

III PMMIS 2019
Post mass media in the modern information society
**"Journalistic text in a new technological environment:
achievements and problems"**

**RUSSIAN AND NORWEGIAN STUDENTS ABOUT JOURNALISM
IN THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ERA**

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Abstract

The article analyses the results of a survey of Russian and Norwegian students held in May 2018 within the framework of the Agreement on cooperation in the field of training of journalists between the Volda University College (Norway) and Department of Journalism of Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod (Russia). The aim of the study was to survey the future journalists in order to conduct a comparative analysis of their perception of the profession, journalism mission, and functions in society, as well as of the professional skills required in the work of modern media, and the features of working with information in the new technological environment. The study uses such methods as survey, interview, content analysis, and participant observation. The article covers such aspects as the role of the media in intercultural communication in a multipolar world, as well as the issues of professional skills necessary for journalists to work in modern media. Presented conclusions made by representatives of two different media cultures and journalistic traditions show not only different approaches but also indicate commonality of issues and tasks that concern future journalists and those who train them in universities. The article concludes about the importance of preserving the best journalistic experience and social mission of the journalistic profession in the era of new information technologies.

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Keywords: Mass media, professional skills, information technology, intercultural communication, social mission of journalism.



1. Introduction

In 2013, Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod (Russia) and Volda University College (Norway) established a collaboration by signing the Agreement on cooperation in the field of training of journalists. The journalism departments of the two universities have cooperated on teaching staff and student exchange, the organization of joint student workshops, and collaboration on web publishing.

The collaboration between journalism students and lecturers from the two universities has been socially enhancing, educationally rewarding, and professionally challenging. Representatives of two different media cultures and journalistic traditions gathered and spent time together with the purpose to understand each other as individuals, societies, and professional communities. The project was valuable for both sides.

We live in a world where diversity of cultures, beliefs, political and other views is becoming more and more visible. At the same time, a world is becoming increasingly united in the era of globalization. The discussion of modern journalism in the era of globalization and powerful development of information technologies is of high interests both, for mass media professionals and future journalists from Russia and Norway.

2. Problem Statement

Lobachevsky State University with 30000 students is situated in the heartland of Russia, in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, former Gorky. Today it is the fifth largest city in Russia. The university has a broad range of faculties and institutes, among them there is the Institute of Philology and Journalism that includes Journalism Department and Media Centre with professionally equipped radio and TV studios.

Volda University College, on the other hand, is a small University in Western Norway with 4000 students. The university teaches Humanities and Social sciences with an emphasis on teachers training. The university is also one of the largest institutions for journalism education in Norway.

More important than differences in size and profile are the differences in political systems and journalistic cultures that create the conditions for journalistic practice. However, despite the objective differences in the traditions of journalistic schools, cultures, and history of both countries, the issues of intercultural dialogue and harmony in society are relevant both for media researchers from Russia and Norway, as well as for the other countries (Bjørnsen, 2011; Brurås, 2018; Duck, Newcombe, & White, 2012; McQuail, 2013; Savinova, 2015, 2017).

This is due to many reasons, including the fact that the modern world is now going through the transformation in the context of new social order, new system of global economy and international relations, globalization of the media. Formation of the new is usually accompanied by crises, which makes the role of the media even more important and requires new qualities and new functions from the media. As Vartanova (2018) stated, the process of convergence and digitalization has made the media a more complicated environment where the old and new have to coexist, which affected the work of journalists as the main media professionals, who are creating socially significant content. Thus, today we are witnessing the powerful development of information technology that is substantially transforming traditional journalism. The digital revolution has led to the powerful development of so-called media aggregators that

deliver information to the consumers. And this is just the beginning. Today, modern mass media technology is largely determined by technological innovations. According to Solovyov (2017), humanity is now standing at the crossroads of the transition from the world of mobile gadgets to the world of artificial intelligence systems capable of creating and processing any type of information. In addition, the possibilities of calculations, forecasting and many technological experiments that cannot even be foreseen yet are expanding.

It is also interesting to note that with the growing awareness of global technological innovations that affect the changes of modern journalism, the expert community expresses doubt about their extremely positive effect. Automated journalism, the tendency to reduce the media text, the convergence of the language of mass media and the language of the audience, which often stands far from literary norms – all these active processes have actualized the discussion about professional skills and qualifications necessary for those who work in modern journalism. It is also important to note that in the search for the new media formats future journalists reflect on the values of the profession, its mission, its impact on the problems of the modern turbulent world.

In the workshop for Russian and Norwegian students in Nizhny Novgorod special attention was paid to the study of the current state of journalism, its current agenda, and, taking into account the distinctive features of the Volga region as a multinational district, to the media coverage of multicultural society, as well as the diversity of national, ethnic and religious backgrounds of the peoples living in the Volga Federal district. Students met with representatives of different ethnic groups and communities.

The project benefits from extensive research on multicultural issues, the role of media in intercultural dialogue and the media portrayal of “the others” that has been conducted at Lobachevsky University. Hate speech and incitement of national hatred in media are current problems and a risk to society. These issues have a cumulative effect and a negative impact on mutual understanding and peace in our societies. However, we should also turn to the positive experience of successful intercultural dialogue in multinational Russia, which is presented in the Volga Federal district.

During the workshop for Russian and Norwegian students in Norway, special attention has been paid to the Norwegian media system, human rights, and civil society institutions. In addition to the workshop, students also visited the Parliament, the National Broadcasting Company (NRK) and organizations engaged in media self-regulation.

3. Research Questions

The first research question was to indicate the most important skills and/or qualifications of a journalist according to the Norwegian and Russian student’ opinion.

The second research question was to identify which functions of journalism Norwegian and Russian students consider the most important.

The third research question concerned students' ideas about socially significant and high-quality journalism.

The fourth research question was to indicate the basic values and ethical standards in covering inter-ethnic issues according to the Russian and Norwegian students’ opinion.

The fifth research question was to reveal the peculiarities of students' understanding of tolerant and intolerant approaches to the news coverage.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to analyze and compare the views of students on their future profession, journalism mission, and its functions in society. Moreover, the aim of the research was to find out students' perceptions about the professional skills required for working in modern media and the features of working with information in a new technological environment.

5. Research Methods

In spring 2018, the Journalism Department of the Institute of Philology and Journalism at Lobachevsky University interviewed first-year master's students on their views on their future profession and the role of the media in intercultural communication. At the same time, the survey was conducted among the students at Volda University College (Norway) as part of the signed Cooperation Agreement between our two universities. The study used such methods as questionnaire development for students, survey, interview. Students also used methods of content analysis and the observation since some of them worked or temporarily collaborated with the media outlets. In Lobachevsky University, there were 20 respondents, while colleagues from Volda University College surveyed 18. The survey was conducted in May 2018.

6. Findings

6.1. Most important skills of a journalist

70% of Russian respondents have chosen sociability and efficiency. "We live in a time of dense information flow, news on the Internet are changing almost every minute, so the journalist should always be aware of what is happening in the world. Information becomes irrelevant and outdated in a matter of hours, so you need to be able to quickly find and efficiently create journalistic materials", one of the students notes.

In general, the speed of the journalist work, the ability to create texts, respond to events quickly are mentioned in almost all answers. One of the students gave the following image of the professional work of a journalist: "the life of a journalist is bright and attractive, but it is contrasting with fatigue and emotional burnout. The person who wants to succeed in journalism must understand this."

40% of respondents mentioned education. The transition to the Internet platforms has contributed to the fact that today all texts have been converted to electronic format, where the auto-correction function can fix the errors. However, when we stop writing by hand, we gradually lose our sense of language. Therefore, in modern publications, readers often find typos, lexical, spelling and punctuation errors. Meanwhile, a well-built text is the key to the trust of the audience. A journalist should have a broad outlook, be interested in everything. In this regard, the journalist needs additional knowledge in various fields to create interesting texts.

In addition, students note the importance of such skills as knowledge of modern technology, fact-checking, knowledge of foreign languages. “Nowadays, more and more innovations are being introduced in the media: infographics, interactive polls, gif-animation, tests. Journalists are required to know how to work with such programs as Photoshop, InDesign, CorelDraw.” As one student points out, a journalist should be “a jack of all trades”. Due to the emergence of convergent editions, journalists should be able to work in various types of media: print media, television, radio, and the Internet. “The modern media system is changing rapidly. Before, the journalist had to have a creative talent of writing, and today the journalist should also be aware of modern digital technology”.

The most frequent answer given by the Norwegian students was curiosity. The term was mentioned by more than 60% of the respondents. As one of the students claims, curiosity is fuel for a journalist. Here it must be understood as a thirst for knowledge, an eagerness to know what is going on in society.

The second most frequent response was awareness. The audience expects journalists to have a certain level of knowledge about society and current affairs. Another popular answer was the importance of social skills (including being extroverted and able to communicate). This means the ability to socialize and communicate with different people. Some Norwegian students also emphasized commitment as a keyword. Commitment is something more than an interest, it is an engagement, a devotion or even a dedication to the purpose and values of journalism.

The other important skills mentioned by the Norwegian respondents were creativity, integrity, honesty, unbiased approach, bravery, and critical thinking.

Among Russian students, every fifth respondent (25%) believes that objectivity is an important quality of a journalist. We should note that the term “objectivity” is the subject of controversy in Norwegian journalism. Norwegian students themselves mention the ability to be neutral and balanced.

The category of objectivity has recently become a subject of debate not only in Norwegian but also in global journalism. Such concepts as the era of post-truth (Konev, 2018), fake news (Ilchenko, 2016) are now a part of the information space. The younger generation is aware of these negative processes, and the fact that some of the students especially emphasize objectivity as an important skill of a journalist, while others argue with this, in our opinion, does not contradict but rather complements the discussion about the current state of the press.

One of the students wrote that every day the audience consumes a huge amount of information. It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and false. Every journalist should be responsible for the information he or she wants to tell the audience. To prove yourself as an honest, objective professional, you have to check the information before publication. “A journalist should have principles and adhere to them, not to act like the “yellow press”. Possession of high moral qualities is integral to the professionalism of a journalist”.

6.2. The most important function of the news media

90% of Russian students chose the information function of journalism as the main one. The second most important function was cultural-educational (75%). 30% of respondents mentioned the communicative function. One of the respondents claims that the information function should be put in the foreground. Despite the fall in the level of trust in the media, the reader still believes that the publication of

the material is proof of the reliability of the information. If the media published the news, then the event had really happened.

There are some other interesting approaches to the functions of modern media. Thus, some respondents noted the need for a greater positive charge of the entertainment function. One of the students claims that a modern adult is always loaded with something (work, study, family, and children), so the media should provide a “breath of fresh air”, immersing people in the world of positive emotions, thereby giving the opportunity to relax from the hectic lifestyle. One of the important functions of the media is the formation of an adequate public opinion, free from propaganda, said another respondent.

One of the students pointed out the supervision of public administration to be the responsibility of the independent press.

Two answers are frequently repeated among the Norwegian students. The first one is a watchdog function, which means taking a critical position towards the authorities in society, asking critical questions and highlighting the dark sides of society. As one of the respondents claims, that means to disclose issues that should be criticized. 14 of 18 respondents (almost 80%) mention this function as one of their keywords. The other frequently repeated answer is information function or enlightenment, as some respondents have called it. Again, 14 of 18 respondents mention it as one of their three keywords. In their opinion, the media should pay special attention to the function of providing citizens with relevant information on public issues. The media should educate people.

Other important functions mentioned by more than one student are agenda setting, being a spokesperson for underrepresented and neglected groups, and creating engagement and involvement among the public.

Thus, the information function was mentioned in the responses of both Norwegian and Russian students. We should mention that the importance of the watchdog function is particularly emphasized by the Norwegian students and mentioned by their Russian counterparts.

It was interesting to understand why the function of entertainment was often mentioned by Russian but not Norwegian students. Apparently, it can be because the function of entertainment in Norwegian journalism is not as hypertrophied as in the modern Russian media practice. This is a separate interesting topic for research: how much of people's leisure time does the media occupy today? There is no secret that endless TV shows compete effectively with theatres, clubs, libraries, despite the obviously excessive supply and questionable quality of programs that receive a lot of criticism from the audience and frankly negative attitude of media (Frolova, 2018).

6.3. Socially important journalism

The students were asked to look through the several online newspapers in their native language and pick up two news stories, one as an example of socially important journalism, the other one as an example of skilled and well-written journalism.

This aspect of our study was related to the need to highlight the current agenda, as well as to note the quality, competent material presented in the media. Here we have received an extremely broad set of replies, although the answers featured similar examples. Thus, among them were the stories related to the situation with the blocking of Telegram, publications about the missile strike in Syria, and news about the

World Cup. The opinion on what to consider high-quality journalism examples differed; however, every respondent strongly justified his or her position.

Here is the material that was cited as an example of quality journalism: In the United States, a Boeing with passengers had the engine exploded in the air. The plane was landed by the former Navy pilot (Korelina, 2018). The respondent believes that, first, the event itself is extraordinary. Incidents with airplanes that end well are extremely rare and always intriguing. Secondly, everything here is explained: what happened, who the hero is, whether there were similar accidents, who was hurt, different opinions were provided. This makes it an example of high-quality journalism.

Another student considers as an example of skillful journalism an entertaining material about the new French cartoon. The respondent points out that the story was followed by a funny illustration, which influenced the decision to read the full article. The author writes about his impressions after watching this cartoon, he advises readers not to be lazy and watch a cartoon which, the author is sure, will not leave anyone indifferent: “This is a charming and in a good way old-fashioned French cartoon for those who are slightly tired of the three-dimensional domination of Pixar and Disney. Three stories from the rich life of a cozy farm stylized in delicate watercolors — like the one that is sold to tourists on the Paris boulevards” (Kornatsky, 2018, para.1). The text itself is easy to read and contains humor. It is always a pleasure to read such kind of material, as they do not contain politics, incidents, gossips, and scandals that fill the entire information space.

According to Norwegian students, the most important news stories cover war and human suffering around the world. They also deal with crime and corruption in the country and cover politics and public administration.

At the time when the students were performing the task, there was a story in the news about a gas attack in Syria, killing 40 civilians including several children in the city of Duoma. Some of the students chose this story as an example of the important news story. They believe that this is a story that the Norwegian media should give priority to, even if it is far from their own country. Other students called crime news important. One example was the news about a former CEO of a large Norwegian fishing company who was sentenced for corruption. Another example was the follow-up story about a member of the Norwegian Parliament who cheated with travel allowances and compensation. Another example was the story about Muslim leaders in Norway who successfully stopped the street crime among young immigrants by simply walking the streets at night and talking to young people.

Respondents’ understanding of the importance of the news stories also includes domestic politics, for example, the criticism of the Prime Minister for the failure of measures to combat terrorism, as well as the resistance of the population against the government’s new mapping of administrative regions in Norway.

Here is one more remarkable story, revealed and exposed by a leading Norwegian newspaper, which is also pointed out by the students. A few years ago, three brothers in their twenties were declared as mentally disabled by the local authorities. However, it turned out that the decision was unfounded, and they were not mentally disabled at all. The reason was the desire to increase the income of the municipality and financial support from the government. The story shocks and shows a striking example of the watchdog function of the media.

The Norwegian students appreciate stories on youth culture, young people mental health, news covering the fight against drug dealers and stories about the trend of fist fighting among young people in the local community.

When it came to the student`s nomination of skilled, competent and well-written stories, a variety of suggestions were put forward. One example is an article on the rise in the cost of housing in major cities in Norway. The hero of this story is Heidi, 23, a recently graduated middle-income nurse. With her salary, she cannot afford 95 percent of the housing market in Oslo. Many readers will recognize themselves in this story. By using graphic presentation, the reporter visualizes how Heidi`s access to the housing market will change in several cities, pointing out the Oslo area as the most expensive. The story is written simply and easily, and it comes with good illustrations, many sources, and links to additional information¹.

6.4. Coverage of inter-ethnic issues

The students were asked about the basic values and ethical standards for covering inter-ethnic issues.

Most often, respondents pointed out the importance of such skills as respect for other cultures and public interests (40%), the ability to avoid racial discrimination and tolerance (35%), ability to be objective and competent (25%).

Norwegian students provided a variety of suggested keywords related to the coverage of inter-ethnic issues including respect, no prejudices, equal status, neutrality, empathy, understanding, and openness to other cultures, correct and realistic representation.

One respondent was concerned with the representation of minorities and the importance of showing ordinary people, not only the vulnerable or the criminal ones. "Show the variety of ordinary people! Draw them into discussions and interviews, use them as sources!"

Another respondent noticed some examples of inaccurate journalism: "I believe it is important to show other cultures as correctly and realistically as possible. If you distort facts and figures, you will not be able to complete your journalistic assignment. I'm not saying not to point out cultural differences, but it should be based on sources, observations, and facts."

Several respondents were concerned about the appropriateness of mentioning ethnicity in media. The general answer is that it should be mentioned only when it is clearly relevant to the story. One of the students claims that a journalist should know when to mention a person's ethnicity and when it is unnecessary. Another student cautions against polarization, stigmatization, and "we versus they" opposition using an example to underline the point: "If, for example, a person born in Norway from Albanian parents commits a crime, the comment field on the news site will look very different, depending on whether the journalist describes him as Albanian or Norwegian. It is desirable to call the person just a criminal without making an emphasis on ethnicity. We should avoid terms and words that could lead to increased stigmatization of ethnic groups".

¹The data were obtained by professor Svein Brurås during the survey of Norwegian students.

6.5. Intercultural tolerance and intolerance

Finally, the students were asked to provide some example of tolerant and intolerant approaches to covering the topic of intercultural relations. Here are some examples from the Russian respondents:

A tolerant approach is shown in the article «It is unacceptable to open fire on children: how the world reacted to the death of a 15-year-old teenager in the Gaza Strip (Smirnov, 2018). The student claims, that “this article completely reflects the problem of tolerance in the world. The author stresses that no matter what difficulties, problems or misunderstandings occur in the world, children should not be involved. It does not matter what nationality they are. That’s a good example of an article reflecting the problems of modern tolerance”.

Another example is from “Komsomolskaya Pravda” newspaper headlined “Bring back Gusya! The serial hijacker of planes from St. Petersburg fights with Sweden because of the cat”. The article states, “the 1993 Dagestani plane hijacker for the first time admits that he could not blow up the passenger Tu-134.” (Mikhina, 2018). The mention of nationality here was unnecessary, used just to attract readers. The word «Dagestani» was mentioned several times, and everywhere it was unmotivated. The material is written with irony; however, no hate speech is used. Nevertheless, the unmotivated use of ethnicity can be considered intolerant.

Here is another example of intolerance from “Komsomolskaya Pravda” headlined “In Tula, the Gypsies stole clothes from a fashionable boutique” (Zhukova, 2018). In the title of this article, we see a negative attitude towards the representatives of the Gypsy nationality, as the ethnic identity of the criminals is immediately indicated. This example forms a negative stereotype in the media about the gypsies and is unacceptable because it promotes ethnic hatred.

It is impossible not to pay attention to the respondents’ reflections on the responsibility and necessity to increase their competence in covering issues of intercultural dialogue. “Before the material is released”, the respondent writes, “it’s necessary to carefully check the information. Neither speed nor format justifies any inaccuracies. It is necessary to spend time and energy on a thorough study of other cultures and nationalities”.

The unmotivated use of ethnicity is a serious problem for Norwegian students as well. Mention of nationality or ethnic origin is particularly harmful in crime reports. For this reason, it should be mentioned only when it is necessary for the story. One respondent pointed out that the Norwegian media have improved their practices and responsibilities regarding this issue in recent years.

One student is concerned about the widely discussed phenomenon in the coverage of domestic violence: “When a murder is committed in an immigrant family, it is called “honour killing”. If it occurs in a Norwegian family, it is called “a family tragedy”. This is an example of intolerance.” The choice of words implies that in the Muslim society domestic violence is connected to the culture, while in Norwegian families it is caused by mental health problems and does not have any cultural elements. This difference is of course not well founded. Mental illness may occur in every culture, while jealousy and a dangerous feeling of lost honour has caused domestic violence in the Norwegian culture as well.

One student mentioned a Norwegian TV documentary as a good example of tolerant intercultural communication. It is called “Escape” and is hosted by Leo Ajkic, who was born in Bosnia and brought to Norway as a refugee when he was 13. Today he is a famous TV personality. Ajkic uses his own background

and experiences when he covers the situation with refugees and immigrants in today Norway. He has received prizes and awards for this television production.

Another example mentioned by the student is an article published immediately after France won the FIFA World Cup in 2018. The author says that he is tired of reading about the origin of French players, for him they are all French without exception. Even the "white" players of the French team have roots in other countries.

One respondent criticized the tendency in journalism to emphasize the most radical and threatening elements of foreign culture. Some journalistic reports on a foreign culture have an insufficient number of sources. "He seems to be trying to spread fear," said the respondent about one journalist and his narrow use of sources.

7. Conclusion

Naturally, some differences and other accents can be found in the answers of Russian and Norwegian peers, however, this study has shown many common issues that future journalists worry about and the commonality of the challenges their lecturers face.

Future journalists from Russia and Norway, who will have to work in a highly competitive environment, already understand the challenges they will face and professional skills they will need to develop. However, while searching for new ideas they should not forget about the experience of previous generations, culture and traditions, which are the main braces of the link between past and future.

Undoubtedly, the new media information technology will significantly influence the process of transformation of journalism, but the main thing is that journalism itself should remain the value of society (Korkonosenko, 2012) and faithful to its social mission.

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