

# *Fake in the Russian Regional Media*

## *Through the Example of South Urals Media*

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**Abstract**—The mass Media are economic agents. For the editorial staff of the media, making a profit becomes a determining factor and a condition for survival. The practice of publishing unverified and unreliable information (fakes) has become widespread in the media, which can be explained by the logic of attracting a readership. The article deals with the phenomenon of fake in the modern media space, analyzes examples of such news from the regional media. The reasons and motives for the emergence of fakes in media sphere are indicated. The authors conclude that the fake has deeper socio-economic and political roots than is commonly believed. At that, the development of Internet technologies and the expansion of the media space only strengthens the overall mass of fake content in journalistic materials.

**Keywords**— *journalism, fake, verification, mass media, South Urals.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Mass media today are full-fledged economic agents. It means that the main objective in activities of such agents is making a profit and reducing costs. In pursuit of profits, and thus, attention of readers and advertisers, media neglect verification of news information. Moreover, mass media become the source and distributor of incomplete, unreliable and distorted information on events; they incorrectly interpret the events and create hoaxes. Often, in pursuit of sensation, they create plainly false information.

Numerous media researchers who are also direct consumers of the media content [2] often note growing distrust that the public (readership, audience, and viewership) shows of the media. A number of studies shows that the very nature of the media landscape underwent significant deformations. Currently, the main functions of the press, radio and TV (information, entertainment and education) are becoming debased at an alarming rate. In pursuit of extending their audience, many media prioritize sensational materials which turn out to be either untrue or containing only a limited amount of true information. Professional jargon of journalists and later the scientific usage were extended with the concept of fake. This phenomenon has become ubiquitous. For example, during the first year of his presidency, Donald Trump trumpeted that mainstream media intentionally distort facts in the information sphere. After his speech, some leading news channels of the country practically introduced preemptive censorship. Journalists were practically forbidden to divulge information without approval of management. As a consequence of such editorial policy, three leading employees of CNN were fired [9].

O. Issers notes, the word *фейк* and its derivatives like *фейковый*, *фейковизация*, having appeared in the Russian language quite recently, cover various cases of mystification and hoax. Russian *фейк* is a direct equivalent of the English word *fake*, which in the contemporary usage most often means *trick* – «ruse, deception», «forgery, falsification, fraud», but also *swindle* – «prank, frolic». The verb *to fake* means «to make an object look real or valuable in order to deceive people». As an adjective, *fake* points at an artificial nature of the object, its mismatch with the reality. Broadly speaking, the word *fake* is used to denote any forgery presented as a genuine thing [5].

### II. METHODS OF STUDY

In the global information space, there are mass media specializing in production of fake news. For example, there is a satirical web-site *The Onion* (<http://www.theonion.com>). It has been bought by the largest Spanish-language American TV company, Univision, with the aim to strengthen the company's position by means of communication possibilities provided by the network [12]. In this case, we may see the evident process of integrating the traditional media with the Internet as the main source of fakes and information attacks.

Appearance of research into fakes in media witnesses to preoccupation of the society with this new turn in media development. Or, shall we say, *seemingly* new turn. Some researchers note that fakes as a characteristic feature of media «appeared only when the whole system of functioning of information underwent a serious technological deformation having led to serious social and psychological consequences for the audience» [4, c. 17]. The author sees the cause of such deformation of the media world in technological changes.

So, this approach to studying the problem significantly reduces the depth of analysis of the issue. It largely ignores other objective and subjective prerequisites for the precedent. Although, it is not about the very term *fake*, but about a global falsification in journalism, when reliability of content is practically denied and generation of fakes in the media system is acknowledged (and even propagated). It is enough to recall Ken Doctor's book *Newsnomics: Twelve New Trends That Will Shape the News You Get* [3].

Compared to this trend, advent of tabloidization may be seen as an amusing, rather than dangerous stage in journalism development. Indeed, the best achievements of tabloid mass media have been long present in the toolbox of the press, radio and television. Moreover, mutual influence of traditional and tabloid media enriches operation on the both sides, facilitating

development of new approaches towards content production and distribution. It is important, that even the management of gotcha journalism outlets very rarely permit publication of a material, if the journalist does not provide proofs of the information. Accuracy becomes if not dominating, but nevertheless noticeable factor of many mass-oriented and even gotcha outlets. This could not have happened without studying the experience of the quality journalism. Similarly, the quality journalism has long been using vivid illustration, catchy headlines and cross headings, attention to celebrity life.

There is a fundamental difference between the fake journalism and the tabloid journalism. The process of tabloidization of mass media is a self-regulating process. At some point, the system develops certain approaches and principles that are accepted by the audience. There is a constantly ongoing change of backdrop, taking into account various specificity of needs and tastes of information product consumers. While keeping in mind the dissimilarity between the quality and mass journalism, it should be noted that both types of outlets represent the factual journalism.

The fake journalism from the very beginning differs by its quasi-truthfulness. There is no objectivity in it, and the main principle in formation of the journalistic text is creating an assorted mix of impressions, opinions and points of view. All this is performed immediately and vividly. Fact is no longer the base of the material, the main thing now is the impressions of the fact. In the journalistic material the authors creates a plausibility of life, often bordering with defamation – «publication of a false statement that harms the reputation of a person» [7, c. 12].

The authors of this paper believe that appearance of the fake journalism is not directly connected to the technological innovations. Maybe, only converging trends in journalisms may be completely justified with the powerful ingress of human society into the World-Wide Web, which is largely the Internet. This is considered in more details in the *Universal Journalism* textbook and in a number of studies. [8, p. 6 – 7]. Only thanks to appearance and implementation of new technologies, a quantum leap took place that initiated a new stage in the development of the media system. It is based upon integrating multimedia phenomena with the use of Internet resources.

Unlike the convergence, the fake news has economic and political features in their foundation. The tactics of information attack looks like a continuation of the global truth. As an example from not so remote past, we may bring up an example of the functioning of the ideological mechanism of communist ideology in the USSR. In particular, the giant hoax voiced at the 21st Council of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by the Party's General Secretary N.S. Khrushchov and later copied in billions of copies throughout the world, about building Communism in the USSR by 1980. It was the largest falsehood, or using the journalist's speak, hoax in history, the falsehood and illusion that overtook a large portion of the global population. However, global fake and local falsification have the same nature. They are the same in their foundation, as a phenomenon that changes objectivity for

the reasons of appearing truth-like. This is exactly the danger that is seen in the modern journalism.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is necessary to consider in more detail the causes and motivation for appearance as well as timeliness of analyzing the quasi-true information.

First, as it has been noted, the statist system in the Russian segment of the media sphere. The state that influences the mass media system primarily through the budgetary financing may produce one hoax after another, disorienting the public and masquerading its true objectives. For example, let us consider the American sanctions against Russia approved by the State Council of the US in June of 2017. Western media were unanimous in presentation of this news: Russia is still a threat to peace in Ukraine and is guilty in creating tensions in Europe. However, just a couple of days later, President Trump revealed the true meaning of sanctions while visiting Poland. The US intend to expand their oil industry into the European market. Removal of the Russian companies from the market is one of the priority tasks for the American business [11].

In early 1990s, a blanket information attack concerting the benefits of voucherization was performed through the Russian media. Up to 1996, in South Urals, there was a regular publication with million copies in circulation (edited by N. Maleyev) that informed the population on breathtaking prospects of the voucher investment. It was later substituted with a weekly publication *Akuionep* (lit. *Shareholder*, stylized in pre-1917 orthography), founded in April of 1996 (edited by A. Glukhov); its publishing ceased in 1997. Among the founders, there were regional Committee for State Property Management, regional Property Foundation, Cheque Investment Fund for Social Protection of Population. However, all activities of the publication were controlled by V.Golovlev, who soon became a representative in the State Duma. The publication discussed life and activities of state employees, catering and retail employees, etc. Thanks to the active information support from this publication, the Cheque Investment Fund accumulated a vast amount of funds in vouchers.

Second, the Russian experience of fakes in journalism includes the transformation of the media system that took place during the first election campaigns. Political technologies, PR and their methods quickly became tools of journalists. Fakes flew from one side to another like arrows, completely distracting the electorate. In 1990s, the trust to journalist's message was still high. It is sufficient to recall the article by A.Koretsky in the *Evening Chelyabinsk* newspaper [6, p. 1]. In a single sentence there, he introduced into circulation a thin story (a fake) about Ariant brand water being poisonous at it was reportedly produced from wells in the vicinity of graves. The owner of the Ariant company was then actively involved in politics. This journalist's attack naturally hit his image and the candidate to the State Duma that he supported.

The fate of *Business Ural*, a regional business newspaper that was founded at the dawn of exchange house movement in Russia, is indicative. It was published as a means for

publishing exchange bulletins at the initiative of A. Nikel, the head of the Horda company. The publication also included news, stock exchange analytics and forecasts for various industries. Later, the ownership of the newspaper was transferred to V.Kichedzhi, the head of the Union of Small and Medium Entrepreneurs. As a result, the newspaper was transformed into a tool of electoral competition. The publication completely shifted to politics thanks to activities of V.Gartung, a member of the State Duma. Fake has become the prevailing part of the content of the publication [1]. Having used the information potential of the publication, V.Gartung transferred it to the journalists, and in early 2000s it ceased its existence.

Third, evident influence of tabloid processes, or more correctly, their negative methods of operation. In pursuit of sensation, some journalists in South Ural region adopted the experience of their Muscovite colleagues (who borrowed it from the Western journalism) in introduction of special fake-oriented columns. These include, for example, the column titled "Through the grapevine and credible". The process was very simple: a story was invented that represented a version of some, most of the time negative, event and was submitted to print. The attack was complete; however, its veracity and check of the information were out of scope. Aggrieved persons in vain turned to the court. The Through the grapevine and Credible column was ideal from the point of view of the compliance and gave free rein to shady journalists.

The above-mentioned method has been long used in the South Ural insert to the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* federal newspaper. It is indicative, that the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* is believed to be the pioneer in implementing the tabloid technologies in 1990s. It was not only about the content, but about the design and layout as well. Until now, the issues of the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* balance at the edge between the quality and tabloid press.

The mutual influence of these two types of periodicals was noted in the beginning of the paper. Let us use this thesis again to debunk the myth that fake news is exclusively the child of technology-related deformation of the news information functioning.

The search for the historical roots of the fake shall be directed toward social and economic development of civilization. The modern era only strengthened the attacking nature of the forgeries. Thanks to computerization, the speed and visual nature of fake news have stronger psychological influence onto consumers of the information products. Indeed, the picture now takes the leading position as compared to verbal and textual messages. This, however, is far from being a revolution in the media system. Development of tabloidization with emphasis on illustration of publications became a precursor for a headlong introduction of pictures into journalism, including into production of fakes.

Fourth, loss of relative freedom on behalf of the mass media, the freedom that was so much sought after under the party rule. However, having obtained the freedom, the journalists ended up largely insolvent. By mid-1990s, most regional and municipal newspapers became financially dependable on either authorities or various businesspersons.

Lack of freedom of thought is a real basis for modern Russian media moving towards fake stories. As is voluntary or involuntary participation in fights between media owners for power or personal influence.

Just the last five years in Chelyabinsk oblast provide a lot of confirmation for this. Let us show some of them. In 2013, the political situation in the region aggravated. Journalists of the STS Chelyabinsk TV company suddenly attacked the governor of the oblast, M. Yurevich, with intense criticism. A real quarrel arose between the Yurevich team and the TV company owner, A. Baryshev. Journalists from the both sides operated on the edge. In the end, the conflict resulted in expulsion of A.Baryshev from the United Russia party and appearance of a manifestation phenomenal for local journalism: regular fake-oriented newspapers appeared, with multiple colorful pages, circulation in millions, and where almost all information content was false or information product at the border of credibility (we mean such publications as «Chelyabinsk. People. Events. Facts», «South Ural Truth», «Truth and Life»).

The person of M. V. Yurevich is worth special attention within the framework of this study. He was the first businessman in the region to create a whole empire of private media. Having become the governor, he engaged statist mass media as well; the latter included two regional newspaper, local TV and almost all district and city level publications. His soaring career found its end in the war of fakes, when his team lost to A. Baryshev, A. Aristov and their media. The President of Russia, V.Putin, signed a Decree to remove M. Yurevich from his position. Vice Governors O. Grachev and A. Ufimtsev had also lost their jobs, moreover, they had criminal cases opened against them.

It should be noted that it is around these people that the first journalists appeared who could be named fakists, the people committed to production of fake information and having become shady personalities, specializing in fakes and information attacks in the South Ural mediasphere. In 2000, when O. Grachev became the chief editor of the Evening Chelyabinsk newspaper, he collaborated with A. Koretsky, G. Galkin, V. Filichkin and others. One after another, they all were prosecuted under law for libel and defamation.

In parallel, South Ural followed the twists and turns in the conflict between the Governor M. Yurevich and the Presiding Judge of the oblast, F. Vyatkin. The concrete causes of the conflict were in the clash of economic and financial interests. However, mass media were used to resolve the conflict. This media-mediated conflict resulted in a special installment of A.Pimanov's *The Man and The Law* TV show in December of 2012. The principal idea of the rather long show may be narrowed down to the malignant nature of Judge Vyatkin and necessity to remove him from his position [9]. The show had great resonance. However, quite fast it turned out that the investigation was fake in its essence. The production of the hoax involved active participation from local journalists and top staffers of the regional administration. The court obliged the TV channel to publicly dismiss the information and submit apologies to the aggrieved persons.

It is necessary to note, that South Ural is the native land of the Russian fake-producing business. In late 1990s and early 2000s, South Ural residents, especially officials and executive of big business cautiously waited for each new issue of the *Stolnik* newspaper (the word may mean both cup-bearer in the royal court and 100 rubles). Its content was a turbulent mix of a pinch of truth and a large mass of fakes, producing “exposés” of well-known regional personalities. Using people's psychology and especially, worries about negative publicity (as there are no immaculate people), the founders of the *Stolnik* participated in blackmail and extortion. Thus, it turned out that the fakes may be an object of trade, goods, a source of a profit. That is, as a preliminary conclusion, we may note that there are various types of fakes. In particular, there are one-off fakes, fake-oriented newspapers, fake-oriented TV shows, fake campaigns.

Fifth, there is a rather unfashionable topic of journalist ethics. Meanwhile, self-regulation of media has to become the insurmountable obstacle for production of fakes. Corporate methods and means, having been formally developed but never used in practice, thus, passed into oblivion. Professional codes of ethics and independent media councils (Public College for Pleas Against the Press, Grand Jury of the Union of Journalists of Russia and similar local structures) too often look anachronistic.

In Chelyabinsk, it seems, for the first time in Russian legal practice, prejudicial amnesty was used with regard to a journalist. Only plea bargain allowed V.Filichkin, a hate figure currently employed as an editor of a regional insert of a federal newspaper, to escape a criminal prosecution. He was also related to the above-mentioned televised fake about Judge Vyatkin in *The Man and The Law* TV show [9]. That is, the fake always accompanies lie, libel and defamation. In this case, the very invocation of professional ethics sounds absurd and inappropriate. All this adds up to serious troubles with the law. South Ural has become a testing area for various forgeries, hoaxes and fakes in journalism. A new fact gives the situation some additional juicy details: Ex-governor M. Yurevich has been put on the Interpol's wanted list and is charged, among other, with subordination of libel.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, fake journalism significantly reduces the reputation resource of mass media. Thought leaders (journalists of the

late 1980s) came through the trial of the vicious thesis “Media is the fourth power”, finally mastered convergence, but somehow ended up by enthroning the fake. It should be stated that mass media degraded from objective information to quasi-truth. It is dangerous and vicious for both journalism and the system of social relations. However, there is a hope that this trend may find its end. The main thing is to prevent the fake from becoming a traditional element, or, worse, typical attribute of the Russian media. As a method to fight the fake content, it is necessary to recommend the lawmakers to introduce the very concept of the fake journalism into the legal field. We believe, this solution is hard to escape within the framework of such concepts and emotional damages, libel, defamation. Then, the Media Law will facilitate revival of the ethical norms of the journalists, and sometimes may lead to thoughts about keeping the journalist's career.

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