

The Specific Character of News Literacy Teaching in Russia and the Dynamics of Media Literacy Levels of Russian Students (2013-2017)

Svetlana Shomova
National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia)

A well-known ironic expression of N. Luhmann says: “The mass media disseminate ignorance in the form of facts” [Luhmann 2005: 45]. Thus, the problem of teaching students both the creation and “reading” of news shifts from the professional vector to the ethical one too.

Changes in the information landscape of everyday life inevitably led to the breaking of habitual stereotypes in media perception, as well as to the rethinking of the most important principles of their use. Nowadays, when the volumes of distributed information surpass all imaginable limits and the term «Post-truth» becomes one of the words of the year in Oxford dictionaries, the issues of critical autonomy and therefore the problems of Information Literacy, Media Literacy and News Literacy come to the fore. During recent years, Russia has been actively included in the global process of teaching these subjects thanks to special educational courses started by the National Research University Higher School of Economics for students of both media and non-media specializations, as well as summer schools and international conferences. However, the course curriculum in Russia has its own peculiarities, puts slightly different emphases and has, in our opinion, some «added meanings» compared to the curricula of other countries.

This report provides a short comparative analysis of known News Literacy teaching programs and methods in the structure of universities in various countries (specifically, we are talking about Stony Brook University programs in New York, the University of Hong Kong and others). Topics that are specific to Russian higher schools and which are especially significant for the national tradition of studies of the problem are determined.

The following features of Media Literacy and News Literacy courses in the NRU HSE can be specified:

- 1) The primary and fundamental goal of the last study plan modifications made in Stony Brook University and the Hong Kong University is the emphasis on recognizing fake news. «Last month, the Stanford Graduate School of Education, with funding from the McCormick Foundation, issued a report on American students’ ability to evaluate information. After analyzing more than 7,800 responses from students in middle school through college, the authors wrote that they found respondents to be “easily duped,” and that “in every case and at every level, we were taken aback by students’ lack of

preparation...» – American course creators tell about it. – «Fake news was seen as a factor in the months leading up to the recent presidential election. Facebook, in particular, was accused of facilitating its spread, leading the social media site to begin measures aimed at curbing false news» [Kitchen 2016].

The problem of «fake» news is the main topic of the last discussions both for the professional News Literacy teachers' communities in the Internet and specialized Media Literacy text compilations [see, for example: Kajimoto 2017]. Taking into account that the Russian course curriculum has specific lessons dedicated to said topic as well as teaching methods for determining fakes in verbal and visual communication, what interests us is not only the applied method of revealing fakes, but also the nature of the high public interest in false news and why bogus stories spread virally in the first place. This, amongst others, was discussed during the recent conference at Harvard, named «Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action», where Steven Sloman, one of the most authoritative lecturers on the subject, emphasized in his speech the difficulties of processing critical independent thinking: «People think little, they don't like to think...» [see: Gatov 2017]. Moreover, it is possible that the increase of Media Literacy does not always guarantee an «immunity» to fake news, which means there is a necessity in studying «cognitive, social and institutional constructs of misinformation» [see: Combating... 2017].

2) The program of the News Literacy course at the Higher School of Economics compulsorily includes not only practical-oriented topics («Where can we find trustworthy information?», «What makes journalism different from other types of information?» etc.) but also topics that improve students' historical and cultural background. Thus, in the course of News Literacy teaching, the National Research University Higher School of Economics puts a special emphasis on the consideration of news in historical perspective and the development of handwritten, audio-visual and electronic communications as providers of current news; on the role of news content in media space and social development etc.

For instance, the course shows various historical versions of news distribution (the Roman *Acta Senatus*, a sort of daily gazette in the times of Julius Caesar; handwritten news-sheets; the first printed newspapers). The impact that such technological innovations as the appearance of photography, electric telegraph, telephone, cinema, radio communication etc. had on the development of news journalism is also considered. A special lesson is dedicated to the problems of the modification of a news report's updating in the context of new media and the resulting professional and ethical problems, as well as the resulting difficulties in verifying the materials of blogs, social networks and so on [Shomova 2016].

Although within the framework of the course we do not spend a lot of time on these problems (from 4 to 6 hours), the discussion of them allows students to understand some patterns of news

development. For example, students learn that fake news ("canard") is not a modern "invention" and it accompanied media at all times (although, of course, new media has enabled its distribution on a much larger scale). Also, students understand how technical progress influenced the development of manipulation and propaganda methods. This, in our opinion, creates additional preconditions for the development of students' critical thinking.

3) In the News Literacy course taught in Russia a special attention is paid to risks and challenges of «news» as a type of text message, discussions about whether news can be considered an «extramoral value» and some other issues. The problem, in our opinion, is that even the concept of «news» itself (which is considered at the News Literacy as a priori understandable to the audience) is very complex in its essence.

Nowadays, a lot of dangers are associated with the news as a communication tool: it is used as a method of forming public opinion, as a way to manipulate the audience, and as a means of information warfare. A news report that possesses attractive qualities in the eyes of the public (relevance, freshness, sharpness, ability to provoke curiosity) simultaneously possesses a high potential for manipulating facts and images [see: Lapina-Kratasuk, Shomova 2014].

The approaches to a definition of «news» differ in psychology, sociology, informatics, communication studies, media theory and other fields. A number of the most important qualities of news, being on the one hand its advantages, on the other hand carry considerable risks to the audience, since they have a high potential for distorting the perception of reality [Shomova 2013]. The Russian News Literacy curriculum provides for classes that consider the «risks» of news messages in terms of social psychology, axiology, semiotics, linguistics, rhetoric, and the ways to «reduce» these risks for the public.

4) The Russian News Literacy curriculum attaches high importance to the technologies of distinguishing news information from propaganda materials. The Ukrainian conflict, opposition rallies, the situation in Syria – at times, all of them are covered in Russian media extremely tendentiously, and this further increases the need for critical thinking and media literacy. Especially since, according to a nationwide media literacy study (Zircon Research Group, 2009-2014) and a study on the Russian media landscape (Levada-Center / Yuri Levada Analytical Center, 2014), more than 50 percent of Russia's population gets their news from a single source of information and only 10 percent of the citizens use more than four sources at the same time. According to this research, TV is the main source of information for most Russians and it does not depend on their place of living, social status or education. Almost everyone, including those who learn about current events «in the country and all over the world» from other sources, watch TV news, produced by governmental channels [see about it: Kachkaeva, Shomova, Kolchina 2016].

The report prepared for this conference considers also the interrelation and mutual influence of the News Literacy course with other educational subjects, particularly, a journalistic deontological ethics course. The problem of correlation of the students' media literacy level before and after studying of News Literacy is examined. This report addresses a question of whether it is possible to speak of significant dynamics of the changes of such level and aggregate factors which influence informational and media literacy in general. This report is based on integrated data of the four-year (continuing) complex study of the media literacy levels of students at National Research University Higher School of Economics conducted with Anna Kachkaeva and Anna Kolchina.

According to the research, course concepts and examples make students (sometimes for the first time in their lives) start thinking about the information that they daily receive, carefully treat sources of information, analyze them, distinguish direct from indirect evidence, find all references, and determine the approximate hierarchy. The course helps students to focus on the problem and explain how they know that the information presented in media is reliable. Analyzing the examples, students become more attentive to the sources, and begin to understand how the process of information verification works and why it sometimes fails.

During the study, the Questionnaire was given to two reference groups of students, both before and after the News Literacy Course (the students in both groups were given the same questions). Our hypothesis was: Before and after the course the level of critical thinking/ analyzing / deconstructing the news changes, and the tendency to build a more complicated reality increases. The method is survey and comparative analysis (groups before and after the course) with the use of mathematical methods. We compared the difference (between groups) from the statistical point of view (figured out if there was a statistically significant difference; how the results differ before and after the course). The detection of the significant difference is defined with the Fisher criterion (tailored to Fisher's exact test). The questions were divided into several categories: the use of media gadgets; variety of information channels/ sources; trusting different information sources. Questions about social mission and the functions of journalism and its professional ethics were included in the additional block.

The study made it possible to identify certain trends which appear after the students complete the news literacy course. First, they become negatively disposed to all information. They often turn away from all sources instead of checking / employing critical comprehension. And now one of the main questions is the following: how to achieve a balance? It is also very important to mention that students "acquire immunity". They start realizing how serious the News Literacy issue is and how great the responsibility is if they wish to become journalists.

As a result, some interesting additional data were obtained too. For example, there is a statistically significant difference between students (before and after the Course), watching TV news. The number of students who watch TV news decreases more than twice. Moreover, there is

statistically significant connection between the Course and trust in TV news: before the Course – didn't trust 38%, after the Course – didn't trust 78 %; before the course absolutely trusted in TV news – 22%, after the Course – 0 %. Also, the number of students who are able to find mistakes/unchecked information in the news grows. There are just a few students after the Course who never feel deceived or given faked/unchecked information (20% - before course, 2%– after the course). Also there is no statistically significant difference, but there is the tendency: the number of students who say that it is easy to understand which information contains propaganda actually decreases. The percentage of students who don't trust news from the media changes from 4 to 32 percent before and after the course (so, we can speak about the appearance of critical thinking skills) [for more, see: Kachkaeva, Shomova, Kolchina 2016].

More information about the results of the study will be presented at the conference in the reports of my colleagues. Still, the main point is that the News Literacy course can become a mental antidote to the uncontrolled and uncritical absorbing of diverse information products produced by modern media in huge quantities.

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