Identity Fluidity in Current Journalism: the View of Professionals

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Abstract

The article aims to identify the changes that occur in the professional identity of journalists and also the factors of these changes. For this purpose, expert interviews were conducted with acting Russian journalists in two groups – with more than 20 and less than 7 years of experience in the media. The research is based on the hypothesis that at present, the community preserves the basic values and representations on identity derived from the traditional professional ideology, and at the same time variety and individualization in relation to the profession are increasing. One of the differentiation factors is the age and the related experience in the media industry. As a result of the study, the hypothesis was mainly confirmed. On the one hand, the ideals of citizenship, public service, and moral duty, traditional for the Russian press, are still present in professional ideology and determine identity, but this is more typical for the older generation. On the other hand, there is an increasing tendency to individualization of the profession representations and the choice of a behavior model as well as a deviation from universal standards and norms, which is especially evident among young experts. Thus, there is no grounds to talk about unified identity, whereas in reality it becomes heterogeneous and fluid. This research is an integral part of the comprehensive interuniversity project "Professional Ideology of Journalism" initiated at St. Petersburg State University. The results of expert interviews significantly complement the objective strong data obtained in other sections of the project.

Keywords: identity fluidity, journalism, media studies, professional media education, universities.

1. Introduction

The influence of information technologies on current journalism does not cause doubts and objections both in the corporation of media industry professionals and in the academic environment, and it should be recognized as a self-evident fact. The arising questions concern to the extent to which technologies control information production, predetermining its rhythms, thematic orientation, stylistics, etc. In this regard, reputable researchers pay attention to the fact that "the digital remains the exterior of the journalistic enterprise … Like other enterprises that have been transformed by digital technology, such as education, the market, law and politics, it is the enterprise – journalism – that gives technology purpose, shape, perspective, meaning and significance" (Zelizer, 2019: 349). From similar positions, other experts emphasize that "events and facts do not have 'intrinsic importance' but become important because they are selected by journalists who adhere to a culturally and ideologically determined set of selection criteria" (Broersma, 2010: 16). Some authors write about the career growth of employees in the field of mass communications as follows: "Much career and professional development research focuses on

technical skills needed for new employees to be successful. An alternative approach to this research perspective puts the focus on emotions ... perceptions of being emotionally and socially capable – influences their career decisions and workplace experiences" (LaGree et al., 2021: 67). "Meanwhile, journalism scholars have started to acknowledge the central role emotions play in journalism practices and journalism outcomes ... and to suggest that subjectivity or empathy, not only detached objectivity, can enhance professional journalistic performance..." (Kotisova, 2022: 790).

In this article, we do not aim to develop a discussion on the topic raised, the authors associate themselves with those scholars who do not share the postulates of technological determinism and give priority to the subjective factor in the functioning and development of journalism. The state of consciousness of media employees, their understanding of their official and public duty, attitude to the canons and variable possibilities of the profession determine much (if not the most important thing) in current journalistic practice. From these intellectual and mental components, professional identity is formed, that is, acceptance of a certain work activity as a means of self-realization and awareness of one's involvement in the community of colleagues. The objectives of the paper authors are, firstly, to define different versions of identity in current journalism, depending on the professionals' biographical and occupational characteristics and, secondly, to reveal trends arising in this regard towards unity or fragmentation of the professional community.

2. Materials and methods

As mentioned above, the main portion of working materials was supposed to be obtained from direct communication with journalists. General methodological approaches to the study are reflected in the published proposals (Berezhnaia, 2022). However, during the preparation for field working, the initial plans underwent some changes. So, potential participants did not support the idea of focus groups with a video recording, referring to the conflictogenicity of the discourse topic and the unwillingness to publish personal opinions in the presence of colleagues. In this situation, the method of individual in-depth semi-structured interviews in anonymous mode with audio recording has become a productive decision. In January – February 2023, Marina A. Berezhnaia conducted 10 interviews lasting 40-50 minutes each; during the decryption of the source materials, the identifying data of the participants were removed from the text.

The wording of the questions assumes that the participants look at the subject of discussion through the prism of individual experience that is one of the parameters of the journalist's subjectivity. Among these parameters there are characteristics of both rational and systemic subjectivity, the first of which includes the personalization of the actor (gender, age, education, experience), and the second is associated with the media organization and the status of the subject, i.e., it tends to reflect collective, institutional representations (Shaykitdinova, 2016). Any of these parameters could be the basis for comparing internal corporate discourses. But the results of the projects carried out earlier convince that the respondents' answers show obvious differences precisely on the age scale, which is strongly correlated with the duration of activity in media (Predstavleniya..., 2017). Although the experience itself is not the subject of analysis in our interviews, we believed that it would provide a basis for comparisons and an opportunity to trace the generational dynamics in the identity forming. At the same time, the characteristics of systemic subjectivity (belonging to a media agency) were taken into account when forming a balanced composition of experts.

The project involved employees of print (text) and audiovisual media of regional and federal levels with up to 7 years of experience (5 people: radio – 1, TV – 2, print media – 1, online media - 1) and more than 20 years (5 people: radio – 1, TV – 1, print media – 2, online media - 1). Below, their statements will be divided into two age groups. Basic questions were sent to the project participants beforehand, but in live communication the sequence of questions could change, clarifications and additions arose, the interlocutors were not limited by the rigid structure of the interview. The authors of the paper are deeply grateful to the interlocutors for their cooperation and frank expression of their views.

Besides the interview, the authors used such methods as data collection from the academic literature, theoretical analysis, synthesis and generalization.

3. Discussion

In research papers, the indissoluble connection between production activity, views on it and self-consciousness is precisely indicated. D. McQuail wrote about the formation of "*working theory*

of journalism, something that has been described as a 'professional ideology'" (McQuail, 2009: 56). Ideology and identity merge together and cannot be considered in isolation from each other. According to C. Mellado, professional roles can be seen as a key part of the journalistic identity construction process, and as a part of the journalistic ideology while "journalistic ideology is a fundamental tool that journalists can use to differentiate themselves from professionals in other fields" (Mellado, 2021: 26, 36).

Thus, in our study the issues of identity are considered in the light of the "*working theory* of journalism", namely a professional ideology. The comprehensive vision of this phenomenon was reflected in the materials of the research conference, which was aimed at its understanding. In particular, it includes representations of media employees about their belonging to their industrial environment, which has more or less definite qualitative characteristics and value orientations. Meanwhile, on the one hand, there is a certain normative ideology, on the other hand, in reality there are many individual and group versions of it that move, complement, collide with each other in the coordinates of social time and production experience (Korkonosenko, 2017).

Undoubtedly, such a complex and dynamic object deserves further special studying. The interuniversity research project "Professional Ideology of Journalism", organized by the Department of Theory of Journalism and Mass Communications of St. Petersburg State University, is designed to perform this work. It combines a set of areas and working methods, from the analysis of quantitative databases to the comparison of individual opinions and judgments. In particular, one of the central sections of the project is an expert interview with media practitioners, which is valuable as an expression of subjective views on the profession and well-established ideas about it, including regulatory provisions. Since we are dealing with judgments based on the experts' own experience, they also reflect the interlocutors' ideas about themselves as actors in the industry and members of the journalistic community. In other words, about their professional self-identification.

Hypothetically, it is quite possible to assume that both identity and the ideology essentially related to it appear very variously in the minds and statements of media employees, and the recognition of universal values and standards will be combined with asserting their right to independence and sovereignty in thoughts and actions.

4. Results

Attempts to compare specific individual opinions with positions of the whole community are based on the assumption that there is some corporate consolidation in the issue of journalistic identity. One of the indicators of the desire for unity is the regular discussion of such issues in the professional environment. This logic dictates the inclusion of the question "Are there discussions about professional behavior in your environment? What are they related to?" (here and below the characteristic fragments of the answers are given).

Work experience 20+

"I didn't hear any discussions. People are not particularly interested in the meaning of their mission, they came, worked and left. Sometimes someone discusses certain events…"

"Disputes are sometimes. As a rule, journalists in their professional environment like to discuss in a close group, without attracting people from the outside."

"I don't remember a single broad discussion which would be devoted to the topics you mentioned and covered in the media. There is an Internet space where such discussions are certainly underway."

"With whom do I discuss journalistic problems? At home. With colleagues."

Work experience -7

"Probably to a lesser extent than formerly. Because formerly journalism used to undergo some changes, but now it has actually changed. Sometimes discussions occur as polemic not on great problems, but on issues of transparency, opinions openness."

"We don't discuss journalism in essence. Everyone understands that sometimes we will probably have to say what we are asked to say."

"In some cases, there were special talks: no, we will not send this correspondent, he will report the wrong way, we need to be neutral… Such discussions make it sad."

Despite some distinctions in details, in both groups there is rather a breakdown of contacts characteristic for the community than an active corporate discourse. It is clear that the negation of discussions increases the tendency to fragmentation, and does not promote integration within the community. The scholarship has already caught the trend towards separation, and researchers

emphasize that it is "essential to keep high the levels of communication among journalists, both at the hierarchical level and between peers ... In the current context of the erosion of personal relationships ... this becomes remarkably critical" (Goyanes, Cañedo, 2021: 393). Regarding to communication with experts, disunity also means that in their judgments about identity they are guided more by individual biographical trajectories than by the collective experience of colleagues.

However, the ratio of individually-specific and collectively approved can also be revealed in the answers to the question of how contemporary journalists define the destination of their work. This question is closest to the topic of self-identity in the profession, so a high activity in giving answers was noticeable.

Work experience 20+

"Report the news. The main task of a journalist is to cover this or that event, fact or phenomenon as full as possible, not suppressing it."

"I became a journalist because I wanted to change the world, and I work as a journalist because I want to do something good."

"I have recently worked in social journalism, where the main goal is to help citizens. We were considering the problem and attracting people who could solve it."

"Everyone who has been working on TV for a long time works by inertia, because they don't know anything else, they don't want to try anything else, they like it."

"To give people an island of safety. Older people watch TV, and seeing the program that we do, they can calm down a little."

"The opportunity of self-realization."

"For many of my colleagues, it's to promote themselves. The author does not show a hero, but displays himself against the background of this hero."

"For some, the number of views and likes is the main goal. There are purposely structured journalistic platforms on the Internet. For them, the number of views is a very important indicator."

Work experience -7

"Not just to inform, but to encourage some kind of action, to awaken active feelings."

"I work with those who want to help and try to bring something useful into this world."

"In entertainment television, I bring some benefit to people - this is that I dreamed of when I wanted to be a journalist."

"There are those who continue to do this because they like it. Surely, there are idealists who believe that something can be changed and want to make life better."

"Someone still tries to do some good deed, if possible, someone stays for the sake of salary or out of habit, and someone – because it's interesting for them."

"Those who stayed, exist by inertia. They are afraid, they keep in their memory the pieces of ideas about their past professional life."

"Colleagues are trying to help. Well, and salaries. I haven't faced a big salary yet, because I don't want to do what they pay big salaries for."

As expected, there is a wide range of opinions – from reflection on, according to the respondent, the loss of the sense of activity to adherence to once-chosen deontological priorities, and this conclusion is relevant to both age groups. Our results echo the findings of another study of the Russian media community going through a period of "confused" identity, which provokes fragmentation and disintegration of the journalistic corporation (Lazutina, 2019: 78).

At the same time, both in the given statements and in those left out of the text, there are signs of consolidation around some basic professional values.

In total, there are four positions in the answers: to inform; to help, to make life better; self-realization, pleasure; denial of sense, activity by inertia. Remarkably, the interviewees most often connect the sense of their work with a humanistic mission – to help, to improve life, and to support people. These judgments correlate with the civic journalism values, which researchers have previously noted as one of the significant professional motivations of employees in Russian media (Predstavleniya..., 2017: 43). In this case, there is a continuity of historical experience that was noted in the research literature, since Russia traditionally cultivated an active, transforming attitude to problematic situations, in contrast to Western canons of objectivity, neutrality, and detachment of the press (Korkonosenko et al., 2018: 135). Much less often in expert interviews there are judgments associated with the functions of enlightenment journalism, which involves moderating public dialogue, generating ideas, etc. And vice versa, there is a high frequency of

statements related to self-realization and getting pleasure from the process of activity, respectively, the focus of attention shifts from the outside world to individual sensations.

Thus, a contradictory picture emerges. There is an evident tendency to agree in understanding journalism as an influential social institution; along with that, media employees are not inclined to act in the broad context of social partnership, they perceive their work as primarily a personal business.

The interlocutors' reactions to the question of the matter and practical importance of professional standards shed additional light on the correlation between the public and the personal, normativity and freedom.

Work experience 20+

"For a journalist, it is important not to lie. It seems to me that this is the main rule."

"There is an international Code of journalists, as I remember, there were a Code of a Soviet journalist, a Code of a Russian journalist. But all these are such soft rules... this is not the Constitution. These are only professional recommendations."

"Today, every word you say must be confirmed. A document, a tape recording, anything. I was taught this, rather, by contemporary journalism, and not by journalism of the 90s."

"Standards are so blurred now that no one understands what is good and what is bad. And many journalists behave according to the rule 'winners are not judged'."

"Always the rule has worked for us that you should definitely ask the opposite side. There is no one truth, as we know."

"The rules are basically universally human. On the air, I will never finish off a person who doesn't feel very good anyway. I always ask before an interview: what we should not talk about."

"The maximum approximation to the truth, to how it really was or is. This is the core of the profession."

"It is necessary to stay free inside yourself. It's like killing a dragon in yourself."

Before getting acquainted with the opinions of a new generation of practitioners, let's say that in the case of the older generation, references to traditions and ethical norms are expected, these knowledge and experience do not come away from the used toolkit even if they are subject to reassessment. It has been said truly that "a good number of professionals have come to the nowadays media from the Soviet period press and can hardly abandon the views and habits that have developed over the previous life" (Lazutina, 2016: 180).

Colleagues with less experience should not feel the pressure of previous practice to the same extent, they are in some sense freer to choose the rules of behavior.

Work experience -7

"The journalist is obliged to cover the situation from all the conflicting parties and not to be led by any of them. I think this is the main rule – never become biased."

"Every journalist acts within the framework of his upbringing and his ethical ideas. The rules also depend on the channel. Our channel is friendly one, we have an unwritten rule – to act as ethically, correctly, and accurately as possible."

"The reliability of the information you provided. The ability to feel sorry for people, to listen to a person. And, probably, fearlessness."

"Everyone knows that it is impossible to submit information from one side. It's unprofessional."

"A journalist should not make factual mistakes. If it was possible to check, but we didn't do so, then it's bad."

It is clearly seen that in the main postulates, the younger generation does not differ from the older one either in the essence of the rules or in the intonation of the discourse. Of course, the content of several interviews is not enough to make generalizations at the level of the entire corporation. But there are grounds to consider that the very process of functioning of journalism convinces the participants of the expediency to adhere to more or less strictly defined norms and rules.

In this regard, we will touch upon the discussion unfolding in the literature about the combination of stability and dynamism in journalistic identity. An excursion into this area will open up the opportunity to expand the theoretical and methodological framework of a particular study. By N. Carpentier, media professionals' identities are contingent and fluid, being over-determined by a diversity of discourses and subject positions which guarantees the possibility of human subjectivity, agency and individuality (Carpentier, 2009: 61). The focus on fluidity and uncertainty in social reality and in journalism in particular, has led to the popularity of the

hybridity concept, which focuses on mixing and interpenetration of heterogeneous elements. Known journalism theorists consider the tendency for hybridity to become an all-purpose buzz phrase that substitutes for more specific analysis (Hallin et al., 2023: 219). Other authors admit that the concept of hybridity in journalism studies have afforded a meaningful intervention in a discipline that had the tendency to focus on a stabilized and homogeneous understanding of the matters. But journalism field simultaneously features new states of stability and the rise of new structures. "If scholarship is to move forward in a productive manner, we need to develop new conceptualizations, terminology, and vocabulary, rather than denote everything that is complex as hybrid" (Witschge et al., 2019: 652). Russian scholars do not consider the increasing diversity of views a good thing for science: "Based on the diversity of theories and, moreover, the differentiation of directions even within theoretical groups, an urgent requirement of the present time is the substantiation of essential, central, 'nuclear' principles that allow to define and explain the phenomenon of journalism" (Blokhin, 2020: 103–104).

It would be logical to think that in a particular case, namely in the discourse on the journalist's identity, it is also necessary to take into account the interplay of continuous renewal and sustainability, which serves as one of the main guarantees of the professional community integrity. Meanwhile, optimistic assumptions about the priority of common values and norms may turn out to be precocious. So far, we have dealt with the verbal manifestations of the experts' attitudes to the profession, whereas identity in a significant part – if not the main one – is a self-awareness embodied in the type of real industrial behavior and specific behavioral acts. It cannot be excluded that verbal statements differ from actions or at least do not completely coincide with them. Thus, the next question is of great importance: whether experts always manage to follow the stated rules and what can force journalists to violate them?

Work experience 20+

"I can't because the opposite side very often refuses to comment on this or that event. In such a situation, this side is losing."

"In any case, I depend on my employer. My task is to say: there will be such an event. The employer will say: sorry, we are not interested in it, let's do other things. That's all. And I cover the event the way it should be in our agency."

"I was very lucky in this regard, because I never stepped on my throat. Some topics that I didn't want to take at all, I was allowed not to take. Due to the possibility of choosing topics, I avoided conflicting, complex stories."

"Of course, I had to violate rules. When the situation is popping up and something is missing… But at least I understand that I shouldn't have done that and that I didn't finalize it."

"Our profession is somewhat similar to acting, because there is a desire to be noticed, to be the first one to report something, which prevails over the understanding that everything needs to be checked, thought through. The desire to jump out, to shoot leads to a violation of standards."

"Why is it assumed that journalists are all so smart? Are they all for the truth? Are they all perfect? They are the same people, with their own fears."

Work experience -7

"The old ideas of how it should be have collapsed. Of course, every journalist knows how it should be, but it doesn't work anymore."

"I always check the information; I have never been punished for a bad fact-checking."

"There is a fear of losing your job. Especially now this is an important argument: at an incomprehensible time to be left without a job and new skills if you move to another sphere."

"I am concerned about the physical threat to my loved ones. I will try to make sure that the family is out of reach, and then publish my materials."

"If we see that the ends justify the means, that sometimes, indeed, it is worth doing."

"We are not asked when they give a topic for development. And everyone does what they can."

"Partner materials, when a person comes to promote his event, is a common practice. On the one hand, this is a paid service, on the other hand, I can competently rebuild the case and say that this is the promotion of a healthy lifestyle."

In fact, actions can and do run counter to verbal statements. Interviewees in both groups recognize the potential and real neglect of the professional rules they declare, although they argue somewhat differently: experienced journalists talk more about personal responsibility and the opportunity to choose, while young people refer to dependence on external circumstances and

company requirements. However, let's highlight the general state of affairs: in this discursive situation, as in a number of those discussed above, the emphasis is shifted to an individual decision, and not to regulations that have been consistently adopted in the corporate environment. Deviation from the approved standards inevitably increases the negative effects that researchers pay attention to: poor-quality journalism, misleading forms of advertising, population's distrust in public institutions and media agencies, etc. (Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020: 76).

5. Conclusion

The performed research shows that the professional identity of Russian journalists is formed as a result of multidirectional and contradictory trends. On the one hand, the intentions of citizenship and serving humanistic ideals, which are traditional for the Russian press, are strong in it. It is characteristic that the ideology of "civic participation journalism" comes to the fore, that is, practical assistance in difficult circumstances. The interlocutors often operate with categories of moral duty and responsibility that have been rooted in Russian journalism. This adherence to the traditions and experience of previous generations contains the prerequisites for unity and mutual understanding in a professional corporation, including between different age groups.

On the other hand, there is a clear preference for a personal view of the profession and the right to a sovereign decision in the case of an ambiguous choice. The loss of the practice of open discussions about the values and norms of the profession is combined with the variability of personal trajectories of activity, that together contribute to the formation of individual, situationally determined rules and standards, the need to follow which is defined by the journalist himself. Our expert interviews present identity fluidity in current journalism. Correspondingly, the tendency towards atomization of the journalistic community develops and deepens, the desire to escape from the dictates of editorial policy and gain creative independence increases. These observations deserve additional verification and development, which can be achieved in the following research projects in this direction.

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