

Original Paper

Multimedia Planning Strategies as a Tool for International Journalism and Alternative Media Studies

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Abstract

News development is currently affected by digitalization. Therefore, media scholars using digital means to cover the news must develop the so-called “multimedia mindset” among professional journalists and media students. It is not enough to teach the technology—the scholars have to embrace new journalism tools to incorporate them with the story planning activities. This article aims to look into how the aforementioned planning activities are used in the curriculum for Russian media students and professionals in the field of international journalism. The paper is qualitative and descriptive based on secondary data reported in hybrid written media. Also, this research uses a case study dealing with a proposed new program “International News Production” a track within the Contemporary Journalism Master program including alternative media at the High School of Economics Media Institute in Moscow. The findings of this study shed light on the skills needed in new alternative media. Students undergoing the proposed new program in alternative and international media enhance their professional skills and qualifications while experiencing Russian culture. Graduates from the program shall have ample opportunities to pursue careers in various areas of the media industry, including visual journalism, data journalism, storytelling, production, and newsroom management at various international newsrooms. Teaching new alternative media methods can be easily projected to the work with practicing journalists in news channels and information agencies.

Keywords

Alternative media, international journalism, skills, multimedia planning strategies

1. Introduction

The first two decades of the 21st century were marked by great changes and innovations in the sphere of media. With the advent of Web 2.0, it became possible to disseminate information on various platforms that do not require extra effort to publish the material. According to Anderson (2007), “Media coverage of Web 2.0 concentrates on the common applications/services such as blogs, video sharing, social networking, and podcasting—a more socially connected Web in which people can contribute as much as they can consume” (p. 4). This gave rise to many alternative media that shape the future of the modern journalism landscape. For example, the Russian RT Television channel was the first news service that began to promote its news content on the YouTube platform. Khovanskaya (2013) reported that “The Russian TV channel Russia Today, which broadcasts in English, has set a world record—one billion views on YouTube” (para 1). Moreover, in its news release, RT (2020) reported “RT is the #1 most-watched TV news network on YouTube, with a record-setting 10 billion views as well as more than 16 million subscribers. The total number of views from across RT’s channels on YouTube has put the network ahead of all the news channels of the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, Euronews, Fox News, and others” (para 1).

Another tendency is the use of innovations in journalism. Stories based on big data, 360-degree video camera shooting, and projects that involve virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR) are winning huge popularity among younger audiences (Hodgson, 2017; Watson, 2017). That is why many media departments at Russian Universities are trying to embrace the experience of alternative media innovations into their curricula. In order to describe these activities in detail it is necessary to define the concept of alternative media and its influence on the young generation.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Review

2.1 Roots and the Definitions of Alternative Media

Alternative media, as a subject for scientific studies, sometimes tends to be ignored among “mainstream” scholars. Alternative media has been mentioned in several linguistic, psychological, and media studies in the middle of the 20th century. Roger Silverstone, in his fine book, “Why Study the Media?”, affirms that alternative media “have created new spaces for alternative voices that provide the focus both for specific community interests as well as for the contrary and the subversive” (Silverstone, 1999, p. 103). Atton (2002a) argues that “Alternative media are crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production. They are to do with organizing media along lines that enable participation and reflexivity” (p. 4). Also, Jurgen Habermas (1999), the founder of the communicative rationality theory, states that “it is possible to change society by changing the structure of communication and not the production”. Dmitriev (2017) posits that “Habermas formulated two communication setups at the level of the society: ‘external’, in which the initiative comes from structures that regulate the society and the ‘internal mechanism’ that comes from within”. However, the last two decades had witnessed heated debates among researchers in relation to defining alternative media (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008; Fuchs, 2010). Nevertheless, Atton (2002b), compiled a summary of alternative media theories based on four directions. He defines the concept as “a variety of media projects that differ from the traditional ways of media operation”. Atton, quoted in Dmitriev (2017), highlighted the basic features of alternative media. Among them, reference may be made to:

- “Content that is not typical for mainstream media;

- innovative design;
- use of innovative technologies and new media;
- change of the editorial and organizational structure within the media;
- development of the community centered around this media outlet” (Dmitriev, 2017, p. 46).

However, Atton (2002a) proposes “alternative media is the capacity to generate non-standard, often infractory, methods of creation, production, and distribution as do by content” (pp. 3-4). Also, Canadian researchers Patrick Anderson and Judith Smith define alternative media on the basis of the position thereof in the entire media system. Alternative media are the “media that hold the niche between underground personal projects and the massive consumer media market, and unite the element of artistic youth media to tell the story in an unusual form” (Andersson & Steedman, 2002). Noam Chomsky states that alternative media are the ones that do not reflect the official and corporate point of view on news and current affairs. Chomsky also offers his own set of “filters” in order to define the level of media “alternativity”. It includes the following components: Form of media ownership, financing schemes, sources of information, editorial policy, and ideology. These trends resulted in the formation of the so-called “alternative journalism” (Chomsky, 1989). It is viewed as a complex of media content that deviates from the standards accepted in the mainstream media. More recently, Mourta and Salem (2014) posit “Twenty-first-century socio-technological transformations have flattened informational hierarchies and altered power structures within our societies” (p. 3). In fact, capitalizing on enhanced skills, competencies, and improved access to new media tools, online movements have informed public opinion in ways that have shaped policy agendas, discourses, government policy, and law (Bessant, 2014). Turner and Saber (2021) assert that “Digital technologies play a significant role in the development of alternative media and their news sources” (p. 1).

Having analyzed all these theories regarding the rapid boost of alternative media, the author of this paper comes up with his own definition of alternative media. It is the union of bloggers and journalists with its own news agenda that differs from the mainstream outlook on current affairs. The information in alternative media trends is positioned in such a way that the viewer would not only be interested in the news but could also share this information with other news outlets and social networks.

Alternative media both have local and international goals. The present-day news environment is shaped by two opposite processes: globalization and regionalization (Lewis, 1993). On the one hand, the alternative media sites that are targeting a worldwide audience have to “customize” and adapt global information for one or several loyal segments, which can make the news more regional by nature. On the other hand, community information from a blogger might attract global appeal if it deals with the common values of people in different parts of the world.

In the present-day environment it is possible to single out the following types of alternative media:

- International alternative media. These are TV channels and websites that do not share the mainstream view on current world events: Al Jazeera International (Qatar), RT, Sputnik (Russian Federation), NHK World (Japan), etc.;
- Nationwide alternative media. As a rule, they might unite communities in various cities according to a common socio-political feature. (The Veteran’s News (USA) and others;
- Local media that practice citizen journalism to discuss the problems of a single region (Boreal Community Media, Minnesota, USA).

After the analysis of modern international alternative media, one may come to the conclusion that their status depends a lot on the segments of the target audience. For example, RT, a 24/7 international news channel in Russia, is seen as a mainstream channel in the Russian Federation. However, if we take into consideration the global international audience, this channel is definitely an alternative media, as it contradicts the views of the major 24/7 mainstream media: CNN, BBC World, Fox News, etc.

As the events of 2022 show, it is also possible to completely block Russian media that used to provide an alternative point of view in Eastern Europe. That's why they had to find other markets in various parts of the world to engage new types of audiences.

2.2 Audience Segmentation

The creators of alternative media are trying hard to get the active segments of the target audience. However, it would be hard to get huge popularity with just one website. This is why the present-day alternative media become part of bigger aggregators or, as an option, they can initiate their own mobile applications (or Apps). This guarantees the influx of a younger audience that tends to consume the news with the help of alternative delivery methods. In Russian statistics, it can be clearly seen that the target audience of the Russian app Telegram, is the category constituting 22-25 years old, while the audience for the news websites ranges from 35 to 50 years old (Ivanichev, 2019). That is why it is possible to classify the demographics and behavioral criteria in the following way:

- The audience of social media pages and apps;
- The audience of the news websites.

Considering the values of the alternative media, we may single out the groups that clearly show the values of various audience segments:

- Opposition to authorities and the establishment;
- A desire to become a civic activist through social and cultural projects;
- A desire for innovation, both in knowledge and technology;
- Perception of media as something that has no relation to the life of the person.

Another important factor in mapping social media is compliance with media law in various countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, any English-speaking broadcaster has to comply with the country's law. These rules are formulated on the basis of the Broadcast Code compiled by Ofcom, the body that regulates the media to ensure the flow of credible and impartial information across the British Isles (Ofcom, 2019). This holds true for international news channels, both mainstream and alternative: CNN, Fox News, RT, Al Jazeera, etc. In spite of the tensions in the relations between The Russian Federation and European nations, Ofcom is trying to make an impartial judgment regarding the activity of the above-mentioned organizations. In 2010, CNN received a warning from Ofcom for failing to mention the fact that one of the news programs was sponsored (Ponsford, 2010): It could have led the viewers to be confused with regard to the impartiality of the information given in the program. In 2019, Ofcom fined RT 200 thousand pounds for the alleged bias in the so-called "Skripal Case" (the scandal surrounding the poisoning of the former Russian-born British Agent), and during the coverage of the war in Syria (Sweney, 2020). RT lodged an appeal against the decision. However, the regulations against Russian media became severe in 2022 after the events around Ukraine. RT and Sputnik were blocked in most of the Europe and UK due to the so-called "propaganda issues" (Deutsch, 2022); a fact viewed in Russia as a violation of the freedom of speech.

One more important factor deals with financing issues of alternative media. It's already been mentioned that some of the media represent countries or international organizations. However, financing of such projects may be provided in several ways. For example, Al Jazeera from Qatar was initially financed by the personal funds of the country's rulers. Then the obligation was passed on to the non-profit governmental Qatar Foundation (Vinichenko, 2016). Moscow-based RT, which reflects the views of the Russian Government on the international scene, is a non-profit organization that receives financing from national institutions. Sputnik News Agency, however, is a full state project, just like NHK World from Japan and Arirang International from South Korea.

Overall, alternative media have become a driving force and a powerful voice that appeals mostly to young people. That is why the author finds implementing these ideas into the journalistic curriculum necessary.

3. Methodology

The paper is qualitative and descriptive based on secondary data reported in hybrid written media. According to Hejase and Hejase (2013), "There is no need to collect and manipulate data since the researcher has in hand reliable and valid data that is extracted from recognized and reliable sources" (p. 114). Also, this research uses a case study dealing with a proposed new program of alternative media at the Media Department at the High School of Economics in Moscow.

3.1 The High School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow

Considered one of Russia's top universities, "HSE University is a leader in Russian education and one of the preeminent economics and social sciences universities in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Having rapidly grown into a well-renowned research university over two decades, HSE University sets itself apart with its international presence and cooperation" (HSE, 2023a).

3.2 The Institute of Media

The Institute suggests "taking a look at social processes in a much broader way by studying journalism, media communications, media management, big data analysis, directing basics, film editing, digital production, stages of the creative process, and the production cycle of creating a media product" (para 2). The faculty (instructors and practitioners) of the Institute of Media teach in several programs including Journalism, Media Communications, Media Management, Transmedia Production in Digital Industries, Data Journalism, Critical Media Studies, and International News Production (para 3). The Institute uses "a project-based approach to learning, offering a modern production base that allows for the most diverse products to be created—from newspaper layouts to multimedia articles and TV shows" (ibid).

4. Discussion

4.1 Alternative Media Principles in Training Media Specialists

The authors apply alternative media studies at the Institute of Media at HSE in Moscow. In 2019, this educational institution launched an English-language “International News Production” Masters programme for those who have Bachelor’s Degrees in other spheres. Focusing on non-standard approaches to the coverage of world events and teaching new media technologies. This degree has a duration of two academic years. Actually, HSE presents its Master’s program “International News Production” as follows:

“In 2022 ‘International News Production’ becomes a track within ‘Contemporary Journalism’. This Masters’ Program is offered by HSE’s Faculty of Communications, Media, and Design. Focusing on non-standard approaches to covering world events and teaching new media technologies, the programme will be taught exclusively in English by leading figures of the international broadcasting industry in Russia, including RT and Sputnik News Agency” (HSE, 2023b). Exhibit 1 provides a clear insight into the program’s advantages.

Exhibit 1: Advantages of the new degree

- An opportunity to master the industry’s latest innovations and build skills in news analysis and agenda setting within a fast-paced media environment
- On-site training in multimedia content production at international newsrooms
- The opportunity to learn editing and broadcasting with Dalet software, which is used by leading television networks and radio companies
- Lectures in contemporary media theory

An opportunity to amass contemporary knowledge about the international media sphere and current economic trends.

Source: HSE, 2023c.

The aim of the program is to give future specialists innovative skills that are getting more and more popular in the production of news content worldwide. Almost half of the students have degrees in Linguistics which builds up the foundation for various creative projects and activities. Another important tool is the philosophy of alternative media.

The first year includes courses—often taught with an unorthodox approach—that provide an in-depth understanding of media theory and history; media economics and its legal aspects; the use of “new media”; and non-traditional methods of creating and delivering high-quality content to the intended audiences. The curriculum starts with the course called “The Introduction to Alternative Media”. It was designed by Alexey Nikolov, Managing Director of the RT television channel. The objective of the course is to teach students critical thinking techniques that can help to assess and verify information that is spread by the mainstream media and usually taken for granted by many media consumers. That is why the course gives students an opportunity to compare various bits of information both from mainstream and alternative media sources. The comparison is carried out on the basis of important themes in the global current affairs agenda. The course is in parallel with other practical activities involving international media outlets. They are:

- Visualization of information with graphics and other elements of data journalism;
- Development of storytelling techniques through video, still pictures, and sound;

- Filming stories with innovative methods—such as panoramic video;
- Practice in newsgathering and news planning organized by the leading professionals from Sputnik and RT;
- Introduction to VR and AR in journalism, brainstorming sessions on how to plan media projects in the future.

The final research project of the students is done in the form of a comparative content analysis of all the major cases in alternative news and current affairs. This created an empirical database that will provide data for the researched alternative media components through a historic perspective. The elements of alternative news production are traced by the students through various aspects of life, such as media coverage of soaring gas prices in Europe, doping scandals and their coverage in the media, the studies on the international media image of the Russian Federation, the portrayal of alternative media websites in the Middle East.

Through the skills in new alternative media, the programme offers foreign students a unique and valuable opportunity to enhance their professional skills and qualifications while experiencing Russian culture and everyday life in one of the world's most exciting cities. Graduates with a degree from the programme are having ample opportunities to pursue careers in various areas of the media industry, including visual journalism, data journalism, storytelling, production, and newsroom management. They are also prepared to work in educational and scholarly institutions both in Russia and abroad. These methods of teaching new alternative media can be easily projected to work with practicing journalists in news channels and information agencies.

5. Conclusion

Amid the current wave of fake news, misinformation, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools that helped to make these happen (and at the same time helped combat them) (Hussein & Hejase, 2022), an urgent need for highly informed, professional, and well-prepared graduates are needed in the different new media facilities and broadcast rooms (Aladdine, 2022; El Takach, Nassour & Hejase, 2022). For example, Alexey Nikolov (2023), the Creative Supervisor in the new Master's program "International News Production" asserts and stresses, in his YouTube presentation, that Media organizations are not finding in the new graduates "the right skills for the job as well as not prepared well with the innovative set of tools needed nowadays". This paper aimed to shed light on the continuous changes in requirements for Media students and professionals, especially in the area of alternative media. Based on the facts within this paper, the new program provides motivation for Academic Institutions of Higher Education to follow suit and be creative in cultivating students with innovative competencies and critical thinking practices to be able to debunk cliches, discover fake news, and deal with misinformation smartly equipped with the current innovative technologies to do so.

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