

Convergent Journalism and Fact-Checking: from Fact Verification to a New Genre

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Abstract—Convergent journalism is a result of the advance of science and technology in general and development of information and communication technologies in particular. It influences various aspects of journalism, media environment and media systems. The emergence and development of new hybrid genres of convergent journalism, creation of the entertainment industry, a change in principles of creation and distribution of informational and entertainment materials, intricate transformations and metamorphoses of media systems, continuous generation of content, emergence of new forms of journalism (citizen journalism, blogs, etc.), the increasing number of borrowings, cross-references, citations, etc. – all of it result in explosive growth of various materials published both in traditional and new media in multimedia format. This process leads to an unprecedented increase in the amount of false information and the need for thorough verification of such data. One way of addressing these challenges is fact-checking, a new phenomenon induced by the development of convergent journalism. It is essentially a transformed version of a verification mechanism for information in media that existed since the emergence of print media. However, as this paper shows, the comprehensive influence of convergent journalism on all aspects of journalism and the media system caused further metamorphoses of this new phenomenon: fact-checking went beyond simple verification of facts and turned into a new genre of analytical journalism.

Keywords—convergent journalism; fact-checking; fake news; factoids; genres of journalism

I. INTRODUCTION

Fact-checking [1] is a process of verification of information/facts represented in information materials in traditional or so-called new mass media. A fact-checker (researcher) according to the internationally accepted methodology relies exclusively on data from open sources and information obtained by official inquiries sent to state, public or private organizations of all types of ownership. A distinctive feature of fact-checking is a detailed description of all the steps a fact-checker does to check out a fact, allowing any skeptic to repeat the whole process of fact-checking from the very beginning to the logical conclusion in order to determine methodological, logical and factual correctness of the fact-checked data.

Traditionally in Western journalism, fact-checking, which emerged as a phenomenon in the American print media

in the early XX century, is divided into *ante hoc fact-checking* (in Soviet and post-Soviet journalism it corresponds to verification or editorial information filtering) that is conducted before dissemination through the media, and *post hoc fact-checking* of information after it was published [2].

Almost in every Western media a dedicated position of a fact-checker exists. Major mass media have entire departments of fact-checkers responsible for information verification at all stages of publication creation and dissemination, as well as handling objections, complaints and accusations of disseminating false news by colleagues from other mass media and the public.

In the post-Soviet space, the term *ante hoc fact-checking* is not widespread and the following notions used for the last couple of centuries are still prevalent: verification and editorial information filtering. Post hoc fact-checking (or simply fact-checking in the post-Soviet journalism) is a new trend. This phenomenon emerged as a form of the journalistic investigation, with its research object being facts reported in news or, less frequently, a traditional journalistic publication and in almost any new hybrid genre of modern journalism.

It is important to note that in the post-Soviet space for the analysis of scientific publications a review is still used. It has not been replaced by fact-checking up to this time for various reasons.

Using fact-checking for fiction is quite questionable. Proponents of fact-checking usage advocate active use of fact-checking in literary text analysis, given the increase in volume of politically biased literature that often aims for historical fact distortion, falsification, and sometimes outright lies and propaganda by manipulating and fabricating evidence. Opponents that object to them argue that an author has a right to his/her own position, interpretation of facts, fictional world, etc. At the current stage neither of the two opinions prevails and fact-checking of fiction is rather sporadic. However, fact-checking materials are a subject of considerable interest for a wide audience, and therefore prospects of fiction fact-checking seems favorable.

A. Introduction to a Problem

In almost all countries of the world, a significant growth of interest in fact-checking as a method for checking if information is true/false is initially induced by an explosive

growth of information in media, constantly generated both by traditional creators of information (such as media, press offices, etc.) and new actors in media systems (such as bloggers, social media activists and other Internet users). In its turn, the growth of diverse content, mainly informational and entertainment one, is the reason the volume of false, fabricated, unverified and otherwise inaccurate information increases.

A constant development of leisure industry represented in all countries of the world, which, according to many scientists including professor Shalaev, is caused by globalization of modern society, has deliberately, purposefully created a whole industry of producing false, fake (non-existent) information. The main purposes of creating such information are as follows:

(a) all kinds of PR, advertising, informational promotion aimed at misinformation and manipulation of public opinion;

(b) traffic generation (the number of visitors on the Internet site) for informational, entertainment, educational, infotainment and other types of resources, which allows to increase the monetization (profit) of this resource;

(c) generation of false information (fakes) as the main type of information product (merchandise) of this Internet resource. It would be fair to note that some of the Internet resources publishing fake news warn users in advance that the information posted on these sites is fictional, fake, humorous or satirical and is created solely for entertainment purposes. Examples of such Internet resources with fake news are "HOBOSTI" [3], the ONION [4], SMIXER [5], etc.

Under the influence of leisure industry, a separate area in creating fake web content, called video pranks, has even emerged.

A distinctive example is a video posted on YouTube, one of the most popular video hostings: it is called Mutant Giant Spider Dog [6] and its main idea is an attack of a huge mutant spider. This video was watched by more than 175 million people from around the world.

Among leisure industry resources, Internet sites of so-called "social experiment" are also very popular: for example, HUFFPOST [7] that publishes fakes that represent different kinds of DIY experiments allegedly conducted by ordinary users.

A separate research is required for fakes representing hyperbolized information taken to the extreme, which is the product of a new, opportunistic trend in journalism induced as a kind of social protest of journalists against propaganda, manipulation and an overwhelming flow of false information published on the Internet.

For example, an American comedian Sasha Baron Cohen offers a highly popular mockumentaries (a portmanteau of mock and documentary) [8], fake videos featuring fictional characters: Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiiev and fashion journalist Bruno [9].

In the post-Soviet space, as an example of a successful project in the style of mockumentary, one can name a project

of the NTV TV company (the author of the project is A. Loshak) that imitates documentaries on different topics filmed in the genre of a journalistic investigation [10].

Fakes created by Internet resources deserve a special mention: for example, FogNews.ru specializes in different kinds of hoaxes, practical jokes and mystifications that not only entertain and amuse the audience, but are a serious challenge for editors and fact-checkers of leading mass media.

For instance, after FogNews.ru published a news article that Barack Obama, after reading an e-mail with threats, was taken to the Central hospital in Washington with a heart attack, this news were released on the RCM portal ("Region Kiev Media") without any references to FogNews.ru. Later it was published on Rambler with a reference to RCM [11].

Another amusing publication on FogNews.ru stated that the former mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov is going to run for mayor of London. It even contains an excerpt from a non-existent interview given by the applicant to Daily Telegraph. Some media have taken this article for granted and published this fake news on their sites.

Due to leisure industry development, regular publications devoted to a review of world fake news (for example, TJournal) are in high demand.

As the number of Internet resources specializing in fake news creation grows and fact-checking also gains popularity, a new phenomenon in convergent journalism has emerged: mass media focused on absurd, but solely real-life facts, that is, news that is hard to believe.

Among such resources is the Internet project Breaking Mad that publishes black comedy news under a slogan: "Until death makes us laugh". Creators of the project assure that only real-life cases are published on their website.

However, everything starting with a clickbait [12] and ending with content of the materials is so hard to believe that the audience wants to personally verify the authenticity of the information by checking its sources. The latter are made available by the authors of Breaking Mad publications.

For example, a publication under the title "A resident of the Ivanovo region beats a passer-by for interfering with him peeing, and shoots an abuser of his friend with an arbalest" [13] has fuelled distrust of the public.

However, a link to the primary source of information was provided in the article, that is an official website of the Prosecutor's office of the Ivanovo region, which contained the above mentioned information under the following heading: "Ivanovo inter-district Prosecutor's office conducts public prosecution against an aggressive repeat offender" [14]. It confirmed the information contained on the Breaking Mad website word for word.

Publications describing the process of fact-checking now gain particular interest of the audience.

The information the audience can get during fact-checking, i.e. from studying materials and open sources in order to

verify the facts, along with arguments of a fact-checker and a line of analytical reasoning provide more useful information and knowledge than the original publication checked for truth.

B. Problem Statement

It is important to note that fact-checking is not a panacea for various types of misinformation, falsification and manipulation that have flooded media all over the world. It can be used not only to benefit the modern information society, but also to harm it by contributing to the creation of persistent stereotypes, journalistic clichés and factoids.

Thus, the rapid increase in fact-checking popularity in the post-Soviet space, together with the active use of “black fact-checking” (by analogy with “black PR”) is linked with the increase in popularity of Internet resources and independent fact-checkers engaged in or specifically specializing in fact-checking.

One of the most famous or even “sensational” examples over the past years is the verification conducted by an Internet project “Newspaper about Newspapers” dedicated to fact-checking of Denis Dmitriev's materials [15]. (Denis Dmitriev is a fact-checker for Medusa, a news site, Medusa Project SIA; previously a fact-checker for a news site Lenta.ru).

It is important to note that a press office of the Federal Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation has earlier fact-checked material by Dmitriev (“Some failure in a mechanism, right?” [16]) posted on the news site Lenta.ru and also found it to be false.

These examples clearly show that fact-checking, as is often the case with all noble initiatives of the media community, is widely used for abusive practices: for propaganda and manipulation of public opinion.

Underestimation of the fact-checking role and influence in the modern information society is as harmful as its overestimation. Notwithstanding that fact-checking has emerged as a kind of journalistic investigation, it is not able to fully replace the journalistic investigation as such.

Of course, information and communication technologies development and the associated development and implementation of the total surveillance via a variety of technical devices, sensors, telemetry, visual observation and recording, satellite tracking, big data technologies, etc., leads to a decreased amount of information still inaccessible to general public. However, there is still a long way to go before any information can be found and verified based solely on open data.

C. Purpose of the Study

This research aims to analyze the phenomenon of fact-checking and its transformation into a new genre of the analytical journalism, which is influenced by information and communication technologies, convergent journalism and the globalizing, digitizing world and integrated into the leisure industry.

This goal implies examining the current status of fact-checking both in Western countries and in the post-Soviet

space to forecast future trends and potential evolution of fact-checking as a method of information verification, as well as a new genre of analytical, convergent journalism.

D. Research Methods

The study of fact-checking phenomenon and the processes of its transformation under the influence of convergent journalism and the leisure industry is conducted using historical and philosophical synergetic approach. It allows to research fact-checking as a complex, multivariate, multicomponent, innovative, multi-factor type of human activity transformed into a new synthetic genre of analytical journalism by a synergetic impact of information and communication technologies, convergent journalism, globalization and information society.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rapid development of information and communication technologies has had and continues to have a significant impact on all aspects of human activities. For some professions, e.g. journalism, the total penetration and impact of information and communication technologies has already led to irreversible consequences at the institutional level, which includes emergence of the convergent journalism and new mass media forms of journalism.

Today, such genres of convergent journalism as infotainment [17], edutainment [18], which were once a curiosity, continue to actively conquer the media space of most countries: they either replace the usual, traditional genres, or transform them almost beyond recognition.

The most important and integral feature of convergent journalism, as a well-known researcher A. Nosik stated, is “practically no delay in production”, that is, the minimum amount of time from the start of content creation to its consumption [19].

On the one hand, the multimedia nature of the leading mass media products, as well as convergence, allows for broadcasting events practically in real time, which is certainly a positive fact.

On the other hand, the possibility of updating, correcting and adding content at no cost from anywhere in the world, given that Internet and access to CMS for administrating or editing of the relevant media form is available, makes special skills of content editing unnecessary for publishing editors or journalists [20]. This in turn leads to a number of modifications both at the personal level (for journalists and editors) and at the level of editorial office management, media systems and media spaces.

This process is intensified by the rapidly growing popularity of synthetic genres of journalism, which are an integral part of the leisure industry [21] and lead to transformation of journalistic professional standards (in some aspects, to their degradation).

For example, the negative impact of infotainment [22] is linked to the transformation of informational and analytical genres into a kind of cultural and entertainment programs.

They picture the most important events of world politics, economics, social development, demography, etc., in the most simplified, entertaining form for the audience.

There are transformations at the level of the text as well: when news materials are written, publications of other media are often used: ultimately, the text of news is a repetition of the previously published material with added author's comments or minor details [23].

These transformations are accompanied by development of the previously unknown forms and types of journalism, e.g. participatory journalism [24], new personalized information resources, such as blogging, accounts in social networks, etc. [25].

Combined, they result in explosive growth in the number of materials published in both traditional media and new multimedia formats.

Besides positive aspects, such as improving public access to information and increasing transparency, they also carry the following dangers for the media and their audience: increase of false or unreliable information in the global media. This has happened more than once in the history of mankind: gossip, speculation and rumors existed since the beginning of the society.

Emergence and development of a new channel of communication between creators of information and its consumers is always accompanied by the spread of false information of some kind. For example, the growing popularity and circulation of print media led to the appearance of canards, and later, as advertising markets developed, of the so-called advertorials.

Development of radio gave rise to disinformation and propaganda in media; they existed before but reached unprecedented level when this type of media emerged. A radio version of the novel "The War of the Worlds" by H. G. Wells aired on October 30, 1938, became a legend. Americans regarded the news of the invasion of the Martians on Earth featured in this famous novel as truth and it caused an unprecedented panic.

Television that emerged a later presented extraordinary opportunities for spreading false information. It brought propaganda and manipulation of social consciousness to a new level.

However, a real revolution in creation, replication and dissemination of false and unreliable information occurred as information and communication technologies were developed and multimedia and convergence media systems emerged.

A huge number of fakes (non-existent, fabricated, false information) [26] and factoids [27] (false information disguised as true one) is swamping world mass media. Moreover, given that "... the world becomes digital, and so do governments, countries and society itself [28]", it is fakes and factoids that begin to play a decisive role in shaping public opinion in many countries of the world.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that verification of exponentially increasing number of materials becomes

more difficult, and technical means and capabilities for the creators of fakes and factoids become better and more sophisticated. It is no coincidence that a number of experts named 2016, which is a record-holder for the number of unreliable news that greatly influenced society, the "post-truth year" [29].

Fact-checking [30], verification of facts is a phenomenon that answers the need and represents transformation of the editorial filter that previously existed in every traditional media. It is important to note that fact-checking appeared when regular press started to gain popularity in the early XX century. In a number of countries, such as the USA, fact-checking became a profession in the 1920's and 1930's. However, in these countries fact-checking is a process of checking texts for typos, factoids, false information, hidden advertising, etc., before the material is published (verified), as well as a process of verification of the already published materials.

Currently, almost every leading mass media has not a single fact-checker, but rather entire departments of fact-checkers, for example, as in the TV Channel 4News (UK) or a magazine *Der Spiegel* (Germany). Russian News Agency TASS developed its own modified fact-checking/verification method prior to publication, that is a publishing editor to control the quality of information for the print".

In the post-Soviet space and in a number of European countries, the term "fact-checking", which is borrowed from the vocabulary of the USA media according to a number of researchers, initially represents a type of the journalistic investigation. It is fundamentally different from the verification and editorial filter choice: the object for its analysis can exclusively be a published material that was widely disseminated.

Features that distinguish fact-checking from other types of journalistic investigations are as follows:

- a) only open, trustworthy sources of information are used;
- b) a detailed, step-by-step description of the fact-checking progress is present, which a general public can replicate to verify compliance with all procedures and verifiability of open sources;
- c) a judgment made on the basis of verification of information is present.

Today, the so-called judgment reference is used across the world: it has from 3 to 10 variants of the judgment depending on the country or a fact-checking resource [31].

At the present stage of development, fact-checking, which is a phenomenon of the information society, went beyond editorial processes in media. Its attractiveness and the growing demand from a wide audience led to the creation of specialized Internet resources (the so-called fact-checking platforms): those known all over the world, such as Factcheck.org by the University of Pennsylvania, Politifact.com, Storyful.com, Snopes, Storyzy, FactCheckEU.org, Wikitribune, etc., and regional, such as Lapshešnimalochnaya (Russia) and such fact-checking platforms of Central Asia as www.factcheck.tj,

www.factcheck.kg and www.factcheck.kz that specialize solely on fact-checking.

The increase in the number of fact-checking platforms (from 44 in 2004 to 114 in 2017, according to the Duke Census report), coupled with the need to monitor platforms and their compliance with fundamental principles of fact-checking, have led to the establishment of the International Fact-checking Network IFCN in 2015 [32].

Major global corporations, such as Google and Facebook, began to actively use fact-checking in order to provide verified information for their users. Such fact-checking partners as The Washington Post, Politifact, FactCheck.org play a special role in fact-checking for Google and Facebook [33].

In addition, in order to fully exploit potential of fact-checking at the interstate level, major media of the country are involved. An example of positive experience is cooperation between Facebook and the leading French media: Agence France-Presse, BFM-TV, FranceInfo, France Medias Monde, La Monde, Liberation, L'Express and 20 Minutes.

Such approach that strengthens one of the fundamental principles of fact-checking via synergy and consists in a detailed, step-by-step description of fact-checking that forms a special interest among a wide audience. Many fact-checking materials prepared by the best journalists in different countries are works of high artistic value, or even masterpieces.

The impact the best examples of fact-checking materials have on their audience can be compared with detective stories, for example, with books by Conan Doyle, in which he also describes in detail every step the famous detective Sherlock Holmes makes in his deductive method.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, for example, a platform PolitiFact (www.politifact.com) with its main focus on fact-checking speeches of the USA political and public figures, in 2009 was awarded with the Pulitzer prize, an Oscar in journalism [34].

Today we can clearly distinguish a trend: the world leading media dedicate special sections to publish results of fact-checking (for example, The Washington Post with its "Fact Checker"), which cause huge interest and demand of the audience. The result of fact-checking is (at least) a new article that contains description of the fact-checking process. Moreover, the results of fact-checking are often published as journalistic materials on other resources, or as a rebuttal of false facts revealed in the course of fact-checking and published on the same resource.

III. CONCLUSION

This makes it possible to assert that fact-checking, started as a simple verification of authenticity of facts in journalistic materials, transforms into a separate genre of convergent analytical journalism.

Of course, it should be emphasized that the transformation of fact-checking as a journalistic genre is ongoing and its prospect are ambiguous and difficult to identify at present time. However, it is clear that the current trend across all

countries of the world is as follow: fact-checking is a new genre of convergent analytical journalism and it rapidly gains popularity among journalists and the audience.

Summarizing the above, we can say that the influence of convergent journalism on fact-checking is manifold.

This research is first step to study fact-checking, a new phenomenon of the modern media society, along with its transformation under the influence of convergent journalism and leisure industry. As a new genre of analytical journalism, it is designated to transform verification of materials to be published in media into a fascinating, extremely interesting for the audience and commercially profitable information product.

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