

Andrey Miroshnichenko

The digital challenges for Russian and American traditional media

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The last editor-in-chief will sign “to print” the last issue of the last Russian newspaper on the 28th of December, 2037, at 4.20 pm.

Why 4.20 pm? Because it should be signed at 4 o'clock, but no one in the editing house ends his or her work in time. Why 4 pm? Because it will be a small local newspaper which is called *rayonka* in Russian, and people at *rayonka* never sit till late.

Why will it be December 28th? Because it will be the end of financial year and newspaper will have to perform all its obligations toward the last five advertisers and the last one hundred subscribers.

Why 2037? This is the main question. This date relates to the concept of the Last Newspaper Generation.

In Russia, the Last Newspaper Generation consists of people who were born in the 1980-s. How can we define it? All of us, who were born before the 80's, received the personal experience of newspaper consumption in childhood. We were familiar with not only how to read but also how to obtain newspapers or magazines. As a child, I knew that I should stay in line near the newsstand or ask my parents to subscribe to my favorite magazine. In school, we were forced to subscribe to Pioneer and Komsomol newspapers. So, normally, everyone got the skills of media-consumption in their teen-age years.

The teen-age years of people who were born after the 80's - in the 90's - fell in the 2000s when subscription to newspaper decreased dramatically. The first reason is the Russian Post worked badly, and people stopped trusting postal delivery. The second reason is the Internet came into our homes. As a result, in the beginning of the century the family tradition of subscription in Russia was interrupted.

So, the boundary between 80's and 90's generation is the frontier between the Last Newspaper Generation and the First Digital Generation.

The word “subscription” in Russian sounds like “podpiska”. And there is very close definition – “podpiska o neveyzde” which means “recognizance not to leave” (the obligation not to leave, given by a person who is under criminal investigation). In 2010, in Moscow colleges, a survey was taken, and the researcher asked student in their twenty what the word “podpiska” means. 54% of students surveyed responded that “podpiska” means “podpiska o neveyzde” (that is “recognizance not to leave”). Thus they have already lost the semantic meaning of the word. (By the way, take into account that students who were 20 in 2010 were born exactly in 1990.)

These young people can see newspapers in the cafe or planes, but they know nothing about how to purchase it. Just here and now the younger generation is losing an everyday life's habit and skill to consume newspapers.

What will happen when 70%, 80% of young people will know nothing about how to purchase newspaper? After next ten years, those people will take leadership positions in society and start managing the family and corporate budgets.

In Russia, when I made my calculation, the life expectancy for men was less than 60 years. So the formula is: 1980 plus “less than 60” gives us the end of the 2030’s. This is the time when the Last Newspaper Generation will have shrunk enough to lose the ability to support the existence of newspaper. That is how the year 2037 was figured out.

Of course it’s a sort of provocation. The exact date is not significant. It is more important to define the borders between Generations and define the cultural changes, conditioned by the change of Generations.

Speaking about the newspaper crisis, we usually mean the Internet. We assume that newspapers and TV can be replaced with multimedia.

However, technical changes are not the only threat to old media. The most important issue deals with the phenomenon of the Emancipation of Authorship.

How many authors has mankind had before? When I say “author”, I mean the people who are able to publish their ideas on the public scale.

As you may know, the Google Books project digitizes all books. In August 2010, Google Books has calculated that nearly 130 million books have been published throughout all of history. Taking in account the amount of scientists, writers, journalists and others, we can suggest a crude calculation, which gives us such number: mankind has had, maybe, about 200-300 million authors altogether.

Nowadays, more than 2 billion users are connected to the Internet. All of them have received the technical possibility of authorship. This is a real explosion of authorship. In a historical moment, the quantity of authors has reached the number which is approximately 10 times larger than the number of authors throughout all of history. Now we are roughly in the middle of this explosion, because the quantity of people who can publish something will grow.

The concept of the emancipation of authorship makes it possible to analyze many problems connected with the Internet influence not only on media but on entire society.

Earlier, mass-media were separated from public by the barrier of access to broadcasting. Now, the internet has given an access to everybody. It has mixed audience and authors. Mass-media have lost the monopoly on production and delivery of messages. Self-publishing Audience is arisen.

There are some remarkable quotations on this topic coined by American media-gurus. «The People Formerly Known as the Audience», - Jay Rosen says about all of us.

Clay Shirky considers that in the new media-environment the inner message of every message is: «You can play this game too». You can say something, too.

And finally, Dan Gilmor develops Rosen’s thought and notices: «The former audience joins the party».

It is an absolutely new type of person and a new class of society, unknown earlier. Who are they — these two billion (not publishers but) *publicators*? What do they want? We know nothing about them, being of them. How will they influence society, which will consist entirely of them after one more historical moment?

The concept of the Emancipation of Authorship is not only about quantity but about quality, too. It can explain, for example, how the evolution of the personal media activism has led to social protests in Russia.

Initially, people who surf the Internet and find something fun or attractive start sharing it. Suddenly, they realize that they can personally provoke the reaction to their activity far outside their immediate physical surroundings. They can be media. Nobody, of course, understands it, but attracting people by means of content technically means to be media.

Further they find that responses can be different. And definite types of content generate definite types of responses. The next discovery is that conversation about public issues generates public response and serves for better socialization. Thus, users move from cat pictures to socially significant communications.

Not all of users go this way, but it is an inevitable evolution of the system of the emancipated authorship: from cats to debates. Most of people stay lazy authors who just use the “like”-button to express their attitude. (However, lazy authors are useful - they support distribution in the huge scale.) But others – hard authors – use their ambitions, knowledge, passions and huge quantity of time to gain the response. And they needn’t any sanction from anyone.

That is what the Emancipation of Authorship means. That is why the main cultural clash in Russia is between “the TV-part of society”, where ordinary people are just passive receivers, and “the digital part of society”, where even the simplest consumption means participation, means at least some activity.

That’s why the Internet started the protests in the number of states with rigid institutes of authorities. The Internet not only gives the tool of consolidation but also shifts the relations between people and their surroundings from *passive* to *active* mode.

There is a kind of urban legend that everything on the Internet is trash. Actually, it is not true. Of course, you can find the trash on the Internet if you want, but nobody really consumes trash. We consume information that was selected and adjusted.

But who selects and adjusts it for us? That is a very interesting question, and the answer to this very question leads us to understanding that the Internet poses a threat not only to the print press but to old broadcasting journalism entirely.

Let’s try to reconstruct how the ordinary user shares information.

When an occasional user finds something interesting, he filters information in his own way according to his own idea of what is interesting to his friends. This “primary” user selects the information and adjusts it. Then the user publishes information to attract the attention of his friends or someone else.

Next users in this chain play the role of next filters. If the initial message is interesting, they support the spreading. It really looks like infection, like epidemic. That’s why the term “viral distribution” is applied.

As a result, the concerted interaction arises, in which every participant not only shares the information but also selects, filters, and adjusts it. He does the same work as an editor does. So, he acts as an editor. That’s why I call this common effort the Viral Editor.

There are some threats to the traditional business model of media. First of them – will it be possible to sell content on the Internet? Will people pay for articles?

The Viral Editor covers everything that might be interesting to its participant.

Significant topics, if they are really significant, get in the focus of public attention.

Occasional witnesses are everywhere, and they hurry to share the information. It is so called *random act of journalism*: “Have seen? Share!”.

Experts discuss the concept of citizen journalism. Let us not forget about *guerilla journalism*, this phenomenon is arising too. The millions of amateurs defeat the thousands of professionals because these millions of amateurs include thousands of professionals in every field. Any topic involves those experts who are interested in this topic and who want share their opinion. The Self-publishing Audience reaches the audience with accuracy 100%. Thanks to the Viral Editor, the Self-publishing Audience can produce public significance and competes with the old legacy media.

Of course, a big noise arises as a side effect. Many people can participate, but only small part of them produces valuable information. However the Viral Editor is tuned by the net of our friends to select and deliver to us only relevant information.

Thanks to the Viral Editor, a user cannot help but learn about socially significant information. For example, when Moscow's mayor Luzhkov was fired, I got this news through my friend feed. Now all it takes is to turn on the iron or some other electronic gadget with a friend-feed inside, and you will know everything you need to know. The same idea was coined by Brian Stelter in the New York Times: "If the news is important, it will find me".

Now people do not hunt for information. Information hunts for people. Perception, not information, is now becoming the valuable commodity. That is why it is now necessary to pay not to receive but to reach. To receive cost nothing; to deliver cost a lot.

What does it mean? It means content is losing its selling value. All of a sudden, it is detected, that business of newspaper was based on principle so called "walled garden" – nobody was able to do what mass media were doing.

It is becoming clear that not information as itself but the scarcity of information caused the value of old mass media. Now we see the attempts of publishers to close information artificially. Instead of spreading the news, they try to create artificial scarcity to keep society in news starvation.

We can recall the Associated Press which forbade its reporters to post news on Twitter before publishing on the wire during Occupy Wall Street hot events. This story was scooped by New York Magazine. Associated Press sent to all staffers e-mail to remind them about Twitter rules: do not tweet or share any news before publishing on the wire.

So the mission of journalists is not to inform society but to feed the wire. That's true because journalism has become a business. But tweet-restriction cannot protect the media-business from global content leaks. As RIA Novosti MediaLab head Vasily Gatov said, "Information is similar to water: it will find the cracks through which to leak".

On December 7, Dmitry Medvedev gave an interview to the main Russian TV-channels. After finishing live broadcast, he commented on the activity of criminal investigators who came to protestor's apartment in the morning too early. Trying to look liberal, Medvedev said privately: "They are goats coming so much early morning". Unfortunately (or fortunately), recording was not stopped. Video immediately went onto YouTube, and a big scandal arose, because G-men in Russia are beyond criticism, especially in this way.

And the trouble has begun! TV-channels, who share the responsibility for broadcasting, started to deny any involvement in, started to charge each other with... scooping. To inform the people - it is really against any "professional standards".

"...It is a pleasure to see how three TV-channels hurry to argue that each of them had not participated in spreading of the publicly significant information," Andrey Babitsky, editor for Esquire Russia, commented on Facebook.

It is funny to compare. The Associated Press wanted to stop sharing because of economic reason. Russian TV-majors want to stop sharing because of political reason. But

either American or Russian biggest journalistic institutes, which theoretically have to keep people informed, in fact want to stop sharing the important, really valuable information. The reasons are of course different, but new environment, where the access is free, has exposed old media's wish not to be a gateway because they used to be a gatekeeper. Thus the fear of new environment destroys the very ethic basis of the good old journalism.

Now the biggest publishers like Rupert Murdoch or Big News Agencies try to keep the walled garden closed by means of creating the *PayWalled Garden*. What I think about paid content: you can continue, but it is too late to start.

Media need in barriers of access around it, but it is impossible to build barriers in the open environment of the Internet, where everyone can become media. And even media-apps for tablet have not become savior: this hope is already going away.

Previously, the media had two main streams of revenue – advertising and selling copies. Now both streams are drying up. Publishers and editors are still accustomed to drawing money from big streams, but probably these streams will never be restored.

It is a kind of dispersion of the media business. Publishers try to replace two old big but shrinking streams with many new sources of revenue.

Editor-in-chief of the local newspaper “Oktyabrsky vestnik” from Khanty-Mansiysk region told once at a Russian media-conference: “We buy inflatable balloons and a cylinder with helium, then inflate the balloons with helium and sell them during the local festivals. It doesn't provide great revenue, but profitability is pretty high”.

Publishers try to bet on different opportunities, not only on journalism. They become entrepreneurs. What if the product of old journalism is not tradable goods anymore?

On July 23, 2009, local daily Ann Arbor News from the small university town in Michigan printed its last paper issue after 174 years in print. Of course, closing of print issue was presented as a transformation to the Internet-media, local newspaper became digital.

That is a story, which is pretty known to Russian media. In recent years, many print media have gone digital instead of being paper; but, in reality, they were closed.

And that is why there is a difference between Russian and American print media which proclaim the transfer to digit. Ann Arbor local paper really started digital project and made some interesting decisions. Ann Arbor's case is well known because Ann Arbor became the first American town that has lost its only daily newspaper. In some sense, the Ann Arbor's case gives us the model of transition media from paper to digit.

I tried to find the same cases in Russia. I asked heads of journalistic associations and dozens of my colleagues in the capital and provinces. There are no examples in Russia with local newspaper shifted to the Internet and continued an existence. There is no sufficient economic basis for such shift on local level. Local newspapers will not become digital. The only way for them is to have a support received from local authorities or someone else.

Media in Russia have a choice: to be affiliated with authorities and have a support, or to work hard on the market and have increasing market risks. Authorities consider that the media play important role for large mass of people, especially for seniors, especially in province. And officials will support newspapers much longer, than it will have a sense in terms of market.

What about the USA? I think the economic factors play a big but not sole role here, too. The key factor is the generation, again. People have an open access to the Washington

Post's articles online, but they still continue subscribing, although it is pretty expensive. It is deprived of any economic sense, but it is just a habit. I asked such persons about the reason of subscribing and found that they pay to support their own habit, not to purchase the product. Frankly speaking, it already looks more like a donation, not like purchase.

Such motivation has nothing common with the consumption of content but can be explained in terms of generation's factor. It is a habit to get a paper physically, it is a visual habit, a mental habit. But all these habits will vanish together with the generation. Modern teenagers know nothing about the smell of typography ink.

Digital-caused business challenges for Russian and American old media are mostly the same. The one more issue for Russian media is the hottest political topics are pushed out from the institutional journalism to the guerilla journalism of the Internet. The audience migrates at the same direction. So, the mass media are losing their attractiveness additionally because of self-censorship reason. The result is logical: the less audience media has, the less money it can earn. Otherwise, if the Russian media covered the hot political topics, they at least might attract more attention of audience and, therefore, be more sustainable in competition with pervasive new media feed.

The future of Russian and American media seems to be similar in the one and different in the other. Both of them will need in support from outside, because the old business model is obsolete and the new one will not be found, so as this type of media was designed *in* and *for* conditions of information scarcity. These conditions are vanishing and never come back.

But in Russia last newspapers will be supported by officials, while in the USA last newspapers can be supported, probably, by people's private and/or collective initiative. For some time which duration depends on longevity of the Last Newspaper Generation.