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**FROM SIGNAL TO WORLD OF MEANING: “ASSEMBLAGE
POINT”**

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Abstract

Smart mobile gadgets encourage production of news in the “glance” format. “Glance journalism”, listicles, and other SEO-optimized genres speed up information consumption in media communication, media content circulation, and its commodification. However, skimming information may lead to disastrous loss of socially important meaning. Media producers are concerned with searching for “assemblage of meaning” forms for their audience. World’s leading mass media and journalist experts turn to digital promotion technologies of long-form news. Hypertext, synesthesia of sign forms of information (video, audio, color, graphixation) are used to create stories with valuable meaning. Multimedia storytelling helps network media communicants find their “assemblage point” of meaning. This study demonstrates the effectiveness of narratives used by Russian mass media (www.izvestia.ru and www.vedomosti.ru) to cover currently important events in lives of ordinary people. Hypertextuality, scalability, cross-platform long-form structures provide interactivity and communicative mobility for readers of online editions. The semantics of media texts, found in the investigated websites, proves to be widely variative, and hyperlinks and addressing are targeted at complementarity of messages about current facts and events. Long-form project comments demonstrate the concern of communicants for different types of information. Thus, it is possible to conclude that modern digital environment of mass media reveals new opportunities for the propagation of social values to communicants of global network space.

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Keywords: Glance, longer-form narrative, assemblage point of meanings.



1. Introduction

Mobile devices become top priority platforms for information consumption. News agencies and large media holdings produce various contents that overflow mass communication channels. The speed of information consumption facilitates the development of new media content forms and change of interfaces. “Smart watch” (Apple Watch) and “smart glasses” already found their way into people’s life and drastically changed the way of information perception. The media strategy of print media – click bait or glance optimized headlines (GOHs) – becomes highly important for content delivering through mobile devices with the small screen. The founder of Quickish, Dan Shanoff ceremoniously declared the beginning of the new era of “glance journalism”: “The pending challenge for writers, editors, producers and product teams is how to deliver compelling news in the “glance” format, because—as one knows from the past decade—the audience wants to go faster” (Shanoff, 2014). Steven Poole from “The Guardian” presents the “listicle” genre (an article that uses a list as its thematic structure): “Psychologically, the listicle is seductive because it promises upfront to condense any subject into a manageable number of discrete facts or at least factoids” (Poole, 2013).

Screenagers reacted instantly to the “glance” format. The effect is revealed to be twofold. Traffic and its monetization are increased to the joy of content generators and aggregators. However, office managers, psychologists, teachers and scientists sound the alarm. Neurophysiologists Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan from California (USA) in their paper «Surviving the Technological Alternation of the Modern Mind» demonstrate negative psychophysiological transformations of mental activity due to computer technologies of information searching, messaging, gaming, and leisure (Small & Vorgan, 2008). According to the research results, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and inability to concentrate and to conclude are basic symptoms of intellectual deformation. The amount of information seems to be inversely proportional to the amount of meaning. The more information one has, the more difficult it is to find the tiniest bit of meaning relevant to the reality.

2. Problem Statement

Researchers and later creators of information abundance seriously start discussing the “catastrophe of meaning” in mass communication channels. An information, as a category to structure all types of motions in nature and society at a content level, is no longer a message or a signal of change only. It has evolved into self-sufficient substance, like matter and energy. Modern researchers of computer virtual reality establish a direct linkage between information and “matter” what allows one to speak about symptoms of “Crealithic revolution”, yet another one in the social history of mankind (Mansurova, 2014).

A self-organizing system of information interaction has several essential features: constant self-regulation and strive for even miniscule order, coherence in appearance and disappearance of media events, the frequency of system bifurcation crises that required more and more new attractors to step out of information chaos. A search of these features is hindered and sometimes is limited in time. Entropy analysis of system self-organization (according to modern philosophers, it has “information casualty”) reveals that dependence between a chance and an opportunity follows geometrical progression. More and more “chances” are required to step out of chaos into order.

SEO-optimized (search engine optimized) content makes an information stream denser. A search of useful information is limited by the speed of an eye scanning the gadget screen. The cognitive sphere is overflowed with signs of different modalities. It leads to hypersignification of information space (even of the local content). Semiotic abundance, surprisingly, leads to gaps in one's knowledge about the world around. During information search in a dynamic environment, the consciousness has no time to build a relationship between obtained cognitions (directives, opinions, stereotypes) and already accumulated ones. A person skimming information turns out to be unable to adjust quickly to the flow of diverse discordant information. According to J. Baudrillard, this is catastrophic to the system. (Baudrillard, 1993, p.34).

These symptoms threaten mass media and, in particular, journalism with a deprofessionalisation. How socially important content can be produced when "glance journalism" provides only brief event coverage without any explanation of the meaning? The problem itself lies in the following: where should the road to "communication paradise" actually lead to – to the "total orgy" by J. Baudrillard, when "everything has been liberated" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.3), or to the space of socially demanded and socially important meaning?

3. Research Questions

The area of human experience is mainly developed as a form of virtual sociality. A semiotic environment of mass media can answer any code of communication. Yet, semantic and semiotic horizons of texts plunge a person in chaos and force him to abide by any behavioral scheme and any judgment slightly close to his own social self-identification. Social area, i.e. area of meaning created in the mass media system by interactions of cohabitant facts is, actually, a nonequilibrium dynamic system governed by entropy laws. Communicants create their "assemblage of meaning" freely according to their intellectual experience. The catastrophe of the "assemblage of meaning" occurs when new information is obtained, and social area order parameters become abnormal drastically. Usually, it happens due to the dissonance of cultural codes and values, obvious alogism in a sequence of media events.

Therefore, a system of expressive means for creation of media texts has to consider the global transformation of communication sensory codes. Journalist experts seriously ponder on the 'so-called' access protocols to the "assemblage point" of meaning (i.e. the moment of comprehension of perceived reality).

Mass media researchers state that streams of discordant and unrelated information cannot be monetized. Moreover, those streams are definitely not the access protocols to the meaning of texts (Vergeer, 2014; Abadie, 2010). Research centers start developing network technologies to promote "long reading" and understanding the meaning. For example, PEW RESEARCH Journalism & Media Center (USA) published the article "Long-Form Reading Shows Signs of Life in Our Mobile News World" where the following is stated: "This is not to say that all long-form news accomplishes the above or that shot-form does not have its own value. But, in a news environment so dramatically different from past forms, the question is worth exploring: Will people engage with lengthy news content on their phones?" (Mitchell, Stoking & Matsa, 2016). Moreover, while much of this concentration began when ad spending was mainly occurring on desktops platforms, it quickly took root in the rapidly growing mobile realm as

well. According to Norman Fairclough, narratives are the sizeable portion of mass media production (Fairclough, 2002, p.90). Journalists with more training or experience can write analytical and interpretive stories, and longer-form narrative and documentary stories.

There is no coincidence in that the narrative became the most popular genre in the western journalism. The narrative is the organization of flow and events with analysis and regulatory ideas of what is right and valuable, with “conceptions of the “good life” by M. Freeman and J. Brockmeier (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001). Politically charged Russian journalism passed all rounds of a struggle for impartiality and came, finally, to an understanding of importance of storytelling in network journalism.

4. Purpose of the Study

Scott Anderson, the senior vice-president of content for Postmedia Network Inc., says that Postmedia is taking print out of the newsroom. “As long as editors are focused on stockpiling content for the next day etc., we are never going to go digital first” (Goodman, 2011). The purpose of this study is to find out how digital mentality is adopted by Russian mass media content, and what expressive means are used to create a socially important meaning.

5. Research Methods

The crisis social and economical situation in Russia divided mass media professionals according to their attitude on topics like “power”, “country”, “government”, “people”, “corruption”, and “patriotism”. This particular discourse now is a battlefield where truth is sought. Social stress of people is ready to be relieved by any nonconventional interpretation of well-known ideas. Social and ethical framework for evaluation of social events is blurred. It leads to a certain crisis in a social space. This space is overfilled with what earlier was a taboo: pathological, unlawful, and destructive to norms of sociocultural existence. Aggressive reaction of network mass media communicants is a response to provocative actions of professional journalists. Often, “flaming” becomes the common tactics of mass media aces for frame-ups and breaking neutrality. So-called “hate speech” is used as the prime stimulus to stir up emotions.

Analysis of publications of Russian mass media confirms the hypothesis that there is no clearly defined articulation in dialogues with specific groups of communicants. Selected hot topics of group discussions often go beyond the scope of thoughts about current events. Generation Y, millenials (born at the beginning of the new century), generation C – “Connected Collective Consumer” demonstrate clear tendency of ironical and negative attitude towards important social events.

During social instability and geopolitical unrest, the global feeling of world order imperfection is the most vulnerable one. A new communicative reality where everything forbidden before is allowed now comes to life through a communicative function of the total invective. Although, this ability of public communication to produce and manage this critical resource of social information, is indeed a tool for social system self-organization and further development.

Professional journalism experts try to change this situation. Content analysis of reader’s comments on the www.izvestia.ru website over the course of April 2017 reveals that there are 50.87% positive

responses. A large number of publications (33.11%) are followed by certain criticism that positively influences editorial activities.

Semiotic analysis, structural and functional analysis of the content of Russian mass media “Izvestia” (www.izvestia.ru) and “Vedomosti” (www.vedomosti.ru) reveals that terms “narrative” or “news item” are inventively linked with the creative norms of the widely known “narrative”. Published articles are supported by excessive meta data (various tags, geodata, links to supplementary sources, search engines meta data). A set of narratives about the history of the “Izvestia” newspaper is placed under the general covering headline “Izvestia”: 100 years – 100 days” to commemorate the 100th anniversary. The “Vedomosti” website presents the project “100 years of the 1917 revolution. The main events and people who changed the history of Russia” (<https://www.vedomosti.ru/story/1917>).

At least ten elements reveal the main points of each story while providing free and unrestrained reading and understanding of the content. Overall attention is focused by the sociocode of the narrative – artifact, image, and precedent phenomenon associated with the historical context and freely interpreted by readers. This sociocode acts as ‘a pointer’ (in a programming language it is a tool for heuristic access to text variables and memory space) that controls the assemblage of individual meanings. The potential of associations of media text keywords is fully activated here: “arrest”, “feat”, “betrayal”, “book”, “award”, “triumph”, etc. Narrative semiosis verbalizes someone’s implicitly existent doubts, proves the value of own judgment.

The “Story from Inside the Armor” with answers to the questions about how to become an astronaut is addressed to the “digital generation”. The narrative is structured linearly for the purpose: to skim the content quickly and to decide if it is worth reading. Semiotics of texts is based on a sign model and vocabulary of millenials: “education”, “a sound mind in a sound body”, “test”, “retesting”, “space tourism”, “ergonomics”, “compactness”, “ergonomics”, “Russian”,... There are five-six stories in each online edition of the newspaper, and they are addressed to different parts of the audience. Each story has its structural mobility and potential of interactive communication with a reader. Of course, there is the ‘pointer’ for heuristic access through precisely set keywords.

There is a story called “Renovation” (<https://www.vedomosti.ru/story/snos/>) that has been developed for quite a long time by the “Vedomosti” website. It is a dramatic narrative full of passion and feelings of people about demolition of old five-storey buildings called “khrushchevka” in Moscow. Different types of elements with multiple inclusions and cross-linkage through hyperlinks are the structural and clearly defined actual basis of typical narrative architectonics. These elements are print texts, audio and video texts, infographics, photos, business quotes, collages – up to twenty-thirty elements used to provoke the audience and trigger an immediate reaction. Functional connotations of visual forms of media content (for example, the “robot-destroyer” collage) are amplified by keywords “protest”, “agreement”, “rundown rights”, “fight for lodging”, “promises”, “guarantees”, “vote”,... Intentionally discrete composition of the narrative has its symbolism: meaning can be found in any directions and everyone can choose his (or her) own grounds. And, according to the rating agency “Mediology”, there are thousands of ‘pro’ and ‘con’ votes of readers on this issue.

6. Findings

This way, production of variative narrations by mass media is the expected result of adopting and synthesizing of a new communication technology that replaces traditional ideological influence. Following the American psychologist G. Bruner, narrative helps “domesticate unexpectedness” (Bruner, 2002, p.90) and transpose complicated problems into mundane human understandings about paying tributes and getting opportunities. In the context of computer-mediated communication, text encompasses in its structure all types of information and becomes the content responsive to any interface or reader.

Media space phenomenon demonstrates new events that have not been studied yet, such as the self-organization of specific connections and relations between random communicants. It leads to catastrophic disruption of system equilibrium and evolution of communicants into “clicking humans” – new anthropological subjects of social interactions (sometimes, asocial subjects). A person immersed in chaos of media space is open and vulnerable to random interactions. However, his deliberate involvement into chaotical flows of information can be treated as an approach for understanding the situation in modern mass media.

7. Conclusion

Digital nature of a journalist’s text has new representative and expressive capabilities to trigger multiple emotions of the audience. American researchers state: “We believe that this dynamic landscape of witnessing, reporting, storytelling and sharing does not represent a crisis of journalism, but rather an explosion of it” (Rethinking Journalism).

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