms facts. The myth is neither a lie nor a sincere confession, it is a distortion" (Barthes, 1994: 95).

The concept of "degree of closeness to readers" typical of regional print media becomes

extremely vague. Newspapers and periodicals lose their true connection with the audience because they broadcast the only right viewpoint, while the others simply conceal it. For instance, we analyzed the coverage of such a pompous event as the Olympic Torch Relay. The weather on November 1, 2013 was bad, i.e. it was sleeting all day. However, the show must go on in any weather, and the attendance of students and schoolchildren was mandatory. They spent three hours standing with teachers and other townspeople on the sides of the central avenue, waiting for local athletes, public figures and officials to run past them with the torch. There is hardly a journalist who has not heard revolts about how much public money was wasted on this attraction and where it would have been viable. However, these opinions were never mentioned in both newspapers despite the fact that whole spreads covered this event. For example, "Pravda Severa" (November 2, 2013) cited a lot of enthusiastic views of journalists and blitz-polls of citizens who showed rare consensus in the positive assessment of this sporting and political event.

We have to agree with scholars who believe that regional journalism is turning from a civil social-political institute into a serving outreach complex hindering the development of democracy. If modern Russian authorities pretend that there is nothing wrong in society, allegedly do not notice protest sentiments, civic activists and even their leaders, they are engaged in propaganda or ordinary political games. While creating preteritions, mass media does not inform the audience about events taking place in the country, does not fulfill its typical functions of information provision, social control and the formation of a system of values, i.e. not only acts unprofessionally but also changes its objective and essence.

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