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Post mass media in the modern informational society
"Journalistic text in a new technological environment: achievements and problems"

THE MEDIA-AESTHETIC ASPECT OF JOURNALISM

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Abstract

In this paper, the author tries to detect future directions of professional journalism development. Four research questions are in the focus of the article; they relate to: (1) the growing significance of the media-aesthetic component of current communication, (2) the problem of the identification of media-aesthetic features in our present-day communication field, (3) the possibility to detect users' aesthetic interests as indicators of communication development, (4) using media-aesthetic analysis in professional journalistic activity as a tool to discover new niches. Answering these questions, the author builds the article logics on the following statements: the crisis of professional journalism is due to the shift of this social institution from a leadership and monopolistic communicative position toward a competitive communication environment, where other participants (persons, teams, organizations) can play key roles of news-making and communication management; the understanding of "public sphere" as a place of politically and socially significant mass discussion is now replaced with an accepted a-political chain of "shared interests" that are relatively independent from one another; the media-aesthetic aspect of these interests is becoming clearer and more intense; this media-aesthetic trend of communication can be used by professional journalists as a way to refresh routine journalistic practices and move toward actual nodes of the communication field.

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1. Introduction

As it evidently follows from the title of this paper, two research domains are intertwined here: media-aesthetics and journalism. Each domain has its own fundamentals. For a further thorough analysis, it is important to conceptualize them (combining the media-aesthetic approach to current communication with an analysis of professional journalism's problems in the era of the so-called "new media"). The core of this research is a search for journalism future niches in communication. The author was inspired to write this article after reading the 20th anniversary issue of the well-known scientific journal "Journalism" ("The Challenges Facing Journalism Today", see: Tumber & Zelizer, 2019). In this issue, the editors presented a dozen of articles treating a dramatic question about the possible destiny of professional journalism in the near future. Just reading the article titles in the issue's content page, one can notice that the major mood of analytics' thoughts is rather pessimistic with words such as: "crisis", "distrust", "the perpetual failure" and so on. This discussion about the future of journalism is currently quite intense in many countries. Russian media researchers have also detected a crisis of national professional journalism, which is oriented (in theory) on normative values but demonstrates weakness and non-functionality (Vartanova, 2012, see also recent review: Simons & Strovsky, 2018). At the same time new media intensify information exchange and this contributes to a mediatization of everyday life (from "traditional" news consumption to "smart environment" and "internet of things", see: Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Klausen, 2017; Mihelj & Stanyer, 2018; Wajcman, 2019). One can see that deep mediatization could lead to the termination of the role of professional journalism in information exchange. Journalism – as a social institution – develops in a multi-actor environment, and its development depends on the competitive processes.

This is why the author deems useful to search the possible trajectories of the new routes of journalism development into media consumption trends. In this article, the author confirms that media-aesthetic interests of the public have an important signification in current information exchanges. The analysis of the media-aesthetic aspect of current communication can help professional journalism find its own niches in the communication field and strengthen its position (as a socially important institution).

Media-aesthetics have not received sufficient research attention up to now (neither in Media Studies, nor in Philosophy). Since Manovich (2000, 2001, 2013a) launched his projects and published books where media-aesthetics were first described for human-machine interaction, one cannot find significant scientific achievements in this field. Although the term "media-aesthetics" is quite popular in different segments of the research field, it is still a marginalized part of the knowledge on current communication processes. The issues the development of such investigations is facing are due to the "hybrid nature" of media-aesthetics: i. e. (1) physical reality of perceptions, (2) new media as a communication tool and an environment; (3) expansion of arts and "artistic perception" in everyday life (and blurring of the boundaries between "artistic" and "routine" practices). Aesthetics Studies provide very fruitful approaches to the new media, even if the authors do not acknowledge this relationship (see Böhme, 2016).

Thus, in this article the author tries to show the perspectives and the fruitfulness of investigations on media-aesthetics for professional journalism seeking its social niches in the new communication conditions.

2. Problem Statement

Finding a direction of development is one of the most significant challenges faced by professional journalism today. Many theorists and researchers have detected a crisis of the so-called "normative theory" (Steensen & Ahva, 2015; Deuze & Witschge, 2018). One of the evident symptoms of this crisis is the blurring of all boundaries between professional journalism and non-professional actors of the communication field. The struggle for public attention and for a cooperation between the different actors – both individuals or organizations – of the communication field inevitably urges journalists to change their professional mission. If politics and economics were the major topics of professional journalism in the past (shaping thus the "public sphere"), now the agenda moves toward entertainment, leisure activity and "light information". But beside this shift, one can see that this "lightness" has an important explanation (see, for example, a review of current research within the frame of the agenda-setting theory: Ninković-Slavnić, 2016; here one can find an interesting analysis of the "vertical" (i. e. professional) and "horizontal" (social) media and their interrelations and interdependencies. By avoiding characterizing negatively this entertainment "turn" in communication as a "downgrade", it would be fruitful to analyze the public sphere as a "symbolic place", where people can explicit their willingness and intentions. In this article, the author tries to shed light on the meaningful phenomena of current communication which can be taken in account by professional journalism as indicators of information, communication niches and public's needs. Mosco (2017) states that in the future, the big social media companies will extend their power and control the complete information field (because of the algorithmic transit of information on the decision-making level), and "traditional journalism" will play a very modest role in communications (Mosco, 2019).

Despite this pessimistic statement, professional journalists can play the role of professional media communication "managers" in the future (keeping a watch on ethical and moral professional standards), if only they provide a monitoring of communication trends in mass-media around the world but also in social interactions and shared cultures. The process of detecting these different trends has now been made easier by the "algorithmic work" of social media platforms that provide fixed and "written" ("hic et nunc") data of communication millions of users. This communication is organized in "bottom-up" logics and constantly moves "up" the significant phenomena of current information exchange. The specificity of the current moment is the growth of the aesthetic nature of communication (previously considered as "emotional turn" in the communication field – see Beckett & Deuze, 2016).

3. Research Questions

The challenges (mentioned above), that are faced by the development of professional journalism in the current social conditions, can be formulated as the research questions (RQ) of this paper. These questions will delineate the next segments of this research.

Why is the media aesthetic component of communication becoming more significant now than in the recent past? (RQ1)

How to identify media aesthetic features of current communication? (RQ2)

How can media consumption help understand the users' aesthetic needs? (RQ3)

How can the analysis of the media aesthetic component of current communication help detect niches for professional journalism? (RQ4)

These four questions prescribe the logics of research: the definition of media aesthetics, its features (media aesthetics as a phenomenon), media aesthetics as a part of media consumption (consideration of media aesthetics from the users' perspective), media aesthetics in the context of professional journalism culture.

4. Purpose of the Study

Following these four research questions, the purpose of this paper can be formulated as achieving two tasks: to describe the media aesthetic component of communication (RQ1–3) and to investigate its possible interrelations with professional journalism (RQ4). When building the set of answers to these questions, it is important to avoid a straight hybridization of the different elements (as a way to combine different elements), and to carry out the research taking into account the media aesthetics phenomenon described in the first part of the paper. In the second part of this investigation, the findings of the first part will be applied to the professional journalism field.

5. Research Methods

The theoretical framework of this research combines several approaches. Philosophy helps understand the nature of media aesthetics (which still has no proper definition in research literature). Aesthetics Studies related to the Art Studies, Body Studies, to the relatively new segment of Digital Body Studies, can be useful for the understanding of human media-perception (and its change) in the digital environment. The question of users' needs leads to the Social Interactionism field, and also to the Use and Gratification Theory. Journalism Culture, Journalism itself and its specific theories (as agenda-setting, for example) help finding an answer to the last question. Thus, a combination of these approaches can be fruitful for the achievement of the purpose of this paper.

6. Findings

The media aesthetic component of communication is evidently increasing now. Media aesthetics can be described as a complex blend of sensual impressions which organize the materiality of the digital environment –for the content user as well as for the content producer. But it also includes human-media interactions, their physical "style" and material organization. Media aesthetics, thus, can be defined in a broad sense as the materiality of communication taken in its perceptive aspect (how can a user "taste" information?).

- (RQ1) Why is the media aesthetic component of communication becoming more significant now than in the recent past?

Defining "postmedia aesthetics", Manovich (2001) emphasized the importance of the "technicity" of human-computer interactions (rather than that of "aesthetic gut" or "judgement"). His key proposition concerned the nature of aesthesis as a constant aesthetic reflection of activity. Aesthetic experience is

considered in terms of "bodiness", tactile sensations, new (comparing with pre-computer era) cognitive relations between hand motoric dexterity, sight, simultaneous immersivity in flows of sounds, visual images and texts (the multimedia nature of the information stream). That is why "software takes command" (Manovich, 2013b): the "sensorium" of communication depends on the technical architecture of the computer's interface organization, but this organization must meet human expectations (what one can call "intuitively understandable interactions"). Thus, one can see a combination of physical or biological (senses), technical (interface and software's logic), semantic (cultural background, visual, textual, audial codes of every individual users' culture).

As for the previous period of communication development (when TV-consumption was dominating), researchers supposed that media-aesthetics related to audio-visual effects. For example, for Zettl (1990), the "fundamental elements" of media aesthetics are light, color, sound and motion. These elements are considered by Zettl as tools which help media actors clarify, intensify and interpret the reality. One can see that Zettl – who is a theoretician of the "applied media aesthetics" – is not concerned with the technical and interactive aspect of communication as a type of "prosumerism" in the media environment (to consume products, to produce consumption).

The development of social media is also an indicator of the development of communication technologies, which develop personal creative needs. By facilitating the creative process (with different types of messages: video, audio, images etc.), social media "upgraded" communication to "individual publicity", where personal creativity can be considered as self-expressionism. Technologies not only serve these needs but also predetermine them: the "pre-reflected" interests become "visible", they get their "virtual materiality". The media aesthetic component "works" as a virtual species in a natural environment: attracting, protecting, provoking and stimulating, trying to win the competition with a limited resource of public attention.

In our present-day communication environment, organized technically as a multimedia information exchange system available to each user, the media aesthetic component of communication is increasing its power.

- (RQ2) How to identify media aesthetic features of current communication?

As media aesthetics can be taken in its perceptive aspect, it is important to describe this process from its material side – as "food" for vision, audition, touch, gustation, olfaction. The visual and auditory elements of communication are well researched upon from their aesthetic aspect. But other sensations in aesthetic "wholeness" have nearly always been marginalized. When we want to find "specific media aesthetic traits" we are faced with the challenge of conventionalism: media aesthetics as "materiality of communication" exist only like a "whole", and, consequentially, the perception of any communicative artifact cannot be segmented. But – as Kiklewicz (2010) suggests – one specific part can play a more significant role than others (in his model he formulates four parts of this "communicative whole": form, structure, context, and meaning). In a multimodal discourse analysis, one can find attempts of researchers trying to define the "unit" of analysis (and similarly when researchers try to achieve a "defragmentation" of this "communicative whole", see: O'Halloran, 2011).

We suppose that the "dominant" media aesthetic analysis can help identify media aesthetic traits of communicative processes or "communication whole" (as any artifact, "material entity" has its own material

characteristics). The "affect" and "atmosphere" characteristics of modern aesthetics (as opposed to the Kantian "aesthetic judgement" and "sense of beauty") were suggested by Böhme (2016). But this approach was not developed as an analytic tool (how does one "measure" affect or atmosphere in an aesthetic sense?) If we apply the "dominant" method to the multi-formats of current communication, we can achieve the research task of identifying and describing media aesthetic traits in their "material" sense.

The challenge (or problem) here is to find this dominance, knowing that all media aesthetic elements never function in isolation, creating a communicative "artifact" (or "whole"). When using media aesthetic dominant analysis we need to consider communication as an interdependency of different "domains" (or "bodies") – technical, biologic (or anatomic), cognitive, cultural. These four sections of the communicative process, acting as a "whole", contain the dominance (one section will play the dominant role in a particular communication case). In that case, it is possible to build the procedure of media aesthetic analysis based on the search of this dominant – "key" part.

- (RQ3) How can media consumption help understand the users' aesthetic needs?

If we consider the media aesthetic aspect of communication as a "wholistic" process of information exchange where content can never be isolated from cooperating parts of communication (i. e. technical conditions of media, anatomic and sensual ways of getting information from humans, cognitive processes and their cultural background and conventions), we can suggest that the coincidence of numerous users' preferences (identified via internet tools) helps understand the users' dominant needs. Here, the individual needs merge with the mass needs, and – being open to everyone – form the information field; this was explained with different points of view by media theories. But the aesthetic aspect of this conventional process has become evident just due to the social media "openness". It needs to be investigated from a "back perspective": modern internet communication opens-up the possibility to observe users' needs which were not evident in the past (pre-internet) times. These needs could be detected in "hype" nods of communication – a research method of finding a dominance of media-consumption. The "public sphere" (see a review of current research state of this topic: Rauchfleisch, 2017) cannot be considered as "pure" "political" and "democratic" problem field. It is a mix of big fields of interests (that sometimes are strictly unrelated to any political issues and topics). Importantly, the "deciphering" of these big fields as representations of users' needs is the key to understanding the "pulse" of society development.

The aesthetic aspect of media consumption (as a research point of view) helps to discover and monitor the different directions of development of the "public sphere" understood in this broad sense (i.e. as interactions of different interests and needs rather than a "collective governance" of society). The numerous opportunities displayed in the present-day communicative field (with "user-friendly" facilitated technologies of producing videos, audios, texts, images, graphics, photos and so on) shed light on users' interests: aesthetic traits of communication (including "emotional turn") develop toward an "aesthetically rich environment", where one can find "hypes" around gustation, haptics, olfaction and other types of sensation, including never ending searches of "new sensations" (as, for example, the recent hype around ASMR-practices). It is important also that this search has a "bottom-up" strategy and shapes into the "depth" of the so-called "mass-self-communication", as Castells (2007, p. 240) defines it.

- (RQ4) How can the analysis of the media aesthetic component of current communication help detect niches for professional journalism?

In the Russian media research field, the opposition between professional and non-professional journalism is accepted in discussions. But for the Western researchers, these terms are not clear enough nor meaningful. The consensus can probably be found in the "institutionalization" of journalistic practices (if it is as a job, supported by a salary, or just "self-communication", leisure users' activity). Deuze and Witschge (2018) emphasized the importance of the "de-institutionalization" of journalism using the expression "beyond journalism". In this paper, we understand the term "professional journalism" as an institutionalized activity for news-making and of mass audience information. In general terms, "professional journalism" is based on public acceptation as a "social institution": its structure includes a professional "charter" (i. e. an "ethic codex"), professional unions, educational system, professional standards, confirmed through the national system of labor standardization, etc.

As it was mentioned above, our present-day communication field is shaped by users' activity which does not need the professional journalism's leadership. That is why for journalism as a social institution it is a time of surviving and searching for new niches. The professional "setting" of journalism has to be changed. We suppose that the most fruitful direction of its development is to follow the audience by detecting "nodes" of mass-interests, then to provide deep and high-quality analyses of these hypes, and finally to construct new strategies of development (managing the role of leader in detecting directions). The good example of this "intuitive" worldwide development of professional journalism was the "storytelling turn" (when all types of journalistic genres were "converted" into storytelling form).

But "under" the mass interest to storytelling one can find an "aesthetic turn" and experiences with emotional nuances and new sensations. Applying the agenda-settings theory to this "turn", one can see the new types of mass interests (for example, the hype around "oddly satisfying" artifacts of communication, Faramarzi, 2018). Using media-aesthetic dominant analysis, it is possible to "predict" the future "waves" of public attention. We can find a lot of successful projects of "semi-professional" and "non-professional" journalists organized toward these interests (as The Hustle or Brain Picking, for example). Media-aesthetics become meta-media-aesthetics, when aesthetic perception is not only "self-satisfied" but is also reflected cognitively by users as a value and the desired destination of their media-consumption (Guerrero-Pico, Masanet, & Scolari, 2019).

7. Conclusion

Journalism can monitor the information space better than other social institutions. The major mass shifts toward "pure media-aesthetics" must be in the focus of professional journalists. These changes are currently not institutionalized, but they show in which zones the public's attention goes for. And these zones are important as potential niches for professional journalists' activity, related to "human well-being". If the information is oriented on corporeality, and if testing to the limits of sensations becomes more and more popular, then journalism can follow these new directions for its own development. If we have seen the success of "following the audience" programs in the heyday of storytelling, now has come the time for "anti-narrative information". Will journalism – with its narrative standards – be able to cope with this shift toward media-aesthetic "a-narrativity"?

Acknowledgments

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