

# Global Media Journal

German Edition

ISSN 2196-4807

Vol. 3, No.1, Spring/Summer 2013

URN:nbn:de:gbv:547-201300216

## **A New Definition of Journalism Functions in the Framework of Hybrid Media Systems: German and Russian Academic Perspectives**

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**Abstract:** The communication patterns of our society have undergone crucial changes due to the development of the digital public sphere and the formation of ‘hybrid media systems’ (Chadwick 2011). This transformation challenges professional journalism in its role as the fourth estate. It is obviously essential to re-think the role and functions of mass media in the modern ‘network society’ (Castells, 2010). Some experts even talk about the end of the “century of journalism” (Weischenberg, 2010), and others argue that it is just the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s news-journalism and the beginning of the new kind of professional journalism that will still be able to fulfill its core functions of building the public sphere, in accordance with the conditions of the transformed society (Pöttker, 2012). For conventional mass media that means a major switch from ‘news-journalism to ‘orientation’ journalism (Bruns, 2005). This transformation has been intensified in Russia by the protest movement that fueled a discussion among journalists about new standards of journalism: should they just be observers or are they allowed and even supposed to be activists of social movements? This paper examines what this paradigmatic shift means to the profession and to the self-identification of journalists as it is being viewed in Russia and in Germany. The author presents arguments of journalism scholars and journalists from both countries and argues that this development brings along a number of serious challenges for the society, connected with an enormous rise of opinion writing that leads journalists back to the era of pre-professional and pre-commercial journalism. In order to preserve journalism as a profession with socially important functions, a revision of the concept and of the standards of journalism is needed, both in Germany and in Russia.

**Keywords:** definition of journalism, journalism functions, Russian journalism, German journalism, public sphere, opinion journalism

### **Introduction**

The rapid growth of online communication and of citizen journalism in the recent decade has fueled debates about the new definition of journalism functions and the self-identification of journalists. Some experts even posed a provocative question:

Do we still need journalists in the era of the Internet (Weischenberg, 2010, Charles & Steward, 2011, Gant, 2007)? In case we do need journalists, then what for? What happens with the Anglo-Saxon post-war standards of reporting, if facts gathering stops to be the prerogative of journalists? Are we headed towards an era of opinion-based journalism? This discussion certainly has its own spin in different countries according to their specific media-political contexts. In this article we aim to conduct a comparative view on the current state of academic and professional reflections about the transformation of journalistic functions in Russia and in Germany in the framework of the developments of hybrid media systems. According to Chadwick's definition, "hybrid media system" is "built upon interactions among old and new media and their associated technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizations" (Chadwick, 2011).

Germany and Russia have different media cultures; this suggests they will have different types of emerging "hybrid media systems". In Germany traditional media enjoys a relatively high level of public support and leading media has also managed to establish themselves as leading media outlets online, so that the German online media landscape can be seen to a great extent "parallel" to the offline one (Litvinenko, 2011). In Russia, on the contrary, there is a low structural parallelism between online and offline media: the online media landscape is dominated by media that rarely provide printed versions. For example, in the citation index of the *RuNet*, the first 10 places belong to online media only, without an offline version, with the exception of *Vesti.ru* (online-portal of TV-News, 5<sup>th</sup> place) and *Verdomosti.ru* (online version of the business newspaper, 10<sup>th</sup> place) (Data of "IAS Medialogia", May 2012); in addition, the blogosphere plays a significant role on the media landscape. These differences can result in a discrepancy of challenges for the journalists in the Internet era in Russia and in Germany.

It should be noted that the sources used in this paper for the information on the debates about the journalism functions in Germany and in Russia will differ in their nature: in Russia the most influential texts about new paradigm in journalism are published in online media and are written by journalists themselves, while the academic reflection on this matter has not been elaborated yet. This can be explained by the rather weak ties between the theory of journalism in Russia and the fast developing practice of profession; consequently, the key works on the theory of journalism have not been updated since the very beginning of the 2000s. In Germany, on the contrary, there is a strong tradition of academic reflection on trends within the profession and several studies address current problems from a theoretical perspective.

Describing the Russian case, this paper, among other sources, will refer to several recent journalistic publications that deal with the self-reflection of journalists in the frame of the protest movement that started in December 2011. This civil movement seems to have become an important factor in the process of self-identification of journalists in Russia. The coverage of the protests made liberal

journalists face some crucial dilemmas that can be understood through the following questions: Should a journalist take sides in a conflict? Should he/she express his/her position and for example appeal to the audience to participate in political rallies? Some of professionals answered with clear “no”:

“Perhaps this is not the most popular position - and it looks especially strange in a column of the participant of the organization committee of winter rallies in the magazine which trademark is a slogan on the cover - but (...) there is journalism, and there is political struggle. Both occupations are respectful - but they should not be confused. Journalism doesn't mean the unconditional support of the forces of good and must not raise the spirits of those forces with inspiring columns.” (Saprykin, 2012)

But such professionals were accused of betraying the “mission” of journalism by others: “Good journalism always means pathos” (Rogov, 2012) A big number of such self-reflecting articles including series of “journalists interviewed by journalists” appeared in the Russian online media in spring and summer of 2012; the most remarkable among them were on the portals *openspace.ru*, *colta.ru*, *bg.ru*, *afisha.ru*, *slon.ru*.

In Germany we could also observe a similar frame of self-reflection recently about the functions of journalism in the media, although in a much less pointed form, with a range of publications dealing with the impact of the economic crisis after 2008 and the debates about how quality journalism could survive in the time when “the content is free” (see for example the series of essays in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* “Wozu noch Journalismus?” (“What do we need journalism for?”, 2010). Speaking about Germany, however, academic sources will be most relied on due to the reasons explained above.

As we can see, the major factors that have recently fueled the debates in the journalistic communities in Russia and in Germany differ in their nature, one being mostly political, the other dealing with the economic pressures, so that we can assume that the responses to the challenges and the views on the transformation of the profession would differ as well.

This article will present the canonical view on the definition of journalism in Russian and German traditions; then it will explore the reasons for the current crisis of these definitions (why do we need to revise them); also, the paper will analyze suggestions of the normative understanding of the functions of journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article argues that the new normative concept of journalism, based on the orientation function, brings along serious risks and eventually can lead to de-professionalization of journalism. As evidence, the Russian case will be analyzed and parallels to the history of journalism in Western democracies will be drawn. In conclusion, I will outline perspectives for the future transformation of journalism functions in Germany and in Russia.

## Theoretical concepts of journalism in Germany and Russia

The most common activity-based definition of journalism in Russia, which is being taught at journalism schools all over the country, is the following: “Journalism is an activity of collecting, editing and delivering information through mass media” (Boljshoj enziklopedicheskij slovarj, 2007). Several variations of this definition exist in journalism study books, for instance, Svitich gives the following one: journalism is a „specific informational activity connected to search and transmission of actual social information in rhythmical form for the mass anonymous audience” (Svitich, 2000, p.4). It does correlate with the basic functionalistic definition of journalism in Anglo-Saxon theory: “Journalism within a wider geographical, historical and generic range seems to be definable by two aspects: its aim is to provide a truthful account of the contemporary world, and it is committed to reporting information that is new about that world, whether in terms of fact or opinion based in fact” (Conboy, 2012, p.2). The German Journalists’ Union describes a journalist as a person “who on a professional basis (...) gathers information, evaluates or checks and prepares news in an entertaining, analytical or commentary way, and transmits it via a medium in the form of words, pictures or sound” (DJV, 1999).

### *“Ideological function” vs. “creation of the public sphere”*

Apart from this activity-based definition there are a range of attempts in both countries to define journalism in the framework of Luhmann’s systems theory (in Russia: Korkonosenko, 1995, Prokhorov, 2000; in Germany: Gerhards, 1994; Neuberger, 2004, Altmepfen, 2000, Weischenberg, 2004 etc.). Thus, in Russia in his “Introduction to journalism” Prokhorov defines journalism through its belonging to the mass media system as a “system of types of activities necessary for the functioning of this social institute” (Prokhorov, 2000). In Germany, Siegfried Weischenberg puts it in the following way: “in the modern pluralistic societies this system [journalism] can be empirically identified through one function in the first place: to gather topics from the different social systems (environment), to select them, to edit, and then to place at the disposal as media products to these social systems (to the environment)” (Weischenberg, 2004, p.43). A further, more recent definition based on the “Journalistik” of Klaus Meier (Meier, 2007), is an attempt to capture the new approach to the role of journalism, but first we will analyze the traditional understanding of a profession that was formed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Weischenberg, 2010).

In both countries there are a number of approaches to categorize the functions of journalism. In Russia, two major schools of journalism theory can be distinguished, that of the St. Petersburg State University represented by Korkonosenko, Vinogradova, Sidorov et al. and that of the Moscow State University represented by Prokhorov, Svitich, Zasurski et al. Sergei Korkonosenko points out the following functions of journalism (he names them “social roles”):

productive-economic, regulating, informational, communicative, spiritual-ideological (Korkonosenko, 1995). Prokhorov coins the following functions: communicative, ideological, culturally-educative, referential, recreative, organizational (Prokhorov, 2000).

The remarkable difference between Russian and German theories is that almost all Russian scientists emphasize the importance of “the ideological” function that does not seem to be relevant in Germany, whereas the Germans point out the function of “self-observation of the society” and “building the public sphere” (see, for example, Görke, 2000; Neuberger, 2003; Balázs, 2005; Meier, 2007), which is not mentioned in a prominent way in the Russian key works. This discrepancy might be determined by the difference of the contexts, traditions and practice of journalism in both countries. Interestingly, these different normative approaches to the profession are reflected in the self-image of journalists as it has been shown by empirical studies in both countries (Weischenberg et al., 2006; Pasti 2007).

### ***The Russian normative concept of journalism: historic origins***

It is also important to mention a strong continental European tradition of journalism existing in Russia that has not been altered like in Germany due to the shift towards the Anglo-Saxon model after World War II. Actually, it was only recently that journalism culture in Russia has partially incorporated the tradition of separation between facts and commentary, which is currently being followed only by very few quality publications. As a consequence of this historical development, Russian journalists traditionally perceive themselves not as observers but as activists and “educators”; for example, a study on the self-image of the Russian journalists conducted by Svetlana Pasti verifies this claim (Pasti, 2007). The effects of this reality can also be found in the theoretical works of the Russian media scholars, where they emphasize the importance of “ideological” and “educative” function of journalism (Prokhorov, 2000; Korkonosenko, 2004).

The Russian press has developed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century within main global trends (although under a very strong state control): highly personalized journalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, uprising of partisan press in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Yesin, 2006). On the Russian media landscape the role of writers and of literature in journalism and in political process has always been enormous, partly due to strong censorship: using the metaphoric language of literature or packing political statements in the form of book reviews was a way to avoid censorship (Zhirkov, 2001). In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a prominent Russian journalist and historian of the Russian press, Pavel Berlin, wrote about his understanding of journalism functions: “A dedicated writer, a honest journalist does not sell his works, his aim is to awaken the ‘good feeling’ and for this purpose he is ready to bear alone the cross of suffering. He is interested not in selling ‘copies’, but in spreading the ideas” (Berlin, 1903 [2001]). Thus, the “ideological’ function has deep roots in the traditional Russian (as well as continental European) understanding of journalism.

During the Soviet era ideological and educative functions became officially the core goals of mass media according to Lenin's understanding of the press as a collective propagandist, agitator and organizer. That actually correlated with the previous evolution of an understanding of journalists as "conscience of the nation", of course with the limitation that the whole profession of journalism in the Soviet Union was instrumentalized by the state; journalists were allowed to express only the kind of opinions that would match the "general line of the party". The main function of journalism within this communistic paradigm was not for information but for building the "correct" public opinion; in other words, "a fact was only a cause for the political-biased publicist commentary to exert influence on public opinion, more than to inform it" (Pasti, 2006).

### **Structural transformation of the media market and the challenges to the normative concept of journalism**

There is although a basic function that all experts, both in Russia and Germany, agree upon: providing information and reporting new facts. However, since the development of the Internet and of citizen journalism it is clear that journalists no longer have the same kind of prerogative of reporting like they used to have. As Horst Pöttker writes:

The function of journalism to provide news for the public decreases in the digital media world, because rapidly absorbable information about recent events ("news") can no longer be delivered only by journalistic media, it reaches the recipient from all corners. (...) The linking of journalism to the news function therefore disappears. (Pöttker, 2012)

Among leading Russian journalists a similar understanding of this shift in journalism functions can be found:

Now the audience is less interested in the reporter as deliverer of information. News is no longer a product of production. News becomes a phenomenon of nature. News grows like grass. More and more media work not as a team of journalists, but as 3-4-5 content managers who just surf through the Internet, monitor social networks and pick news like mushrooms. Of course, getting really exclusive information still requires professional efforts of journalists, but the field of the regular news reporting is irretrievably lost by our profession - and thanks God. (Sokolov-Mitritch, 2011)

This transformation of journalism as profession evidently has to do with the transformation of the whole media system which it is a part of. The media system has undergone, in the recent decades, significant changes due to a number of reasons. The following paragraphs take a closer look at these reasons in order to understand the nature of such transformations.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the global media industry has already suffered from two big financial crises (2001 and 2008) that have revealed and aggravated the major structural crisis of the industry; at the root, this is mainly due to the fact that traditional media failed to meet the demands of the audience that has changed a

lot within the recent decades. These new audiences are characterized among others by mobility, individualism, pragmatism, new type of media-socialization, custom to get information anytime, anywhere, anyhow, to be prosumers of information (consumer and producer at the same time) (Litvinenko, 2011).

### ***Shift from “news function” to “orientation function”***

Media industry responded to the crisis by re-launching media outlets according to these new needs of the audience. Both in Germany and in Russia media has had to become multi-medial, mobile, more interactive, hyper-textual, and personalized. These changes lead consequentially to the revision of the range of functions of journalism as a profession. The most popular normative response to the question “what should the core function of modern journalism be?”, both in Germany and in Russia, is called the “orientation function”, because orientation is what the audience needs in the face of the enormous information flow that is becoming more and more complex:

“Of course, the reporter as always has to run, to look, to listen and to touch. But at the same time you have to realize; no matter what kind of exclusive information you’ve managed to get - this is no longer sufficient for success. You have to give the reader not only the dose of new information, but also a strong charge of clarity.”( Sokolov-Mitritch, 2011)

In Germany the Klaus Meier’s definition reflects the modern understanding of journalism as a profession:

“Journalism researches, selects and presents issues that are new, factually correct and relevant. It creates public sphere by observing the society, delivering these observations to the mass audience through the periodic mass media and thus constructing a common reality. “ (Meier, 2007, p.13)

In this definition Meier emphasizes the two core functions of modern journalism: presenting relevant issues correctly and constructing a common reality. This view can still not be found in Russian journalism theory, although we can observe similar ideas in the self-reflexive articles of a Russian journalist: “In order to create a sensation in the new information age, we should be able to convert the scattered information in the essential knowledge of what has happened” (Sokolov-Mitritch, 2011). However, the creation of a common reality in today’s world is done by journalists under new conditions. Horst Pöttker from Dortmund Institute of Journalism suggests that journalists in the frame of the ongoing shift of paradigm turn from the “neutral observer” to an “independent actor” (Pöttker, 2012). According to his normative concept the crucial point for the profession is that the journalist keeps fulfilling the function of making the social processes transparent and creating a public sphere (Pöttker 2012). But is it realistic to expect that journalists in this new role will be able to stay nonpartisan and independent? Pöttker responds to this argument by giving the example of the brilliant reporter and writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Heinrich Heine: “Heine wrote his correspondence for

the "Allgemeine Zeitung" always in the I-form, because he saw himself as a part of the events, about which he reported. At the same time, there was no one who would insist on his journalistic independence more than him" (Pöttker, 2012). Even so, examples of significant authors are not enough to prove that there is no danger in setting the new standard of the journalist as an actor who expresses his opinion in the first place; this would make the profession extremely dependent on the individual character of a journalists, who, in the majority of cases, cannot be as brilliant as the best examples.

### **Conclusion: Perspectives of opinion journalism**

To explore the consequences of the current shift to the model of opinion-based journalism the history of journalism in western democracies must be referred to. Aaron Barlow, in his book "The Rise of the Blogosphere" (Barlow, 2007), draws parallels between the evolution of the profession in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the situation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century describing the partisan press as the ancestor of blogs. He gives the example that in the 1820s Andrew Jackson used partisan press like the politician Howard Dean in 2004, who "first recognized the power that blogs could have in sparking enthusiasm for a campaign (not to mention in raising money)" (Barlow, 2007, p.56). 1820s was the epoch of pre-commercial and pre-professional journalism, when the role of opinion journalism was high and "the concept of impartiality or neutrality that became such a hallmark of American journalism starting in the years just before WWII was almost completely absent" (Barlow 2007, p.61). Thus, the pre-commercial state of journalism was tightly connected with the rise of opinion journalism which led to segmentation of the public sphere rather than to its consolidation.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we witness in fact a very similar process; journalism, losing the exclusivity of the informative function, has the tendency to focus on expression of opinions, so that for instance in the Russian practice of journalism the separation line between blogs (personal opinion of the authors) and journalism often dissolves (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, forthcoming). The increasing presence of journalists in social media leads to personalization of journalism (increasing of the importance of journalists as brands), which also used to be a trademark of pre-professional journalists on the dawn of the press development (Conboy, 2004). Thus, the situation resembles that of the pre-commercial and pre-professional state of journalism, where the press was in the first place the battlefield of opinions.

In these circumstances we observe the rise of the advocacy type of journalism which in the era of complex and globalized communication can cause further fragmentation of society. However, it should be mentioned that this trend differs from country to country, depending on the national media and political landscape. For example, in Russia, journalists often acknowledge themselves to be advocates

of certain groups (Pasti 2007), whereas in Germany the self-perception of journalists as objective reporters is still dominant (Weischenberg et al., 2006). We can observe the effects of partisan media on the example of the coverage of the election campaigns in the U.S. where mass media openly admits their partisanship by supporting certain candidates. The study of the American blogosphere has shown that the two major politicized clusters of the blogosphere – blogs supporting democrats and that supporting republicans – are practically isolated and barely connected between each other with links (Hargittai et al., 2007; Shaw & Benkler, 2008); this is a clear symptom of the existence of separated “information worlds” in the blogosphere and of a high level of fragmentation of the public sphere.

The case of the evolution of the Russian journalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century also gives us a clear example of the de-professionalization of journalism in the framework of its orientation to expressing of opinions. Gorbachev’s “Perestroika” (“Restructuring”) in the late 1980s brought the wave of “free opinion journalism” with it and the journalists who advocated democratic values certainly played “a decisive role in the liberalization of society” (Pasti, 2007). Further in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the freedom of speech was unrestricted, but as far as the advertisement market was underdeveloped, media outlets could not survive independently, so they were instrumentalized by the state or by oligarchs, who hoped to gain political power via media. The Anglo-Saxon standard of separating facts and opinions was introduced only in a few media outlets (mostly business press as *Kommersant* or *Vedomosti*). In the beginning of the year 2000 Russian experience with opinion-dominated and instrumentalized journalism resulted in a general frustration about the press and distrust in journalism. In 2004, according to the poll of *Amnesty International*, 75% of Russian citizens wanted censorship back – a shocking figure that obviously expressed the “overfeeding” of population with low-standard journalism (Schlindwein, 2007). In the Russian case, the concept of journalism based on the presumption that journalists are there in the first place to provide their own opinion, was one of the main factors, along with economic crisis, that led to a degradation of standards and to a devaluation of journalism as a profession.

It can be assumed that in the case of online-journalism, which still does not have a valid business model to become really profitable, (especially if it is not backed by strong publishing houses as it is the case with German leading online media) we are heading to a pre-commercial state of journalism that, as we saw from the examples out of modern Russian history, is in danger of getting manipulated by various groups.

However, the danger of de-professionalization of journalism obviously differs from country to country, due to the difference of the media-political context and the traditions of professional standards in journalism. Thus, Silvio Waisbord from George Washington University describes the situation of the significant

concurrency between blogs and mass media, but at the same time still sees no danger in de-professionalization of journalism in the U.S. (Waisbord, 2012). In Germany – where the level of professional standards in journalism and of self-organization of journalistic community can be estimated as very high and where bloggers still cannot be regarded as serious competitors to journalists, as it is the case in the U.S. or in Russia (Knaut, 2010) – the threat of de-professionalization can be estimated as rather low in comparison with such transitional democracies as Russia.

The described risks of the ongoing transformation of journalism into opinion-based publicism should nevertheless be taken into consideration by journalistic communities in different countries, in Germany as well as in Russia. It is urgent to revise and to redefine the normative model of journalism, introducing standards for opinion-writing, drawing a stricter line between blogs and journalistic comments (as we do between PR and journalism), and between publishing of a journalist as a private person and his work in order for journalism to survive as a profession that aims to fulfill the social function of orientation and of building a public sphere.

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