

JOURNALISTS AND AUDIENCE IN BULGARIAN ONLINE MEDIA – THE NEW ROLES

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Abstract: The present paper analyses the changes in the traditional roles of journalists and audience in some of the most popular web sites of Bulgarian traditional media. It examines the levels of interactivity and personalization which enable the audience to create and share its own texts, recordings, news emissions, and also to set its own agenda and take part in the gatekeeping process, etc. The paper defines the status of Bulgarian “citizen journalism”, making the conclusion that the audience’s new role has some similarities with the traditional journalists’ role.

Keywords: communication, roles, interactivity, agenda, gatekeeping

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Internet as a mass-communication platform was the beginning of maybe the biggest revolution in the field of mass-media since the invention of the printing press. Online news distribution appeared to be faster, cheaper and much more attractive for the audience than traditional press, radio or TV. So, in order to survive, traditional media had to become online.

At first online media was very similar to the traditional press – one-way communication, which relied mostly on written text and rarely on photos and other formats. As the connection speed rose up, Internet evolved from the static Web 1.0 to the Social Web 2.0. It enabled everyone to create and share information in a wide variety of formats, without being a journalist. This caused the rise of so called “citizen journalism” – made for citizens by citizens, which changed the informational habits of the society. Researchers all over the world accept that in democratic countries this leads to some major changes in the roles in mass-communication. The information flow is not one-way anymore and very often professional journalists use the audience as a source of information.

Many of the most important mass media web sites across the world benefit from the so called user-generated content. There are several ways for them to achieve that – by blog platforms within the web site, by forums and comments etc. For example “The Daily Telegraph” (or “The Telegraph” as its website is called) has one of the fastest developing blog platforms in the world. These new opportunities make the audience’s role close (although not equal) to professional journalists within the mass-media websites.

In spite of being a former socialist country, Bulgaria follows closely the global trends in the field of mass communication. The first online emissions in Bulgaria date from May, 1993. They represented a daily informational bulletin in English, which was emitted by the Balkan Information Pool. The first newspaper to go online was "Pari" in 1995, and in 1998 there already were about 60 online newspapers in Bulgaria (Дерменджиева, 2001:111). These numbers increased rapidly and today most of the traditional mass media own a website.

In the field of social media and networks, Bulgaria also follows the West's trends. Facebook became popular in 2007/2008, along with the micro-blog platform Twitter, the social media for video-sharing YouTube, blogs, podcasts etc. At first these new formats were used merely for entertainment. At this time mass media websites were accessed primarily directly or through search engines.

Gradually users began to use the social media not only for entertainment, but also as an information tool. They began sharing articles, photos, podcasts etc. individually or in groups, according only to their interests. People became so used to gathering information from social media that a joke appeared, saying that "What was not shared on Facebook did not happen".

Bulgarian mass media websites once again followed the trend closely. They created profiles and groups within the most important social networks and allowed the users to easily share their content directly in these networks by including "share" buttons in the design of the websites.

In spite of that the informational monopoly of journalists within the mass media websites in Bulgaria

remained unchanged. Mass media began using the social media to distribute news and other articles, but they didn't socialize themselves. Very little was done to create societies of interconnected users in these websites. Accordingly Bulgarian mass-media websites have a very low level of citizen journalism and user-generated content. This is the reason why the present paper analyses the changes in the traditional roles of journalists and audience in some of the most popular web sites of Bulgarian traditional media. We will examine the levels of interactivity, personalization and integration with social media sites, which enable the audience to create and share its own texts, recordings, news emissions etc. This document is a template. An electronic copy can be downloaded from the conference website. For questions on paper guidelines, please contact the conference publications committee as indicated on the conference website. Information about final paper submission is available from the conference website.

II. WEBSITE SELECTION METHODOLOGY

One of the most important challenges in such a research is the selection of the websites. In spite of being a really small country Bulgaria has plenty of informational websites in a wide variety of formats. In fact a large quantity of informational websites, which declare themselves to be "news agencies" appeared in the time of the 2013/2014 anti-government protests. Most of them publish articles without any proofs of objectivity or authenticity. It is quite easy to distinguish the political orientation of these websites which makes their independence questionable.

In spite of this, the new "news agencies" have some regular users, who must not be neglected. So in order

Table. 1 Selected mass media websites

<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>Magazines</i>	<i>Radios</i>	<i>TVs</i>	<i>News agencies</i>
dnevnik.bg	Rozali.com	Gong.bg	bTV.bg	Dnes.bg
24chasa.bg	Zajenata.bg	Dariknews.bg	Novatv.bg	Focus-news.net
standartnews.com	Manager.bg	Bnr.bg	Bnt.bg	Mediapool.bg

to achieve a fair selection, we need some kind of objective criteria, which could outline a group of websites to be examined. Web counters provide lists of most visited websites, which could be considered as an objective selection criteria.

There are lots of web counters in Internet. In fact every one of them could be used for such a selection. In this particular case we will use the web counter Alexa.com. Along with counting the visitors, this tool rates the websites by their correlation between visitors and the quantity of pages viewed per visit. Thus the counter makes it harder for websites to achieve higher rates by using automated visit-enhancing tools (bots). Of course the use of Alexa.com is not obligatory. Any other web counter could be used, even small local web counters. However to understand the global position of Bulgarian mass media websites it is better to use global web counters such as Alexa.com or Google Analytics.

For the purposes of the research it is appropriate to use the most common categories of traditional media – newspapers, magazines, radios, TVs and news agencies. We will examine the three most popular websites in each category (15 websites altogether), according to the Alexa.com popularity ratings.

III. WEB SPACE'S SPECIFICITIES

There are several different categorizations of the specificities of web space which researchers find

important for this change of roles in mass-communication. They include between four (Bradoel; Dauze, 2001:91) and twelve (Дерменджиева, 2005:7) specificities. The most common of them are interactivity, personalization, hypertext, multimedia, hypermedia, constant feedback, etc. Very often some these specificities overlap each other – for example constant feedback could be achieved by interactive applications and multimedia could be interpreted as very similar to media convergence etc.

For the purposes of the current paper we will analyze the selected web sites in terms of interactivity and personalization. These characteristics of web space appeared at the beginning of the web. The first form of interactivity was navigational – users were able to jump from one website to another at their own will. Thus they could use as many information sources as they want to. This opportunity made the audience active for the first time of mass communication's history.

While the web was interactive since its beginning, websites remained static. They were very similar to a traditional newspaper, providing one-way communication, which contained mostly written text and rarely any other formats. Online media was considered to be a new communication channel which attracted the audience, but the way of making news remained the same. In fact it is very difficult to talk about online journalism at all, because most of the

mass media websites just copied the publications from the traditional media and had just the same periodicity.

Interactivity and personalization became much more important with the beginning of the second generation of the web – the so called Social Web (or Web 2.0). Although according to Tim Berners-Lee¹ the interactive technology was present ever since the invention of the web, it was programmers who made the Social Web possible by creating the so called “open source software”. These programs were created by software professionals and enthusiasts around the world. They were free to use and their program code was opened for modifications, so everyone could add different functionalities. After modifying the program each user shared it to others. The connection technologies also changed. When Web 2.0 emerged the connection speed was high enough to support interactive applications and multimedia and personal computers became much more powerful.

The open-source browsers let the audience not only to see the published content, but also to create and share its own content. At this time appeared many web platforms for shared content, known as social media – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Blogs and many others.

The Social Web changed the one way communication model, used by traditional mass media and Web 1.0 websites. The audience was no longer a passive consumer of the information, it became an information creator. The social media gave a tribune to every single user, who could share any kind of content. But it also gave the users the opportunity to connect to each other and form “groups of interests”, discussions etc. The audience was no more a mass of not-connected-to-each-other people. It became a

society of interconnected active users, sharing large amounts of content on random topics.

Why is interactivity so important for the citizen-journalism and the change of the traditional communication roles? It is widely accepted that 3 major types of interactivity exist – *navigational, functional and adaptive interactivity*.

A. Navigational Interactivity

Navigational Interactivity lets the users choose their own way in the structure of the website. This is related to the current search habits of the audience. Online readers are used to non-linear reading. They prefer to choose alone what to read and what to dismiss and pre-structured paths obstruct their navigation among the publications. This is the reason why most of the current websites have non-linear structure in which case the navigational interactivity is really important for orientation. The most popular examples of interactive applications for navigation in the web sites are the interactive site-maps, interactive menus and routes etc. This affects the design of the websites. Most appropriate for the non-linear reading and unfocused search is the so called “Mosaic” design. It provides long front pages with many text fields and photos, but very little structural information. This makes it harder search for a particular text, but it facilitates the users who use search engines.

On the other side is the so called “Structural” design. It provides a front page with much information about the sections of the website, but little or no text at all. It makes the search for a certain topic easier, but it is not appropriate for search engines.

Many websites use a hybrid design, which combines the characteristics of both mosaic and structural design.

14 out of the 15 Bulgarian websites use structural design and the last one (*rozali.bg*) uses a hybrid of structural and mosaic design. In addition to being old-fashioned, this makes unintentional search really hard and makes the audience browse through the structure of the sites. The most important examples for Structural design are found in the *dnevnik.bg* and *gong.bg*. On the front page there are no text fields at all – only headlines (with hyperlinks leading to the respective article) and photos. All of the other websites provide at least 1-2 sentences along with the headlines. For example *Standartnews.bg* and *btv.bg* provide a short (2-3 lines) description to the leading article in each section. *Rozali.bg* is the only one of the selected websites which uses a hybrid design. The first part of the front page is created in structural style with headlines, photos and very visible indication of the section, where the articles could be found. The lower part contains more text and photos and less structural information.

News agencies are usually meant to serve the intentional search of information. Most of them are used by other media as a source of information. Structural design is important for their users to find exactly what they are looking for. In spite of this *mediapool.bg* provides a 5-6 lines of text along with every heading, which is typical for the mosaic design. This website however has a clear structural organization.

Interactive menus are available in all of the selected websites, while interactive routes are available in 13 and interactive site-maps only in 2 websites. These tools are important for the navigation because they let the audience to dismiss whole sections of the websites and prevent the loss of orientation during the navigation. While interactive site-maps never really got popular among Bulgarian websites, interactive menus are

irreplaceable. All of the selected websites provide easy and intuitive to use menus. While most of them are not multilayer, the sports radio website *gong.bg* gives a good example for the advantages of multilayer menus. For example if we want to find news about English football games we go to the “Football” section on the menu and then we select the “England” subsection, dismissing all other football news.

It is clear that Bulgarian mass media websites still prefer to make users browse through their structure than to let them choose on their own how to access the publications and which to miss. They rely on the possibility that while browsing the users will access more publications, which otherwise would be avoided. This is not necessarily true, because according to recent researches users usually spend very short time (about 10-15 seconds) on each page in the website’s structure, which is barely enough to read the headline and see the photo. Therefore users prefer not to browse through menus when possible, or to browse as fast as possible.

The changing role of the audience is still clearly visible. Using the interactive menus users can easily select what articles to read without observing the public agenda, created by journalists. Thus users create their own agenda, changing one of the most important mass communication theories, to which we will refer again later.

B. Functional Interactivity

Functional interactivity lets the users interact with each other using chat-rooms, forums, or e-mail. This is one of the most important social characteristics of the websites. While the traditional audience consists of many not-connected-to-each-other readers, the Web 2.0 audience consists of interconnected users. These

interconnected regular users of a particular website form its own society. Since the success of social media, mass media websites widely accept some social characteristics to gain popularity. Most popular ways to provide functional interactivity are forums, comments under the publications and personal messages and many others. Personal messages are usually used by big websites with large numbers of regular visitors and rarely by small websites which rely mostly on random visitors. Private messages require registration, so it is appropriate for websites which provide some paid functionalities, which require registration too.

Most of Bulgarian mass media websites let the users comment the publications. Twelve of them have a "comment" option, usually found below the articles. This is a way for users to interact with each other, share news and opinions. This is the reason why we could consider this interaction as a process through which the audience "adds value" to the content created by journalists. Most of the time comments are free of moderation. In spite of that there usually are some rules, which the audience has to keep in mind when posting a comment. These rules are related to speech of hate, insults, discrimination, anti-Semitism etc. The editors of the website keep their right to delete posts which contain some of these characteristics. To avoid the frequent editorial deletion of comments dnevnik.bg for example has created a system which lets the users regulate the communication by themselves. There are icons which let users vote for others' comments. The votes could be positive or negative. When a comment gains too many negative votes, it is removed from the page and a message appears which informs that the comment has had inappropriate content. Of course this

system is not always objective, but most often it works quite well.

Rules and self-regulation mean to prevent the websites from posts which contain the so called "bad content" or spam. "Bad content" can be defined in many different ways, but usually the rules mean posts which are not recognised as text. For example "I like it" is "good content", but replacing it with "+++" (which is frequently done in Bulgaria) makes search engines see it as "bad content". Search engines also recognise spam as bad content, so many websites use filters to guarantee that there is no spam among the comments.

Forum sections could be found much less frequently in the selected websites. Only 6 of them possess such sections. In spite of being very similar to comments, forums let users discuss random topics which may have nothing in common with the publications on the website, thus generating large amounts of user-generated content. Therefore forums need a strict moderation to avoid the above mentioned problems.

Two of the selected websites provide personal messages platforms. This form of interaction between users is free of moderation. It doesn't add user-generated content, so most websites prefer not to provide such platforms.

C. Adaptive Interactivity

Adaptive interactivity lets the audience to change the content and design of the website. Users can share their own news, recording, photos or other content. Journalists usually have to mediate this process according to the website's ethical rules. Usually mass media websites use interactive applications which change the information which is shown on the site after some user-made setting (for example – the

weather cast applications which change the cast according to the city chosen by the user). While these applications only change the information shown which is shown on the screen, others such as blogs, pod-casts, news or photo publishing-platforms allow the users to share their own content.

These are the main tools of citizen journalism. Using blogs, social networks and other tools, users can share their own content – articles, photos, videos etc. Thus they become an active party of the mass communication. The traditional one-way model of mass communication changes to two-way model. The audience not only comes closer to the traditional journalists' role in communication, but many times journalists use the audience to gather "first-hand" information. So we could conclude that due to citizen journalism journalists and audience are constantly changing their communicative roles.

Citizen journalism attracts lots of attention. Many people prefer to gather information through blogs and podcasts, shared by ordinary people, not by professional journalists, because they consider these sources to be much more independent, objective and trustworthy (Burkholder:2009) than the traditional media. That is why many critics are concerned about the quality and objectivity of citizen journalism as well as about the rights of bloggers, who are not considered to be equal to journalists in many law systems. Of course one of the most important questions is about the copyright. Users often select, compile and share text from mass media which they are not authorized to use. On the other hand sometimes mass media also violates the audience's copyrights by publishing user-generated content, without authorization.

Interactive applications which show different content according to user-made settings are found in 14 of the selected websites. Usually they are weather cast or trading applications. Much more important are the opportunities to share user-generated content in blog or pod-cast platforms. Only six of the websites provide such platforms. It is very important to note that blogs and podcasts usually are not part of the website's structure. In fact they are reposted from bigger platforms. The editors of the media carefully select the bloggers whose posts can be reposted, in compliance with the policy of the media. This bloggers could be considered as freelance reporters of the media which is the exact case in standartnews.com. In the "Bloggers" section there are only 3 bloggers and all of them are leading Bulgarian journalists. Sometimes the authors of the blogs are the reporters of the particular media. Their blogs provide content, which is not published among the articles of the media. Only five of the websites let the users share their own short news and photos.

Dnevnik.bg demonstrates the most interesting approach towards blogs. Bloggers could join to a section of the website called "Blogosphere". The platform automatically selects blogposts which are to be reposted. The copyrights belong to the bloggers and dnevnik.bg is not responsible for the shared news and opinions.

Btv.bg, nova.bg, rozali.bg, dnevnik.bg and 24chasa.bg give users some additional opportunities to share content. They provide platforms for news-sharing. In btv.bg this platform is called "Me, the reporter" and in dnevnik.bg – "Dnevnik LIVE". Dnevnik.bg requires the shared news to be no longer than 140 symbols and they undergo editorial consideration process before been made visible on the website.

Table. 2 Interactivity in Bulgarian mass media websites

Media website	Alexa global rating	Navigational interactivity		Functional interactivity			Adaptive interactivity		
		Design	Interactive menus/routes/site maps	Comments	Private messages	Forum	Interactive applications	Blogs	News/ annotations/ photo/video sharing
Dnevnik.bg	12143	Structural	+/+/-	+	+	-	+	+	+/-/-/-
24chasa.bg	30365	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	-	+	-	+/-/+/-
Standartnews.bg	33233	Structural	+/+/+	+	-	-	+	+	-/-/-/-
Rozali.com	54037	Hybrid	+/+/-	+	+	+	+	-/-	-/+/-/-
Zajenata.bg	90309	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	-	+	-/-	-/-/-/-
Manager.bg	120929	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	+	-	-/-	-/-/-/-
Gong.bg	23323	Structural	+/+/-	-	-	-/-/+	+	-/-	-/-/-/-
Dariknews	33185	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	+/-/+	+	-/+	-/-/-/-
BNR.bg	155529	Structural	+/+/-	-	-	-/-/-	+	-/-	-/-/-/-
bTV	11409	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	-	+	+	-/-/+/-
Nova.bg	29840	Structural	+/-/+	+	-	-	+	-	-/-/+/-
Bnt.bg	51740	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	+	+	-	-/-/-/-
Dnes.bg	10283	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	-	+	+/-	-/-/-/-
Focus-news.net	64485	Structural	+/-/-	-	-	-	+	-/+	-/-/-/-
Mediapool.bg	77571	Structural	+/+/-	+	-	+	+	-/-	-/-/-/-

We could definitely conclude that the websites of Bulgarian traditional mass media lack adaptive interactivity very much. Users rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to share content of their own within the websites without editorial consideration. Thus journalists manage to keep their monopoly over the information flow within the mass media websites. In spite of this the first signs for the changing roles of journalists and audience are visible. The dnevnik.bg's "Blogosphere" is a good example of popularizing citizen journalism and gaining user-generated content.

D. Personalization of Information

Personalization of information supports these changes of the roles of the audience. It even goes further by giving the audience tools to avoid unwanted/uninteresting publications.

Thus journalists become unable to do the traditional agenda-setting, because there is no guarantee that the users will even receive the publications. There are several ways to personalize the content – the most usual of them are RSS emissions which let the users subscribe to receive news only from certain sections of the site (for example – sports news) and avoid everything else. This could also be done by customizable e-mail bulletins. Subscriptions to the mass media pages within social networks could also be a way to personalize information but it is not as precise as RSS. One very rarely used mean of personalization is the customizable front page of the website. It could usually be found in web sites which require registration and allows users to move, add or delete entire sections of the site, thus choosing what to see

and what to avoid. We can conclude that each user sets their own agenda, according to their wishes and interests.

While the opportunities for the users to share their own content are very limited in Bulgarian mass media websites, the personalization is on a very high level. 11 of the websites provide highly customizable RSS emissions and 14 of them have profiles in the social networks, which is also a tool to personalize the information. The e-mail bulletin is rarely found in the selected websites. Only 4 of them still use this tool. It is actually one of the oldest personalization tools, but many users consider these e-mails to be spam. One even older tool for personalization is the Archive. We can accept it as a personalization tool, because the users usually search a particular text and rarely read something else. Distinct "Archive" sections are rarely found in modern websites. The articles usually can be found in search engines, but intentional search could be really difficult.

IV. THE CHANGE OF ROLES AND THE CLASSICAL COMMUNICATION THEORIES

As we already saw the Social Web changed the traditional roles in mass communication. The audience is no more passive. It could search and personalize information and even create and share articles, photos, videos etc. The Social Web is the first platform in mass communication's history, which makes the citizen journalism possible, giving the audience exactly the same tribune and tools for publication, as those which the professional journalists own.

This inevitably affects some of the most important traditional mass communication theories. Below we

will shortly define the changes which citizen journalism brings to the Agenda-setting theory and the Gatekeeper theory – two of the most well-known classical mass communication theories.

The classical Agenda-setting theory created by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw is one the most important postulates in the traditional mass communication theory. It states that if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important.

Interactivity and personalization make traditional agenda setting nearly impossible. As we already mentioned, personalization makes it uncertain if users will even receive the publications. Audience does not rely on journalist anymore to set the public agenda. Every user could set his own agenda by searching and sharing only the content in which he is interested.

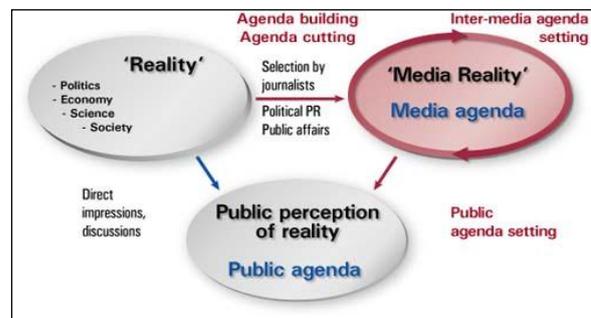


Fig. 1. The Classical Agenda-Setting Theory

Traditional Gatekeeper theory undergoes some changes too. In its original version it states that media personnel filters the information, thus limiting, controlling, and shaping the public's knowledge, based on their own experience, opinions, expectations etc.

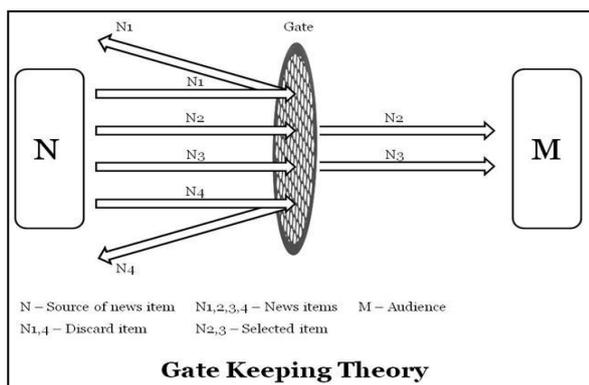


Fig. 2 The traditional Gatekeeping Theory

Traditional Gatekeeper theory undergoes some changes too. In its original version it states that media personnel filters the information, thus limiting, controlling, and shaping the public's knowledge, based on their own experience, opinions, expectations etc.

As we already mentioned the interactive capabilities of the Social Web allows the users to search, compile and share journalistic, as well as self-created content. This process is also based on the experience, attitude, etc. By choosing what to share and what to dismiss, every user keeps the informational gate shut for some news and opened for others. So we could conclude that the audience becomes a gatekeeper along with the traditional gatekeepers – journalists, editors etc.

Within Bulgarian mass media websites these changes are very hard to notice but still exist. As we found out while examining the levels of interactivity and personalization, journalists keep their informational monopoly within their websites. The most common tool for the audience to set its own agenda and to do is the “comments” section to every article. However shows a very low level of citizen journalism within the mass media websites.

Bulgarian mass media websites still have to accept some elements from the social media to gain more user-generated content and to form social networks of regular users. Since the first signs of this process are already available, the change of the roles of audience and journalists will continue in the future.

ENDNOTES

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