

## **The cognitive dimension of hybridization of journalism and PR (PRnalism)**

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*PRnalism* drives to qualitative changes in journalistic practice and news content of mass media, reducing the cognitive function of the press and affecting the work of professional journalists.

Reduction of the cognitive function of the press embarrasses realization of its role as democratic institute.

The framework of the paper was formed by the content analysis and description of different forms of *PRnalism* in printing press and TV of two post-Soviet countries (Russia and Ukraine) in the period of political changes and economical crisis (2008) and with the comparative study of effects of *PRnalism* in realization of cognitive function of the press. Moreover, in Ukraine 2008 was a year of strong political tensions and conflicts, in Russia it was a period of presidential election.

The examination of the practices and texts of Russian and Ukrainian national and regional newspapers and national TV channels demonstrated that the *PRnalism* is presented in following forms:

- Publication of PR texts without obligatory control of accuracy and trustfulness of information. Such practice produces the conflict with the universal ethical norm of journalistic examination and verification of information provided by external sources. Obligatory internal qualitative selection and correction of information are suppressed, because staff of newsrooms believes that “colleges” – professionals in agencies of public relations – already made this work.
- Publication of PR texts produced by public relations agencies and provided to the newsrooms as a journalistic product or inside of

news sections, without clear designation of the origin of text. It can be result of the deal, when publication of PR text as journalistic work is the consequence of the payment to journalist/newsroom by public relation agency or clients.

- Production of journalistic texts exclusively by the compilations of PR texts.
- Passive following to news agenda setting established by agencies of PR, with the suppressing of active journalistic news gathering and, generally, the cognitive function of journalism.
- Production of PR texts by journalists according to demands of public relations agencies or clients. Publications by demand, often with payments to journalists/newsrooms, are common practice in conditions of underdeveloped market of advertisement and economical crisis. The example of the ethical conflict of interests can be related in same time with other ethical conflict provoked by “creating of news”. The transformation of journalist into PRmen is the “top” of conflictive essence of *PRnalism*.

The post-Soviet period in Russia and Ukraine was a time of rapid development of agencies and services of public relations, with intensive PR influence to media practices. In Russia, the years of presidency of Vladimir Putin were the period of relative stability, related with reduction of the political PR market, created by 1990<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of 2000<sup>th</sup>. Official public communications existed as the dominant forms of political PR.

In the analytical report for VIII National Congress of Union of Journalists of Russia (2008) were disclosed negative effects of news agenda setting established by official PR agencies in the period of presidential electoral campaign of 2008. The monitoring of political news on national TV channels, controlled by the State (Perviy, Rossia, TV Centr) and 5 private channels (including NTV and Ren-TV) confirms the dominance of positive or neutral coverage of president (38 % of news in Perviy, 31 % in Rossia, 30 % in TV Centr), government of Russian Federation (29 %; 30 %; 14 %) and pro-governmental political party “United Russia” (19 %; 20 %; 32 %).

The prevailing of official news on TV was established by PR methods of agenda setting when the main representatives of power were constantly presented on the screen as exclusive news makers. In the same time the access of opposition to TV was limited (Analiticheskiy doklad VIII S'ezdu Souza zurnalistov Rossii...).

Oleg Tekhmenev and other Russian media experts described the common use of paid publications in national press as significant PR resource for creating more attractive political image of regional administrations in all-Russian scale. When election of regional governors was substituted for their designation by Kremlin, the needs to produce the PR influence to voters were not so important in comparison with center-oriented positive image making of leaders of regions (Khodoroch, A.). The services for media promotion of regional governors are far from realization of cognitive function of journalism as provider of adequate social information for public, because PR goals of creating the "necessary" media reality confronts to the journalistic ethical ideal of *truth telling*. Flows of officially generated information in *PRnalism* format produce the social illusion of transformation of reality in the positive way. Victims of biased media representation of reality are citizens – and state functionaries too, because the illusion obstructs their adequate managerial work.

Now is evident the professional metamorphosis of the part of journalists in post-Soviet area: they are moving to the field of PR communication without loss of journalistic status. The non-formal combination of two different kinds of professional activities produces conditions for the hybridization of journalism and public relation, when journalist and newsrooms are hidden producers and providers of texts created with PR-goals.

The media expert Boris Lozovsky, dean of Faculty of Journalism of Ekaterinburg State University, notes the economical reasons of hybridization of journalism with PR. Low incomes of the majority of Russian journalists, undeveloped market of advertisement, especially in regions, produced the effect of seduction of journalism by public relations agencies, commercial partners and clients of the press. (Nosikov, 2006) In

actual situation clients prefer publications of PR text without clear designation of its origin, as journalistic product. Client is always right – in the case of the press this well known commercial principle produces evident conflict between economic goals and social essence of journalism as a public service. Indeed, PRmen who are the blind slaves of clients' requirements easily lose the professionalism, victimizing the quality of texts. So, *PRnalism* provokes the fall of quality, and, as result, the fall of efficiency of communication, the damage of media organization reputation with prospect to lose the audience and the advertisers (newspapers of Russia and Ukraine confirms this trend, with the dramatic lost of readers).

The actual economical crisis is the period of spontaneous situation development, the fall of credibility to powerful business structures, brands and reputations and the revision of methods and means of commercial competition, including changes in communicative politics of banks and corporations. Analytic and prognostic publications of the press are most demanded in constantly changing conditions of crisis. In Russia the public interest to such publications is exploited in needs of commercial public relations, including the struggle against competitors by way of the destruction of its reputations and positive image making of business leaders – demanders of PR in mass media.

The form of paid “analytical” publication in format of *PRnalism* serves effectively in the period of strong deficit of credible business information. But such publications, produced with PR goals, are often very far from real analysis of economic situations and problems. The example of damaging practices of *PRnalism* is the disinformation of public by “analytical” articles inspired in Russian press by PR agencies which served for image making of semi-bankrupt businessman Oleg Tinkov as extremely successful innovator in business [<http://www.raso.ru/index.php?action=show&id=54832>].

Executive director of private PR agency “Artefact” Alexandr Shoumsky thinks that publication of paid PR text as journalistic product are not effective instrument of public relation because the production of credible hybridized media content is relatively difficult. The easy place-

ment of paid PR text in the press provokes the devaluation of the publications quality, presented as journalistic works. Often the “analytical” publications produced by demand clearly seem like informational service in interests of client, contrasting to PR goals. Big part of public doesn't believe in truthfulness of such publications. But the use of paid publications in favour of clients is the common practice of Russian PR agencies, because submitter's requirements are of the highest priority. (Khodorych, 2005)

“Sovetnik”, Russian professional magazine for PRman, recognized that the practice of paid publications provokes paradoxical and dangerous situation where the useful information, including news of evident values and social significance, can be ignored by the press. Under strong influence of *PRnalism*, journalists lost interest in news gathering if have to provide information without payment.

The Ukrainian journalism confronts the similar situation. Independent experts in Ukraine - representatives of media watch organization “TeleKritika” stressed that the pressure of economical and political PR to the press extremely increased in conditions of crisis. According to calculations, the most part of publications in Ukrainian press are paid texts provided by PR agencies or produced by demand of commercial and political clients, presented as journalistic text. Its volume was estimated between 60 % and 80 % of newspapers news content [Kotyuzinska, 2008]. This practice confirms that the hybridization with PR is the dominant trend in transformation of Ukrainian journalism, in context of underdeveloped market advertisement.

The monitoring of 10 leading TV channels of Ukraine produced by media watch group “Not for sale!” (Kiev) demonstrated that hidden political PR presented as news is widely used by all broadcasters, excluding STB channel. Media critic Natalya Ligachova, the chief editor of the monthly magazine “TeleKritika”, recognized that such practice has had the destructive influence to the reputation of Ukrainian journalism during last 10 years. PR clients have the priority, because their money is significant financial resource for broadcasters. In the same time ethical principles of honest journalistic work were ignored [Ligacheva, 2008]

Monotonous PR texts, provided to press by banks' and corporations' public relations services, form the biggest part of "anti-crisis" content of Ukrainian mass media (Mirovoy finansoviy krizis...) *PRnalism* produces cognitive barriers creating bias in media representation of economical processes. The chief editor of Ukrainian national news agency UNIAN Alexandr Kharchenko stressed in his interview for "Deutsche Welle" that actual trend has pernicious influence to society and to development of country because only some percents of citizens can distinguish the biased media reality created by the press, and objective reality. Kharchenko characterized the pressure of PR to Ukrainian newspapers as "economical censorship" ("Tsenzura kosheljka"...)

The practices of regional Ukrainian press demonstrated the influence of *PRnalism* too. Independent media watch group "Informational Press Center" notes that in November 2008 the "champion" of paid publications in the South of Ukraine was the newspaper "Vechernyaya Odessa" with 17 texts, produced in different corporative PR agencies. All texts, published by newspaper as journalistic works, were examples of conflicts with the traditional journalistic norms of accuracy and balanced reporting. The positive information about companies' clients and its services was presented without independent commentaries of journalists and consumers. "Number 2" in the November list of South-Ukrainian newspapers is "Gazeta po-odesski", which heads proposed for sale the newspaper's space in order of placement of paid publications inspired by PR sources. Independent media experts noted that level of quality and credibility of such publications is extremely low. (Zborovskaya, 2008)

The proclaimed ethical ideal of journalism as *truth telling* is accepted by the public, because the trustful information has the vital importance for the orientation and more adequate positioning of citizens in society, for rational and positive political and economical choice, for democratic social transformation. *PRnalism* is the real opposition to common professional journalistic values and norms, provoking the fall of professionalism of journalists and significant reduction of cognitive function of journalism.

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