

Charged by the Net

Anna Kachkaeva

A little more than two years ago, I had to start a page on Facebook.

By that time, for many editors who were adapting themselves to convergent and multi-media tracks, it had become clear that social networks were a convenient means for additional promotion of programs and the radio station where I worked. As a researcher and a teacher, it was important for me to understand personally as well – and not from the publications of Western colleagues – how a professional journalist can and should exist in this information space, and how much his affiliation with an editorial office and his status as a journalist affect audience attraction and the formation of a persistent online community.

I had 1,545 friends; they were, in part, active readers and listeners but largely professionals connected to the media of various platforms and with various editorial lines, except the nationalist line (this was a very important understanding of the “kernel” of the audience). I also had 1,912 subscribers and about 1,000 offers of friendship rejected. Observing the life of this very likeable community, I was to find a confirmation of many of the observations of my colleagues from different countries, but with a Russian coloration, largely related to the lack of a free discussion space in traditional media (especially on TV).

For starters, two examples: On November 1, on a day when the mass media, citing press secretary Peskov, published the news that the president of Russia was postponing his foreign trips until December due to a “confluence of reasons” and not due to his health, I published this post on my Facebook page:

A man of about 60 years old picked me up for a ride¹ in an ancient but sturdy and well-maintained Volga. He was talkative and forceful. When he told me about V.V.’s back², he swore at the mass media and switched

¹ The reference is to an informal private car driver who offers rides to the public.

² The reference is to President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who was rumored to suffer from an undisclosed back ailment at the time.

a number of people invented headlines, taken photographs, and laid out and published periodically at such a mass level).

Like and smile space: The Web and emotions

How does a television screen differ from the screen of a computer hooked up to the Internet? In the context of our conversation, in only one way: when watching television, we “talk” to a screen that does not talk back to us, in the sense that we do not obtain feedback from the television. You can speak as much as you like about a surrogate and network communication, but it is interactivity that is attractive for people who are looking either for a “communities of their own people” or a sense that they are not alone, or a mutual disclosure of “life scenarios” or a means of self-expression, when people laugh and empathize what was not made by professionals. But for professionals as well, informal network communication is an opportunity to receive additional attention (or approval or censure), the opportunity to explain oneself to people whose opinion you trust and even reduce tension, which is always present in the professional milieu.

Smiley faces and “likes” can also, in some sense, be seen as media effects. A smiley face J is a replacement for revealed emotions, a sign enabling one not to waste a lot of words. It is a utilitarian instrument conceived in order to compensate for the absence of emotions on the Web,))) , essentially, it leads to an increasing lack of the need to select words (((Everything is clear anyway))).

Repost journalism

In the era of mass television and only a fledgling Internet, it was customary to say: “If you haven’t been shown on television, you don’t exist.” In the current situation of Web “individual mass communications” (according to Manuel Castells) it is considered that “if you have been reposted, then you exist.” Essentially, this is the same index of citation that is important for those who attain popularity and influence on the Web. With the help of “repost journalism,” the effect of the correlation of the information consumer to the author is more obvious; there is solidarity with similar or liked opinion, and satisfaction from the expression of thoughts in such a way that it seems as if “he wrote it himself.”

In fact, liking an opinion, text or author unifies people on the Web no less than dislike and irritation (it turns out that “getting mad” together for a common

reason is also comforting). The repost, just like the comments, is a reaction of engagement, the “stickiness” of the audience not only for specific authors on the Web but the transition of this personal loyalty to the media where the journalist works. Thus, the continuation of “the editorial you” on the Web works for the author’s name and the media brand – and vice versa. When the media outlet where you work establishes a Web page, this helps promote you when a re-post is made not only of your materials broadcast on the air but your blog posts.

The Web as a community of experts and critics

The personal story of a personal observer with which I began this article is part of the ordinary life of a published author on the Web, on to which the profession of author is projected. But further, on your personal page, there can be more or less of the professional – it depends on your personal strategy. Many of my colleagues use their pages as an additional place for publication of their materials already published in the media; others use it as a place to offer publication of those texts and broadcasts that were cut or rejected by the editors. For me, the Facebook page above all is a platform to maintain and support interest in the topics of my professional interest in television and the media, in the accepted format for the Web.

Observation of how the social network audience, professional or non-professional, discusses television provides a representation not only of people’s reactions. They are capable of becoming material for producers, television content providers and can serve as marketing tools for promoting the product to the consumer who traditionally does not watch television.

The Web viewer can be “glued” to the television by commentary along with viewing. This is particularly visible when there is a live broadcast of a significant, large-scale spectacle. The effect of presence; the wish to discuss in a community what is seen; the satisfaction from instantly sharing with someone the reaction to the screen; the remark or joke – this participation in the event is similar to the feeling of a fan. The custom of watching something together brings people closer. There are even cases when I have begun a discussion, and described the first scenes, and then I had to leave. Then later, on the road, I catch up on the comments which filled my page in my absence. I no longer saw what was being shown on television, but on my iPhone, I saw a reflection of what was shown in the Facebook comments.

Today, the subject of how TV shows are discussed on social networks is one of serious research interest. Thus, for example, in Germany, according to data from an Internet survey conducted by the channels ARD and ZDF, 43 percent of German users have a profile in social networks and a third of them (31 percent) exchange views on these networks about what they have seen on television. But 80 percent of viewers up to 25 years of age watch sports programs and simultaneously discuss them with friends on Facebook. A recent Western survey that also touched upon Russia was conducted by Ericsson ConsumerLab (13,000 interviews in 13 countries). More than 40 percent of those surveyed noted that while they are watching TV, they continue to chat on social networks with the help of smart phones or tablets. (For more details see <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1818066>).

Recalling the classic work by José Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses*, we can agree with the fact that the “mass man,” who has obtained a lot of free time and relative social prosperity develops the need for self-presentation and self-realization which is realized in the indisputable “right to an opinion on the matter without previous effort to work one out for themselves” (Chapter VIII).

But at the same time, Web communication, with its interactivity and necessity of entering into polemics, helps both to form a view and enables its formulation. Even 50 years ago, the idea was expressed that television disunites the family; family members didn't gather at the dinner table, where they could talk among themselves, but sat at the television set. Now, they don't even sit at the same television at all. People who are in one apartment can be looking at programs at the same time but discussing them not among themselves, but in various communities on the Internet. The networks uniting people more strongly and more rapidly according to individual interests nevertheless cannot, like television, impose a “common agenda of the day” for peoples and the state, but evidently can still influence it.

Likely even today, you cannot disagree strongly with the opinion of Ortega y Gasset, who did not know the Web, but who wrote about “a century of self-satisfied ignoramus.” Yet such a characterization of active users (especially of activists who build bridges and “crowd-sourcing” platforms to offline foundations, actions, and volunteers) does not reflect the whole spectrum of processes. Since the appearance of bloggers, equated in influence and popularity to mass media, there has been a recognition that timeliness is now a prerogative mainly for social

networks and not traditional media. Not to mention the fact that thanks to the formation of communities, through the Web a journalist can very quickly find both a needed expert and the direction for research. He can obtain important insider's information, and the explanation of details of processes not visible on the surface. The Web is prepared to help, and a journalist can and should make use of this opportunity. Finally, the Web makes available to “the individual Web viewer” a lot of what television tries to hide from the “mass viewer” (stories and programs taken off broadcast from federal channels quickly turn up on the Web).

Am “I” on the Web a journalist or a person?

Is there a difference between the reaction to a journalist's text on the editors' platform and the opinion of a journalist on social media? Yes and no.

On the one hand, it seems as if on the Web, “authorship is liberated” (it's your own personal blog), but affiliation with a professional corporation does not separate the person from the journalist. That's why there are cases when the journalist, as a private person on his page on Facebook, Live Journal or Twitter has published some remark or comment and it provokes exactly the same reaction of the community or the people mentioned in the remarks as if they were publications in the traditional media, when people are insulted, demand retractions, and insist on publication of their own viewpoint. This is not to mention cases of firings from media outlets for publication on personal pages which contradict the editorial code or the rules of the contract (this is a special and sensitive topic, but such stories are not a rarity in many countries of the world).

Moreover, heated discussions periodically erupt among professionals on social networks: about what is permissible and what is not; where people have sold out and where they have not; where the border is between propaganda and a viewpoint. Such reflection forces people to say: why you are in the profession, what you are doing, what do you want to do further, and how much you relate yourself to the corporation? This conversation, it seems to me, is productive. Furthermore, in this constant feedback with content consumers, you sense the need to teach citizens media literacy, and with media professionals, expand the “interpretorial community” on the Web, which helps reflections and making sense of what happens in the professional sphere.

Thus, the free Web space for the professional journalist is not only and not merely a personal space, but a space for a new type of professional communication which you have to learn how to manage and which does not remove the consequences for ethical norms and internal accountability for reactions, opinions and words.