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Public Discourse on the Journalism Prospects: Towards Substantival Approach

1. Introduction

For journalism researchers and practitioners, statements on the profession crisis and soon disappearance from public life became just habitual thing. “The end of journalism - version 2.0” (Charles, 2014) – this is the title of a vast work by the British authors (however, the chapters content leads to the opposite conclusion). “Journalism in crisis: Time for a government bailout” (Journalism in crisis, 2009) – this is the similar title of the analytical review made by American sociologists. As some authors consider: “The emergence of the Web has to a degree de-institutionalised journalism ...” (Russial, Laufer, & Wasko, 2015, 301). According to such statements, journalism is allegedly incompatible with the digital revolution.

However, in the discourse on the future of journalism not only tragic predictions but also prosperous prospects may be found. In particular, Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge have offered the paradoxical “Beyond journalism” theoretical approach. As journalism functions in increasingly networked settings, it “requires a toolkit that looks at the field as a moving object ... ‘Beyond journalism’ is an approach to journalism that considers it as a dynamic object of study” (2018, 177). At the same time, there are also very optimistic forecasts: “This dynamic landscape of continuous and diversified witnessing and reporting does not represent a crisis of journalism, but rather, an explosion of it. In fact, the profession seems to be more alive than ever” (Haak van der, Parks, & Castells, 2012, 2923-2924). Hence, favorable prospects are opening up for the research community. Apparently, there are strong rational grounds under the difference of conclusions, which should be to precisely identified and explained.

2. Problem Statement

From theoretical viewpoint, the problem is not the collision of individual judgments, but the difference of methodological approaches to the studying object. Proponents of the technology primacy use a relational methodology that describes the object as (through) social relations or interactions; those who insist on the maintaining and flourishing journalism gravitate to the attributive-substantive methodology, which treats the object through its essential properties (the object as it is).

The paper is primarily aimed at considering promising theoretical approaches to analyzing the journalism current state and future, namely at revealing the productivity of the substantival approach. As research methods, we use a critical review of theoretical consideration of current state and prospects of journalism, paying special attention to the differences between relational and substantival methodologies.

3. Findings and discussion

Typical logical contradictions are clearly seen in the following statement: "The journalism functioning is a basic process of its social functions realization, which takes place in the form of purposeful interaction with the environment"; and after that: "For journalism, two social subjects ... have especial importance, namely the *state power* ... and *the audience*, or rather the total potential audience" (Lazutina, 2018, 15). The quoted statement presents a relational way of understanding journalism, but also it offers a sociological version that does not consider journalism as a phenomenon in itself, regardless of the interaction with external social actors. Another position looks correct: "Journalism seems to be just a diligent likeness of the society, by which it was created ... But the functioning of journalism often shows quite serious differences from the functioning of society as a whole" (Sidorov, 2015, 49).

It would be useful to listen to those philosophers who remind that, firstly, "the substance of the phenomenon is something without which this phenomenon cannot exist" and, secondly,

that "without the substance of the phenomenon it is impossible to determine the existence of the phenomenon ... and therefore to begin researching" (Afanasiev, 2010, para. 7, 10). At the first stage, one should take into account the substantive characteristics (essence) of journalism as the potentiality to act and interact with external environments, and only then analyze the functioning. In particular, in this case, there will appear a reliable explanatory basis under the fundamental thesis, with which we fully agree: "The market commercial environment ... not only is contraindicated for journalism, but it is simply deadly for it" (Ivanitskiy, 2015, 29). Otherwise, the inevitable will be various kinds of situational depending on the interests and influences of third-party actors, including the government, political elite, business, undeveloped audience with its unstable requests, etc. We are not talking on the danger of interacting with institutional and private partners but on that journalism should maintain its qualitative certainty and that namely essentially (naturally) inherent properties of journalism should be extracted by partners in interaction.

A special kind of dependence on the external environment in the technological field does exist. Both in the traditional newsroom practice and in the reflecting academic consciousness, the inertia to percept journalism as the content substance of mass media was deeply rooted. The object of the theory has obviously modified, and the changes have created a need to rethink what journalism is and consequently to reassess theories of journalism. According to observers, there is a transition from discussing the symptoms of the crisis in journalism to fundamental questions on its essence. As they write: "Philosophical perspectives on digital journalism remain few. We believe that this is a blind spot not only of this special issue but of journalism studies at large ... journalism studies should lean more heavily on perspectives such as ethics, ontology and epistemology. They liberate scholars from studying journalism only within the institutional framework" (Steensen & Ahva, 2015, 15).

The following idea proves quite well-grounded: "It would be a mistake to assume that the types of journalism emerging outside and alongside legacy news organizations are necessarily different or oppositional to the core values, ideals, and practices of the profession"

(Deuze & Witschge, 2018, 168). It seems to us, this conclusion speaks in favor of the substantive methodology as a tool for assessing the latest journalism and prospects of its developing in a dynamic technological environment. The substantive approach does not just admit, but implies changes at the level of the phenomenon, in its forms, properties, and states. That is what undoubtedly happening with the latest journalism, including journalism, which has left the frames of traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television companies, etc. However, there remains a certain semantic core, without which journalism would no longer be itself. Paradoxically, we find an ally in Pierre Bourdieu who he stressed: “Journalism is a microcosm ... To say that it is independent or autonomous, that it has its own laws, is to say that what happens in it cannot be understood by looking only at external factors. That is why I did not want to explain what happens in journalism as a function of economic factors” (1998, 39). The latest media research in 14 European countries confirms and develops the idea of the sovereign value of the journalism's professional core: “Our analysis leads us to conclude that media policies should not only focus on observable elements of media systems and practices (such as ownership, public service broadcasting, and access to information) but should also find ways to promote various configurations of those elements of journalism cultures that support the publication of quality information and journalistic content more generally” (Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2017, 1967-1968).

Let us add the incorrectness of the now popular equalization of journalism to media, which should be regarded as a hypertrophied emphasizing the communicative and technological aspects of journalism. The definition of journalism as an activity for the collecting and disseminating relevant information that is widely spread in dictionaries and textbooks deserves a special criticism. This is a distant echo of the 1960s, when a fascination of humanitarians with cybernetic ideas came, which led to the expansion of applied sociology with a pragmatic inclination in the American way. Instead, the national-cultural determinism of journalism moves to the focus of today's discourse, as experts from different countries insist (Aslan & Tuneva, 2018, 77; Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2017, 1957; Zagidullina, 2015, 66). Well-known researchers strongly oppose sociological attempts to reduce journalism “to an instrument, trying

to see in it only a neutral and technical transmission belt taking social events to a consumer audience” (Sodré, 2014, 125-126). We support calls to abandon formalism and schematism in favor of realism in the research methodology (Korkonosenko, 2016). Indeed, for adequate understanding the essence of the phenomenon not so much the act of data processing is important, as the content of activities, manifested in relation to reality.

In the epistemological dimension, the special way of reflection has a crucial meaning. We have proposed to generalize its specific features in the concept of journalism lifelikeness (resemblance to life, to reality; in Russian – *zhiznepodobie*). Journalism is similar to everyday life, even by virtue of its documentary basis, high actuality and penetration into all areas of the social world, both in thematic and in geographical dimensions (Korkonosenko 2012, 32). Other Russian researchers emphasize the same attributes of the press interaction with existence of society and the person: "Its role in the knowledge of the reality's relevant variability is huge ... its subject is the everyday life practice, the current variability that occurs in the relevant phenomena of reality" (Shkondin, 2016, 178). Similar ideas Brazilian scholars promote: “Journalism is a unique form of knowledge production ... the potential of journalistic production lies in its singularity of everyday action and consequently in the established dimension of relationships and events that constitute contemporary social reality” (*Gadini, 2005, 137*). Greatly important, that the arguments in the proposed coordinate system exactly correspond to the professional standards of journalism, among which the central places are given to reliability, accuracy, and efficiency as the desire to keep pace with the event variability of life.

4. Conclusion

The performed analysis provides the basis for few important methodological conclusions. First, the additional clarity appears in the understanding of the object of the journalism theory and additional prospects for studying open up. Second, the analysis confirms the possibility and necessity of changes at the manifestation level. Third, in this regard, when assessing the state and forecasting the ways of journalism evolution, the solutions should be based on the idea of the sustainment of its substantial integrity, despite the mobility of nowadays manifestations.

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