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**INFORMATION OCCASION IN JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC
RELATIONS**

Irina Bugaeva (a)*, Valerii Morozov (b), K. Skvortzov (c)
*Corresponding author

(a) Russian Timiryazev State Agrarian University, 49 Timiryazevskaya str., Moscow, Russia, bugaevaiv@mail.ru

(b) Russian Timiryazev State Agrarian University, 49 Timiryazevskaya str., Moscow, Russia, cooper-
morozov@yandex.ru

(c) Russian University of Transport, 9b9 Obrazcova Street, Moscow, Russia

Abstract

The notion of ‘information occasion’ is one of the basic notions in research works and the professional discourse of journalists and PR experts. We will consider various interpretations of the ‘information occasion’ term in journalism in Russia and other countries. Our objective is to compare its usage in different spheres for the purpose of its theoretic comprehension as a key notion in mass communications theory. Analysis of research literature on journalism and public relations helped us produce a continuous sampling of terms corresponding to or being synonymous with the ‘information occasion’. Comparative analysis allowed to compare them and to establish the differences and concurrences of meanings. The method of classification made it possible to range approaches to the understanding of ‘information occasions’ as an instrument of journalism and public relations. Analysis of Russian and foreign research literature shows that Russian journalists and PR specialists use practically only one term – ‘information occasion’. The terms one that comes across in foreign sources include ‘newsworthy event’, ‘newsworthiness’, ‘information subject’, ‘newsbreaks topicality’. Also, the essence of this term in journalism and public relations differs considerably. Given the current globalization of international activities and the prospective internationalization of the training of journalists, specialists in PR and integrated mass communications under dual programs, as well as the student exchanges, it is important to study and compare the different approaches in curricula and the contents of the education process and, in addition to it, the stocks of professional terms adopted in different countries.

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Keywords: Information occasion, journalism, public relations, terminology.



1. Introduction

‘Information occasion’ is one of the basic notions in academic literature and the narratives of journalists and PR experts. The differences in its definitions and the contexts of its use require a special study.

Journalists who work with ‘information occasions’ and PR specialists are often viewed as their creators. Experts on public relations face the task of drawing the journalists’ attention and getting their companies or brands mentioned in the mass media. For this purpose, they develop a variety of techniques, tools and technologies. ‘Information occasion’ can be classified as a cross-disciplinary term, as it is also used broadly enough in marketing. It is exactly in the media that journalists use ‘information occasions’, explicitly or implicitly, for the solution of marketing tasks.

2. Problem Statement

The author set for herself the objective of a) a theoretic study of various approaches to interpreting the term ‘information occasion’ in Russian and foreign journalism and b) comparison of interpreting the term ‘information occasion’ in journalism, PR studies and marketing.

3. Research Questions

Theoretical study of various approaches to the interpretation of the term “Information occasion” in domestic and foreign journalism. Comparison of understanding and interpretation of the term “Information occasion” in journalism and in PR.

4. Purpose of the Study

The scope of research objectives includes analysis of how ‘information occasion’ is applied in journalism, public relations and marketing so as to enable its theoretic comprehension as a basic term in the history of mass communications.

5. Research Methods

Analysis of Russian and foreign academic literature on journalism, PR and marketing studies made it possible for the author to do the sampling of terms that correspond to or are synonyms of ‘information occasion’. Comparative analysis made it possible to compare the terms and to establish the differences in or concurrences of meanings. The method of classification helped systematize the approaches to understanding the ‘information occasion’ as an operational tool for journalists, as well as PR and marketing experts.

6. Findings

6.1. An overview of terms

The term 'information occasion' is widely used in Russian journalistic and PR tradition. Upon a closer examination of contexts, it turns out to have multiple meanings. This diversity has resulted in a variety of definitions, classifications, typologies of genre relatedness, etc.

The Anglo-Saxon theory of journalism and PR offers an abundance of terms that are translated into Russian with the single-option 'information occasion'. Their list includes 'data pretext', 'news event', 'newsworthiness', 'information subject', 'information event', 'information occasion', 'newsbreaks topicality', 'newsbreak', 'inject', 'newsworthy information', 'news story' (Dowson & Basset, 2015).

Mudd (2019), who analysed newsworthiness, singled out ten characteristics of the phenomenon. They are proximity, prominence, timeliness, oddity, consequence, conflict, human interest, extremes/superlatives, scandal, and impact. McIntyre (2016) in "What Makes 'Good' News Newsworthy?" and Lee and Chyi, (2014) offer the same line of arguments, although they add to it the value of a news story, which they put at the top of the list, saying it underpins any newsworthy event.

While the theory and practice of journalism has deep-rooted traditions in Russia, PR as a branch of knowledge was not developed here until the early 1990's. Over a rather short period of time, Russian researchers published a big enough number of theoretic works. At the initial stage, translations of books by Western scholars and practicing experts were published, and numerous works in Russian began to appear in the first years of the 21st century.

Russian journalism explains 'information occasion' as an "[...] object used by a subject of the information process purposefully for injecting information into the informational space" (Dedov, 2018).

The Student's Dictionary of Advertising and PR Terms (2017) defines the 'information occasion' as "the reason for a PR expert to turn to the mass media and broad audiences" (p. 36). The further explanation says that "the grounds for 'information occasions' are the official and vocational holidays, anniversaries, jubilees, unofficial and religious festivals, regional and municipal festivals and official functions, the functions held by an organization or the ones where it takes part, social events, shows, parties involving VIPs or celebrities, incidents (inclusive of the highly resounding ones), private lives of people of consequence, competitions, lotteries, catchy phrases uttered by officials, etc. On the whole, any event can be presented as a socially significant news story can serve as an information occasion" (p. 36-37).

6.2. 'Information occasion' in journalistic practice

Volokitin (2016) reviews the stages and structure of shaping up a journalistic article as the first step towards planning and the later formalization of a media product. The model he proposes consists of the following elements: idea - media potential – 'information occasion' – concept. The presence of all theme elements make it possible "[...] to identify mediaworthiness of the situations, the scale of its informational prospects, as well as its topicality, newswiness, and the demand for the prospective material on the part of the audience. All of this leads up to a clear understanding of the tasks that are to be solved" (p. 3).

Kiuru (2012b) makes an attempt to devise the typology of 'information occasions' as exemplified in sports reporting. This classification relies on the thematic principle (p.88-89).

Nosova (2013) provides analysis of the notions of ‘fact’, ‘topic’, ‘event’, and ‘news’ that, in her opinion, “specialists in the mass media often use as synonyms.” (p. 132).

Ukhova (2015) highlights the media tendency to transform news stories into ‘information occasions’ and asks: “Do we deal with journalists’ texts in all cases or do we get custom-made (commercial) materials disguised as such texts and helping the government form the type of public opinion it needs?” (p. 90).

Indeed, not all news stories can turn into ‘information occasions’ but only those that have a more or less broad public impact. Along with it, the ‘information occasion’ is something that exists regardless of a journalist’s personal opinion and that evokes interest towards a certain issue or certain problems. An ‘information occasion’ may arise from a fact, supposition, appeal, proposal, intention, assessment, plot, or in other words from anything that can evoke people’s interest towards the matter reported by the journalist. The ‘information occasion’ is the immediate reason that predetermines interest in or the topicality of a theme or problem.

The term ‘theme’ has a rather narrow interpretation as the main subject of the narrative. It does not signify the sphere of life, which it relates to. ‘Interest’ implies an individual’s inadvertent attention to an object, in the course of which he or she does not want to interrupt the contact with the latter (Sventsitsky, 2018; Interest 2019a; Interest 2019b). Contrary to what is claimed in some studies of psychology, interest does not always have a link to positive emotions. Negative emotions and apprehensions of a possible ending of a distressing report can also fuel it.

Let us analyse the correlation between the ‘information occasion’ and the subject of reporting in journalism. Congruity of the main subject of the narrative and the object of the audience’s interest makes up the first aspect of correlation between the theme of an article and the reason for creating it. This is particularly typical of purely informational genres – notes, reports, and eyewitness accounts. Let us take the Euronews visual report titled ‘Mega hailstorm hits Rome’. It contains general data on the weather calamity that hit Rome on October 22, 2018, and on its drastic ruinous impact.

The second aspect of correlation between the occasion and the subject is the limitation of interest to it and the constriction of the theme by a certain framework chosen by the journalist. This constricting is almost inescapable in reports on important official events. The writers are compelled to limit themselves to recounting the events, quoting and analysing the most important and/or interesting speeches. Constricting is necessary in chronological media reviews and reviews of events.

Constrictions may be necessitated by the limits of printing surface or airtime. Authors can also use them as a creative technique, with the aid of which they create the desirable images of reported subjects, while focusing attention on their selected features. This technique is found in documentary prose (essays), like portrait of landscape sketches, feuilletons, pamphlets, epitaphs, essays, as well as in analytical papers that focus on selected features of a subject, like in monitoring.

Leaving aside some details of the subject in the process of balanced reporting of its main features is not a constriction of the theme, as it is developed comprehensively, albeit superficially. Sometimes, however, one or several features are unveiled in more detail than others. This forms a third type of correlation between the ‘information occasion’ and the theme of a story. It appears owing to a heightened interest in certain aspects of a subject and necessitates reporting of the details, expression of assessments, exposure of the causes of events, prediction of their further development, and exposure of covert facts. A

deepening of the theme is found in the majority of analytical journalistic works, especially in analytical articles, commentaries and in other genres with a big share of commenting, like versions, sociological resumes, analytical interviews, analytical reports, as well as in other genre types, if one or another aspect of the subject gets a precisely-focused detailed coverage or if the author of documentary fiction gives particular attention to a well-grounded assessment of the subject, to tracking its development, to relationships in the environment where it functions, and to comparing it with other phenomena.

In the process of deepening the theme, the journalists compare the subject under discussion with other subjects for a fuller disclosure of the specific traits the main one. As they consider the subjects with an equal share of attention and draw the conclusions that apply to the entire range of the phenomena under consideration, one more type the correlation between the ‘information occasion’ and the subject of the narrative arises. It is expansion of the theme that occurs frequently enough in analytical articles and forecasts and various kinds of sketches, except portrayals of individuals.

For instance, BBC reporter Cook (2017) used the devastation produced by hurricane Harvey in the impoverished American town of Rockport as the ‘information occasion’ for his report ‘Harvey: Too poor to flee the hurricane’. His work would have been an analytical report, had it contained only the two parts where he described the destructions he had seen in Rockport and the quotes from what he heard in conversation with local residents. The article, however, has the third part where the journalist describes the town’s history and gives an assessment of the present depressed conditions there. The latter fact turns the report into a traveller’s sketch.

Shifting away from the ‘information occasion’ or its complete or almost complete incongruity with the main subject of the report constitutes the fifth type of relationship between the occasion and the theme of the article. In this case, the ‘information occasion’ is little more than a newsworthy pretext. It gets a brief mentioning in the material that is devoted on the whole to other facts. This situation is characteristic of the reports devoted to commemorative data – jubilees, anniversaries of military victories, festivals, etc. Materials in this category most typically give focus to the events linked to the commemorative dates, but not always the anniversaries or festive events as such. Thus, the forthcoming New Year always offers a reason for reviewing the results of the outgoing year. For example, a yet another change of the calendar year offered an occasion for Euronews to prepare a review of climate cataclysms titled ‘Global warming: Saddening results of 2018’ (Cereceda, 2019), to compare them with the weather phenomena of the previous year and to make a forecast for future changes of the climate. This correlation is typical of portrayals, essays on problems and historical events, epitaphs, press reviews, event analysis reviews, summaries of rankings, opinion polls, and spacious analytical articles.

It is important to point out a possibility of the situations where constriction, deepening and expansion combine with one another. These combinations may produce four hybrid correlations of the ‘information occasion’ and the theme. For example, hurricane Florence in the U.S. furnished the BBC (2018) Russian with an occasion for the analytical story ‘Death toll from Florence storm in U.S. goes up to 11’. The report gives a very concise description of the storm. The authors mention the victims and destructions and assess the actions of the U.S. authorities to normalize the situation. On the latter issue, they go into details. At the end of the story, the journalists expand the theme and ask the question: “Is there a link to global warming?” They review in this context the overall conditions for the emergence of hurricanes on the planet. The

conclusion they make suggests: “At this moment, there are no clear indications that the frequency of hurricanes depends on the increase of the average air temperature on the Earth.”

As regards congruity and incongruity, they cannot combine with other types of correlation between the theme and the ‘information occasion’ for fairly obvious reasons.

Any specialist, whose profession envisions the creation and/or pertinent analysis of journalistic works, should be able to differentiate the contents and subject of the narrative from the causes that prompted a journalist to produce the report. Expectations of the audiences’ interest and awareness of the social significance of reported events can, in an equal measure, be the factors standing behind the creative concept. If this is the case, the author has to convince the public in order to evoke its interest to the information. The skill of tapping an effective ‘information occasion’ and its correlation with the main subject of reporting makes the solution of the task considerably more efficacious. It is common knowledge that written messages in the online versions of mass media have an overblown size sometimes and readers find it difficult to read them to the end. Length exposes their authors’ inability to abridge, deepen and expand the theme. Even the understanding of the importance of correlation between the theme of the article and its ‘information occasion’ may be absent as such.

To sum it up, the role of the ‘information occasion’ in journalism is determined by its main function, which is the gathering and proliferating of socially important information that is processed in line with journalistic cannons of reporting facts, phenomena and events.

6.3. ‘Information occasion’ in Public Relations

The notion of ‘information occasion’, currently accepted in Russian research works, was applied to public relations by the authors of the textbook on ‘The Basics of Public Communications’ (Krivonosov, Filatova, & Shishkin, 2010). “The information occasion is an event of a socially significant character that a subject of public relations initiates to inject information into his communicational medium” (Krivonosov et al., 2010, p. 153). The authors of this definition single out the following parameters of the ‘information occasion’ – the composition of participants, interaction between them, and chronotope.

Research literature and textbooks describe several types of ‘information occasions’. The most commonly accepted classification was offered by Chumikov and Bocharov (2006). Our observations and conclusions confirm its correctness. They suggest that a certain communicational PR technology correlates with a certain type of ‘information occasions’ in the current practice of public relations. The presence of ‘native’ and ‘alien’ occasions has brought into existence the technology of news jacking. New occasions lay the groundwork for the technology of news-making. Cyclic occasions are linked to the image-making technology. Mandatory occasions have generated the technology of spin-doctoring.

The ‘information occasion’ in public relations has a specific trait, namely, the event that is its centrepiece “transforms into a basis for forming publicity and communication environment of a public relations actor” (Krivonosov et al., 2010, p. 155). Thus the main function of media relations – the management of information – is determined, and the correct choice of an ‘information occasion’ is necessary.

Considering the tasks and functions of communications with public quarters, the following classification of ‘information occasions’ is possible:

Internal/ external;

Planned/ spontaneous;

Forecasted/ unpredictable.

On an analogy with the ‘information occasion’ some organizations use the term ‘PR occasion’ that embraces the official functions and events initiated by a company and arousing maximum interest on the part of mass media. Analysts at Medialogia Ltd., the largest Russian company monitoring the mass media, hold the ‘Info Occasion of the Year’ annual contest, for which they select the best cases in various theme groups, like Finance, Real Estate, Auto, etc. The information and analysis system does its research on the basis of the Medialogia (2019) designed by the company’s experts to measure PR efficiency in terms of the authority of media outlets, positive/ negative assessment, and public appeal of reports.

‘Information occasion’ is associated frequently with the terms like ‘news story’ (Krivonosov et al., 2010), news-making (Kiuru, 2012a), topic (Nosova, 2013), and fact (Ukhova, 2016). Some researchers correlate the different meanings of this term with PR genres (Sevastyanova, 2017a, b; Feshchenko, 2018).

The majority of researchers and practicing experts will most obviously agree with L.V. Ukhova’s postulation that “the main property of journalistic information as compared with PR information is its relevancy, or the capability to provide the fullest possible information on social subjects and processes that is essential and adequate for the target audience” highlighted in bold by Ukhova (2015). In contrast, PR information is initiated by the subjects of public relations (or customers), and it is based on the specially selected facts and details that shed favourable light on the objects of reporting. Information of this type has a longer life cycle than media news stories.

Situational marketing as a company’s response reaction to concrete political, social and cultural information also has links to the theory of ‘information occasions’.

Experts on marketing interpret the ‘information occasion’ as a newsworthy event that helps shape up or correct the reaction of a target audience to the subject of the occasion – a commodity of service or a company that produces them. This case reveals full awareness of material or immaterial benefits of information that can attract consumers or mass media representatives and facilitate promulgation of the object in focus. The goal of the ‘information occasion’ in marketing is to inject the data, assessments, attitudes and expert opinions into the information space and to proliferate them there, as they help give shape to public opinion – positive and negative likewise -- regarding the promoted objects. Numerous articles in various media discussing the quality or ingredients of foodstuffs offer an illustration of this. An amassed information campaign can bring about a loss of a share of the market to a company and even drive it into bankruptcy.

Consumer of informational content find themselves in a knotty situation, as they are not always able to identify the genuine journalistic information containing verified facts, the PR information designed to bolster publicity or reputation of a brand or company, and the marketing information designed to draw attention to a commodity for the purpose of greater sales.

To sum it up, the ‘information occasion’ from the point of view of journalism is a theme, which the article describes. In public relations, it designates the facts and events that are described to create a definite image. The ‘information occasion’ that serves promotion of a commodity for commercial benefit is an object of marketing.

The internet Dictionary of Marketing (2019) lists the following properties of ‘information occasions’ – large range (the scope of the target audience), vividness of an event (that stands out against the backdrop of other events), unambiguous assessments, definitive positivity, and prominence of the occasion. It also states that extension of interest towards the promoted object is the main task for marketing specialists and this brings up the importance of forming the interconnection of the promoted object with something more significant or with a different ‘information occasion’ that has a bigger duration or scale.

7. Conclusion

1. Analysis of research literature shows that Russian journalists, public relations and marketing experts use a practically identical term ‘information occasion’. It has turned into a policeman, as is it has a separate meaning in each of the three spheres. The equivalents of the ‘information occasion’ found in foreign research works are newsworthy event, newsworthiness, information subject, information event, information occasion, newsbreaks topicality.

2. The ‘information occasions’ can be divided into three categories with regard to their main functions:

a. proper ‘information occasions’, the objective of which is to report an event that the general public finds to be important;

b. PR occasions, the content of which aims to create and/or maintain a reputation of the subjects of public communications;

c. marketing occasions that help the sales of commodities and/or services and are also used to gain immaterial benefits.

3. Experience of teaching students in the fields of journalism, advertising and public communications shows that the easiest aspect for them is the congruity or incongruity of the ‘information occasion’ and the theme of the report. The biggest problems are associated with drawing a line between the deepening and expansion of the theme, since the size of a report increases in both cases, and the yet unprofessional perception prompts the students to interpret it as expansion. The skill in identifying the ‘information occasion’ and correlating it with the main subject of the narrative is formed as the students get practical training in the basics of creative analysis of journalists’ works and, later on, in the process of pondering own academic assignments and journalistic reports for publications. As regards the students trained in PR, it is important for them to get knowledge of how to initiate the ‘information occasions’ depending on specific project requirements or the work specification (brief). Such skills make up an important part in the duty instructions of specialists in this field and are often included in the lists of eligibility criteria for aspirants to various positions in the information and communications agencies. It is important to study and compare diverse approaches not only to curricula and the contents of the education process, but also to professional terminology adopted in different countries now that the globalization of international activities is underway and the prospect are emerging for the internalization of training in journalism, public relations and integrated mass communications based on dual programs. This is also important for student exchanges.

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