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JOURNALISM IN THE WORLD OF “POST-TRUTH”

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary editorial board named the term “post-truth” Word of the Year. In the dictionary, the definition goes as follows: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. The reason for a neologism, slightly more than 10 years in scientific use, to get this honor is its involvement in two major political events: the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President and Britain’s decision to exit the European Union (Brexit). More than 70% of statements made by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign were evaluated by the independent Politifact project as lies or distortions of facts – many of those were refuted outright. Nevertheless, opinion polls showed Trump was believed to be more honest and trustworthy than Hillary Clinton, his opponent. During the referendum on Brexit, the opinion of the majority of British citizens that Britain spends too much money on supporting the EU proved to be contrary to the available data and documents which evidenced that the EU membership comes out significantly cheaper for Great Britain than exiting it.

The large-scale consequences caused by this mass deviation from the traditional “truth/untruth” dichotomy brought about an influx of pessimism among political analysts concerning the fate of journalism in the Internet era. There were numerous publications asking the same question: since people no longer believe confirmed facts, perhaps they no longer need the truth? Although careless treatment of facts and attempts to manipulate public opinion have always been a typical feature of politicians from time immemorial, the consensus in liberal democracies has always been supported by independent professional journalism, also known as “the fourth estate”, its key function defined as providing the population with objective and reliable information. In a world that is no longer fact-centric and turns away from ethics and logic, there is no place for professional journalism.

Research points to several reasons behind this “crisis of fact”, from the abundance of factual information and diversity of methods for its transmission, which brings about an impossibility to check how reliable the sources of information are, and whether they are free from outside manipulation, to the influence of Post-Modernist philosophy and aesthetic principles in mass culture, which include moral relativism, an indifference to distinguishing between truth and untruth, and even attempts to justify the impossibility of this distinction.

Other reasons behind the loss of prestige currently experienced by mass media are a trend for their commercialization, a pursuit of higher ratings, and their involvement in the political struggle and information wars.

Apart from these, an inclination towards “post-truth” in Russia’s political life and journalism has a number of specific reasons. A confrontation with the West, the country’s involvement in the military conflict in Syria, the events in the Ukraine and annexation of Crimea resulted in legitimization of a “hybrid approach” in politics. Truth happens to be very sensitive to politics: facts are downplayed, there is a state-supported demand for propaganda, and the pro-government media are tasked with manufacturing enemies both inside and outside the country. The very style of presenting information changes: it becomes a negative narrative, “the language of hate”.

Dmitry Kiselyov, the former host of “News of the Week” TV program, presently the general director of “Russia Today” information agency, made a militant statement defending “post-truth” immediately after changing posts in December 2013. He said, specifically, that “an objective attitude is a myth that is being imposed on us. The time of distilled, impartial journalism is over”. He also tried to question the opinion common for the present-day political discourse that propaganda is a biased dissemination of views, facts, arguments and other information aimed at influencing public opinion, or possibly having other aims pursued by its originators (from Latin “propaganda fide”, literally “propagation of the faith”), claiming instead that propaganda is “just an attempt to explain”.

A reservation he made later, during an international media forum on June 6, 2016, as he repeated his statement about “distilled journalism” being a thing of the past, sounded as “one needs reliable sources to support his statement. However, it did not save the situation: by that time, cases of Kiselyov taking liberties with facts were common knowledge.

The trend-setting statement made by the head of a leading information agency met with a sharp response from the members of regional press. Journalists from St. Petersburg, Urals and Yakutia, who came out with a number of open letters, articles and publications, were unanimous in their opinion that journalism can and must be impartial, and anything smacking of propaganda should be avoided.

This reaction served as a reminder of the existence of a multiple national and international documents, including declarations, charters, resolutions and codes of ethical professional behavior, which define the main aim of journalism as the search for, and publication of, truthful information serving a public interest. It is further stressed that the criterion of truthfulness and impartiality applies to both presenting and commenting the information – in particular, distorting the meaning of cited material, suppressing a free discussion, and omitting the statements the author does not agree with are inadmissible, as they run counter to the principle of the plurality of opinions.

In many countries, there are self-regulating bodies of the press – the councils which include representatives of all

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the parties concerned, including journalists, editors, owners of the media, and members of the public. All council members should have an unblemished reputation, and be committed to the idea of the independence and self-regulation of the press. The main task of those councils is examining complaints at media and passing collective decisions concerning adherence to professional ethical norms. By doing this, they provide the society with guarantees concerning the quality of the information it receives, demonstrate the responsible attitude maintained by the professional community of journalists, and show the absence of need in any extended state control over mass media.

In Russia, the Public Board on Press Complaints, an independent representative public structure, exists since 2005. The Public Board is made up of the House of the Media Community and the House of the Media Audience, each including 25 members. The House of the Media Community is formed by the non-commercial media organizations, while the House of the Media Audience is formed by political and non-political organizations operating beyond the media sphere. The Board is tasked with solving moral and ethical conflicts linked to the journalists' professional activity.

Drawing on the main principles of ethics in journalism, and based on the resolved cases of media disputes, the Board arrived at a number of fundamental conclusions that define professional journalism as incompatible with propaganda, which it characterized as having the following features:

- treatment of any person, social group or the whole of society as an “object” by the originator of the propaganda;
- deliberate simplification of a complex multidimensional picture into a flat, black&white dichotomy;
- narrowing down the field of personal moral choice and the responsibility involved in the choice;
- distinct aim that should be achieved as the expected effect of the media influence on the “object”;
- deliberate choice of facts according to a rigid “scenario”, active use of disinformation, manipulating facts, statistical data, and opinions (including evaluation by experts), or shifting focus where direct disinformation is impossible;
- using the “end justifies the means” approach, utilizing means and methods that are basically incompatible with principles of truth and honesty;
- search for, creation, or active addition to the “image of the enemy”, including deliberate instilling and supporting the split into “we” and “they” in the public mind;
- setting up a belief that any hostile act toward an “enemy” is morally justified – which includes “internal enemies”, “potential enemies”, or any person displaying insufficient loyalty towards the dominant social institutions, interests and ideas;
- appeal to emotions and feelings, aiming to suppress reason while stirring up fears and prejudices;
- using journalism as a “cover” while attempting to assume the role of the primary source of information;
- passing off fictitious information as coming from a reliable source, by fabricating false indications of its reliability;
- using manipulation to instill in the “target” a loyalty towards the system of institutions, interests and ideas that the originator of propaganda is serving.

Basically, there is nothing new in the idea that an appeal to emotions is more efficient than an appeal to reason. Those

in power have always used this principle; one can safely assume there were certain “post-truth” periods in the history of any country. The urbanized industrial society, however, offers many additional possibilities for mass propaganda; in an authoritarian regime, sealed to outside influence, it could prevail for lengthy periods of time. But those cycles always come to an end. One can hardly imagine the world to ever say farewell to truth. As Ralph Keyes, an American writer and researcher, has rather subtly remarked, “We would hardly ever be able to discuss post-truth, unless we were sure that truth matters”.

The feeling of elation or shock caused by political perturbations eventually dissipates, the mind clears of the effects of “bombing by propaganda”; the bottom line is reduced levels of confidence, towards both the authorities and the mass media. Thus, the polls conducted by the “Public Opinion” (“Obschestvenoe mnenie”) fund show that the citizens of Russia are losing confidence in the country's television. In April 2018, 43% respondents said they trust television more than they do other sources of information. In the spring of 2015, this figure amounted to 63%, in January 2016 it was 58%, in February 2017 it fell to 50% and in June 2017 to 47%.

According to the results of the public opinion poll conducted on 31 January 2016, 65% of the participants trusted the state-controlled media; by November 18, 2018, this figure fell to 47%. During the same period, the trust placed in the independent media grew twofold, from 13% to 25%. This clearly testifies to the fact that the mobilizing “Crimean effect” is now depleted, and the TV audience is no longer compelled to believe whatever the pro-government media says; on the other hand, there is a widespread opinion that in discussing the reform of the pension system, the federal TV channels support the official point of view.

The problem of believing the media is even more poignant in the former Soviet republics where post-Soviet journalism is suffering from a hereditary disease. The strain it inherited is the ideological “cold war” against the West, also known as the first world war on the information front, which lasted nearly half a century, resulted in a tremendous amount of propaganda lauding the Soviet Union and smearing the West, and brought about a decrease of confidence in the country's journalism as the Soviet system progressively weakened. The numerous non-commercial media born in the 1990s had been mostly smothered in the 2000s; by now, almost all the formerly independent regional newspapers and TV channels of that time are controlled by the local administrations.

The independent mass media in the recently established post-totalitarian states have to face similar problems in their operations. Among the problems are lack of traditions and experience in self-regulation; political conflicts splitting the media community apart; a permanent political pressure by the authorities, which insist on loyalty and try to ban criticism; a dependence, both political and economical, imposed on journalism by the political elites and the business circles.

In 2011, the representatives of the media self-government structures of seven post-Soviet states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Ukraine – set up the Media Self-Regulatory Organizations Network (MSON), aiming to struggle for the recognition

of free and independent media as a fundamental feature of a democratic society, as well as demand support for high-quality, professional and ethical journalism. The participation of Tajikistan was later suspended; in 2016 its place in the organization was taken up by Byelorussia. In 2014, the Consultative Commission to Confront Propaganda was established under the auspices of MSON. The new Commission issued Recommendations concerning dissemination of propaganda in mass media.

Media self-regulation is a complex process. The standards of journalism are ardently discussed across the world, even in the countries with well-established liberal democratic traditions. Another necessary part in defending one's right to tell the truth is the professional solidarity of all the honest journalists. In January 2018 there was an exemplary incident during the press conference of Pete Hoekstra, the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands: the participants reminded him of false claims he made three years ago.

"You wrote," journalist Wouter Zwart asked him, "that Islamists set a politician on fire alive in the Netherlands. What was his name?"

"I spoke of the danger of terrorism," the ambassador replied good-naturedly.

"You wrote," another journalist repeated the question, "that Islamists set a politician on fire alive in the Netherlands. What was his name?"

"Next question," the American remarked with irritation.

"You don't understand," the third journalist said. "You have to answer the question my colleagues asked you."

Then Hoekstra expressed his regret about what he said, but framed his answer in the post-truth key: it was not a matter of his personal views, but an expression of the U.S. politics.

To gain a valid status in a society, the journalists should not play up to the government but exert control over it and expose its abuses of authority; thus, members of the press would perform their main function – being the watchdogs of democracy.