

# PRINTED MEDIA OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS IN DIGITALIZATION CONDITIONS: TRANSFORMATION OF CONTENT DELIVERY METHODS AND SEARCH FOR A NEW AUDIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

The paper identifies and explores methods for transforming content delivery and ways to search for a new audience by the editorial offices of newspapers in two countries representing the Union State: the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. We show the transformations of the media environment that occurred under the influence of digitalization and the transition of a significant part of the audience to the Internet, taking into account both global factors and national specifics. The authors pay special attention to the growing tendency to view news on mobile devices, to increase the share of visual content in online media, the use of multimedia elements in the practice of creative activity. Using the methods of content and structural analysis for the six media under study, the authors found that the editorial offices respond to the new challenges of accelerating digital transformation, representing the journalistic content in today's mobile and visual formats. The challenges facing the system of modern Internet media of the two countries in connection with the increasing role of technology in the production of journalistic texts were also identified. Changes in the journalistic profession in the online media sector associated with the growth of convergent processes have been demonstrated. The main conclusion is the following: in the conditions of digitalisation and mediatisation of society, periodicals in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus are subject to significant transformations. In modern conditions, the media of the two countries are changing, offering to the audience the content which is relevant to its requests in the latest high-tech formats.

**Keywords:** newspaper, content, audience, regional media, digital journalism, convergence, social networks, instant messengers, "Birzha" (Exchange), "Volzhskaya Kommuna" (Volga Commune), "Kazanskiye Vedomosti" (Kazan Bulletin), "SB. Belarus segodnya" (Belarus today), "Intex-press", "Gomelskaya Pravda" (Gomel Truth).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The periodical press in the Russian Federation and in the Republic of Belarus (two countries friendly to each other) is currently at the stage of transformation taking into account global factors of digitalization (2009) [1]. Having improved for about sixty years as part of the media system of the Soviet Union, the Russian and Belarusian mass media began to develop independently after 1991. There is every reason to believe that Russian and Belarusian journalism has incorporated the best practices and traditions of the Soviet: a strong research school, a variety of genres, and journalism.

The period since the second half of 1991 to the beginning of 1995 is called by scientists as the “golden five-year period of Russian journalism” because of its liberation from the previous ideological “fetters” imposed by the Communist Party, and the “course” taken on objectivity, conducting journalistic investigations, and working in the interests of an ordinary audience. In the press and electronic media of that time, there were dominated discussions and investigations often aimed at exposing the censorship of the Soviet era, highlighting previously unpublished facts, reassessing and rethinking the role of specific individuals in the history of the country. At that time, one could hear words from journalists that there were no topics forbidden for discussion. Similar processes were characteristic of the mass media in the Republic of Belarus.

In the second half of 1990, all the leading Russian media (both federal and regional) were ruled by large businessmen who organized media holdings to solve their problems. Those holdings included the most popular among the audience print and electronic mass media. The reason for this was the cessation of state funding for media outlets and low advertising revenues. The period of objective coverage of events has ended; their interpretation has occurred exclusively from positions favourable to owners of those media holdings. In the Republic of Belarus in those years, the leading Republican and regional media remained in the hands of the state, but a number of independent publications also appeared on the market.

Having begun since the 2000s, V. Putin’s policy has adjusted the development vector of Russian journalism. The owners of many media holdings emigrated, their place was taken by businessmen or former representatives of law enforcement agencies, one way or another connected with V. Putin. Media is still being a part of the holdings; however, a variety of points of view expressed by the audience was almost not reflected by media. The government’s position on various issues dominated in the “agenda,” opposition opinions can be heard on a limited number of media channels (for example, Ekho Moskvyy radio or Dozhd TV channel). Thus, we can talk about uneven airtime allocated for state and opposition points of view. A similar situation was partly characteristic of the Republic of Belarus. So, the majority of Russian and Belorussian audiences are forced to consider themselves satisfied not with objective and versatile information in the traditional print and electronic media, but with the propaganda of the state’s position, accordingly.

The World Wide Web has been assimilated by media since the beginning of the 1990s (2006) [2]. In Russia, the first edition to go to the Internet was Uchitelskaya Gazeta (1995), behind which other publications, radio stations and television companies began to go online. In the Republic of Belarus, the first to create a website on the Internet was the newspaper “Vecherny Minsk” (“Evening Minsk”) (1996). Currently, there are many studies devoted to the quality and transformation of traditional media in their development of the Internet space, as well as practices for working with the

audience. The purpose of the paper is to identify and study the transformation of content delivery and search for a new audience by the regional print media of Russia and the Republic of Belarus in the context of digitalization. We were interested in studying that question: what are newspaper editorial offices doing in order to increase their audience and be interesting to different audience groups?

The results of our study complement the findings of E. Ruppert (2013) [3], A. Moreno (2015) [4], M. Latzer (2013) [5], and S. Bodrunova (2013) [6] in the field of research of the practice of functioning media in the online space. The data obtained can be included in training and continuing education programs for journalists, editors and media managers at universities, special courses or professional educational seminars as additional cases for studying the quality of preparation of media texts specifically for publication on the Internet.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical basis of the study was the sites of six newspapers in Russia and the Republic of Belarus (three editions of each country) for 2018. On the Russian side, three highly rated socio-political newspapers of various ownership forms were selected for the study; they were published in the three largest non-capital cities with a population of more than one million people each (one newspaper from each city). The sites of newspapers are: "Birzha" (Exchange) (a private newspaper, the city of Nizhny Novgorod, birzha.ru), "Volzhskaya Kommuna" (Volga Commune) (which founder is the government of the Samara region, city of Samara, vkonline.ru), and "Kazanskiye Vedomosti" (Kazan Bulletin) (a municipal publication with private-state form of ownership, the city of Kazan, kazved.ru). The websites of the following Belarusian newspapers were also examined: "SB. Belarus segodnya" (Belarus today) (leading socio-political state publication, "SB. Belarus segodnya" (Belarus today) Minsk, sb.by), Intex-press (the largest regional private title, Baranovichi, intex-press.by), and "Gomelskaya Pravda" (Gomel Truth) (a leader among regional state print media, the city of Gomel, gp.by).

The analysis of the websites of these newspapers was carried out according to the following criteria.

1. Attendance, the ratio of the number of unique visitors and the population of the region, traffic sources, viewing depth;
  2. Frequency of updating content, its uniqueness, a set of genres and formats;
  3. The use of multimedia elements (photos, audio, video, infographics, maps, etc.);
  4. Interaction with social networks, engaging the audience, understanding the specifics of various platforms;
  5. Website design, adaptation for mobile devices, functions and site navigation;
- In the course of the study, we applied the following methods:

1. *Structural analysis of the periodicals' sites* that constitute the empirical basis of the study. With its help, the following was established: their rubrication, the design of the main and secondary pages, the availability of services offered to the audience (the ability to comment on articles, the presence of interactive elements, various forms of attracting and retaining audience attention on the site);
2. *Content-analysis of the content* distributed by the newspaper's website. This method made it possible to establish the quality of textual and visual content

(professional journalistic and user-friendly) from the standpoint of its correspondence to the current and socially significant “agenda”, the availability of articles written according to different journalistic genres, interest presented for a wide audience, the convenience of layout of the site’s pages, provision of different audience services, editorial work with social networks, etc. We have not studied the content found in the advertising message on the sites.

3. Comparative and contrastive analysis of sites selected for the study of newspapers. This method made it possible to compare, according to the above criteria, both the practice of editorial activities in digitalization among themselves and generally in countries, that is, to identify: the regional newspapers of which state work better on their content and in general to attract a new audience.

### 3.RESULTS

The study found that the online version of the information and reference weekly devoted to the life and business of Nizhny Novgorod entrepreneurs “Birzha” is structured according to the model of business print media. The daily audience of the site does not exceed 160 unique visitors. The population of Nizhny Novgorod as of January 1, 2018, is 1,268,234 people. Thus, we can conclude about the low degree of popularity of this online publication among the city residents. It does not take into account the specifics of the new system of genres and formats for delivering content in digital media, and therefore loses its potential users. These results are supplemented by the conclusions of L.G. Svitich (2015) [7].

After analysing the content of the official publication in the Samara region “Volzhskaya Kommuna”, we found that it is designed for a wide mass audience. Every day its website is browsed by around 4000 unique visitors. The website of the Volga Commune publishes both materials published in the newspaper, and specially written for it. The site is characterized by close interaction with social networks; it has links to VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, My Mir. However, the creators of the site have little understanding of the specifics of various platforms and practically do not use a variety of ways to engage the audience.

A case in point is the Kazanskiye Vedomosti newspaper. The newspaper has had a website since 2003. About 6 thousand unique visitors per day view this site. The behaviour of users of online publications has its own characteristics: most visitors come from sites - 75%, from search engines - 24%, from social networks - only 1%. The site of the Kazanskiye Vedomosti publishes both materials published in the newspaper and specially written for the site. Publications of the site by their genre characteristics are mainly informational. Materials on relevant topics are accompanied by a photo story and a video sequence. Multimedia elements are available on the site in sufficient quantities. The site is characterized by close interaction with social networks. Advertising is represented by banners and text advertising and information materials.

By the present moment, Belarusian mass media have accumulated sufficient experience in developing Internet space. The leader in the segment of state print media is the newspaper “SB. Belarus segodnya.” The newspaper website sb.by was created in 2000. Initially, like all web resources in those years, it was an electronic “tracing-paper” of a print publication. Today, it is a major information portal with the traffic of about 95 thousand unique visitors per day.

In 2012, an Internet project division was created in the structure of the editorial board “SB. Belarus segodnya”; it employs about 15 people now. This confirms the conclusion by A.V. Vyrkovsky on the need to transform editorial management under the influence of digitalization (2018) [8,11]. A team of 7 people works in the news department of the Internet project division “SB. Belarus segodnya”. The news comes from 6 am to 2 am. The work is organized in 3 shifts, each journalist prepares about 16-20 unique news on the website per day. At the end of December 2016, the sb.by website was redesigned; today it is distinguished by visualization and adapted for mobile devices. Editors need to more actively promote content on social networks. The total audience of social networks “SB. Belarus today” reaches 68 thousand people, but its activity should be recognized as low.

The most famous title among the non-governmental regional print media in the Republic of Belarus is “Intex-press” weekly published in Baranovichi. In 2009, the online news portal intex-press.by began to develop, and in 2016 it became one of the 10 most visited online media. In this context, we agree with M.V. Zagadullina, who claims that the editorial boards of modern media should think in multimedia categories (2015) [9,12,13]. For the period 2016-2018 the portal’s audience has grown more than in 7 times: from 9 to 65 thousand unique visitors per day. The editorial board see the portal’s mission in informing about city events, raising acute social problems, entertaining, reaching out to people, studying personal experience, and shaping national identity. In June 2018, the daily unique auditorium reached 68,063 visitors. In the traffic structure, there are dominated direct calls to the site (67%), indicating the audience loyalty.

Unlike “SB. Belarus segodnya”, “Intex-press” pays serious attention to social networks. With the introduction of smart tape algorithms, the emphasis began to shift from the number of subscribers to the quality of content and the activity of the audience. The total “Intex-press” audience on social networks reaches 54 thousand people; the editorial staffs are also successfully represented in the Viber and Telegram messengers. The study showed that the editorial board writes original introductions to materials for publications on various social networks, and does not just post links to the site there. This confirms the conclusion by V.V. Tulupov, who believes that the world is undergoing a second revolution characterized by an online approach to the text, constantly changing depending on the author and audience (2015) [10,14].

Pravda.Gomel, the information portal of the Gomelskaya Pravda newspaper, is another major player in the regional media field in the Republic of Belarus. When the site was redesigned in 2015, a large-scale work was done to analyse the audience, and the web resource itself, after rebranding, turned from the sites of the GP newspaper into the Pravda Gomel information portal. The average daily audience of gp.by today is about 20 thousand unique visitors. According to Yandex.Metric, referrals from search engines (45%) are the main source of website traffic in July 2018. “It is significant that 75% of visitors accessed the site from smartphones, and only one in five came from a personal computer or laptop. According to statistics, similarly to previous sites, the main audience of gp.by are readers aged 25-34.

We believe that the newspapers “Birzha”, “Volzhskaya Kommuna”, “Kazanskiye Vedomosti”, and “SB. Belarus segodnya”, “Intex-press”, and “Gomelskaya Pravda” to date have accumulated sufficient experience in the development of the Internet space. However, not all studied publications are fully utilizing the new features of online media. In particular, the “Birzha” newspaper does not take into account the specifics of the new system of genres and formats for delivering content to digital media.

The study found that the most successful sites in the digital environment are the newspapers “Kazan Vedomosti” and “Intex-press”. These Internet resources offer its audience an original content in the latest high-tech formats, without repeating the paper versions of the publications.

#### 4.SUMMARY

In the context of digitalization, the periodical press of Russia and in the Republic of Belarus are developing in similar conditions. The media sphere of two countries has faced the need to create a multi-channel distribution of content. Some sites so far (for example, the Internet resource of the Birzha newspaper) are clones of print media. It has been established that the reasons for the low popularity of the sites are duplication of newspaper content on the Internet, insufficient visualization of content, lack of multimedia elements, and poor integration with social networks.

As the study showed the most successful editorial boards both in Russia and in the Republic of Belarus offer their audience a journalistic content in modern mobile and visual formats. We see this, in particular, with the examples of the Kazanskiye Vedomosti and Intex-press newspapers. The most effective development strategy for a newspaper’s website may be its transformation into a regional portal with various additional services.

It was also established that in determining the quality of work of a particular media in social media, it is important to pay attention not only to the number of subscribers to communities but also to the activity of the audience (number of reposts, comments, likes). In any case, it is obvious that the process of intensive introduction of new technologies in the regional media sphere requires constant improvement of journalists' skills.

#### 5.DISCUSSION

The results of our study supplement the conclusions by L.G. Svitich (2015) [7], A.V. Vyrkovsky (2016) [8], V.V. Tulupov (2015) [10]. These authors studied various aspects of media transformation in the context of digitalization, taking into account global factors. The results of our comparative study devoted to the newspapers of the two countries indicate that periodicals of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus successfully transform their ways to deliver journalistic content, trying to attract a new audience.

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