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BRAND JOURNALISM APPROACH IN THE INTEGRATED MODEL OF INFORMATION INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

The modern world dictates significant changes in the realm of media. In the field of marketing communication, it is thus necessary to find new approaches to the implementation of information influence in the global media space. Brand journalism has become one of these approaches. Brand journalism is the complex approach which integrates the technologies of PR, marketing, communication studies and journalism for the promotion and influence in the communication space. This essay illustrates the approach by showing how the two largest global holdings use this approach; China Global Television Network (People's Republic of China) and Russia Today (Russia) implement the principles of brand journalism in their media model of influence in the global world. It concludes that new approaches allow them to grow their audience and increase their influence in media space.

Key words: Brand journalism ▪ integrated model of information influence ▪ media model CGTN ▪ media model of RT ▪ multiplatform ▪ multichannel

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern world is the world of media. It dictates its own laws in communication and interaction both between people and between organizations. Changes in the information space require changes in the presentation of information and the formation of the media image of the organization. One of these approaches is a new direction which is being called brand journalism. A number of corporations and companies use this approach in corporate communications, including media corporations which use this approach in their model of media and information influence, as practice shows. The purpose of this paper is to describe the model of information influence based on brand journalism. This is achieved by clarifying what the concept of brand journalism refers to, how this approach differs from other forms of marketing communication, and by illustrating how the two largest global holdings, i.e. China

Global Television Network (People's Republic of China) and Russia Today (Russia), implement the principles of brand journalism in their media model of influence in the global world. In the illustration, I focus on the content of their communications and tools used for interaction with a media audience, including use of social media.

2. BRAND JOURNALISM AS NEW APPROACH IN THE CORPORATE INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION

There is the question about what brand journalism is. Is it journalism, as the label seems to suggest, or simply a component of the PR? Is it simply another kind of journalism, just as political journalism is journalism, sports journalism is journalism, or blogs on local issues are journalism? The term itself appeared in public space for the first time during a speech made by Larry Light, McDonald's marketing director at the Advertising Age conference: "In our mobile, digital, multiplatform, multi-user era, brand journalism is an even more relevant way of communication than 10 years ago" (Bull, 2013, p. 27). The author of the speech reacted to the change that occurred in the realm of marketing communication. Before the Internet, companies hired PR firms to write press releases and pitch to journalists who digested the releases and wrote a story that was hopefully favourable to the company. Today, a company can bypass publications and PR firms entirely and publish its own articles. Using blogs, online articles, websites, emails and social media, companies now have an unbelievable opportunity to communicate directly to their customers using journalism-style storytelling.

Brand journalism is thus an approach that incorporates the tools and technologies of PR, marketing, communications, PA (Public Affairs) and, of course, journalism itself. Concerning the form of filing, this is journalistic material. Within the framework of the approach, interviews, reports, columns, or educational, informational and analytical articles are used. However, tasks which brand journalism solves belong to the field of promoting a brand of an organization or idea. In other words, brand journalism as an approach aims to use high-quality journalistic content in the way that allows any organization to attract an audience, maintain and build trust for the brand. Using own corporate media (the organization's social media accounts, website, etc.) allows completely managing this content. This is what makes brand journalism a part of modern journalism. Transforming under the influence of new demands of the audience, responding to the distrust of the direct influence on our opinion or the opinion of the audience, brand journalism forms a new space for interaction with "its" audience. This includes creating and maintaining a managed image, creating values among a specific target audience, loyalty of the audience, creating a community organization or idea among the audience and stakeholders. Using an interdisciplinary approach, brand journalism forms the brand's information field, builds its credibility and expands the communication field to interact with potential

or target audiences. Examples include VOLVO, Red Bull, or Cisco. Among media corporations, there are Cosmopolitan, RT, and others.

Concerning its relation to another type of marketing communication, brand journalism is close enough to content marketing at the first glance, but it goes a little further: it creates the content not so much about the company as for the person. With the new ad campaign “I’m lovin’ it”, McDonald’s has rejected traditional marketing and advertising approaches that focus on one, repetitive message in favour of the “content flow approach”, in which diverse messages are transmitted through different channels for different target audiences (Bull, 2013, p. 13). Larry Light compared this approach with the publication of the magazine: “McDonald’s communication work is similar to the work of an editor who uses different types of materials for different interests to issue a magazine, but all the content is within a coherent editorial policy” (Bull, 2013, p. 17).

3. MAIN COMPONENTS OF BRAND JOURNALISM

In his report, Larry Light also highlighted the three main components of brand journalism. The first one, consistency, will be the most effective way to attract and interest the consumer. This means that it is necessary to create a constant flow of information that will be relevant, useful, integrated and involving participation. In this activity, the organization can use all available tools of corporate communication. They include are articles, advertising, blogs, social networks, photos, videos, or outdoor events. The second component, multidimensionality – a monologue of the company, addressed to the viewer, is replaced by dialogue and “multilog” in the process of communication with customers. Brands become part of multi-user networks in which there is an exchange of information and views between all participants. The task of the brand is to be the significant and valid part of customer’s information space. And the third component is “journalistic”. Brand journalism is a mixed and multidisciplinary approach. Creating the corporate content and using corporate media are the part of the journalism sphere. And this content should be professional and of good quality. In this case, it will be memorable for the audience. The content will line up on the same principles as if there was a creation of a magazine for readers, where each article will differ from another on the topic, the main problem, the main idea, but the entire set of articles will form a single story about the brand – the actual, exciting and dynamic (Bull, 2017, p. 32).

Over time, there were other interpretations of this term. JWT journalist and expert Kyle Monson puts it like this: “Brand journalism is an objective chronicle of the brand, supported through media channels” (Bull, 2013, p. 37). The main idea in this case consists in that the brand or organization does not simply create the content but prepares good quality journalistic content competing in the media market. Yet besides informing, this content has another goals such as creating the positive attitude to the brand, supporting the loyalty or being the valid source of information.

4. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRAND JOURNALISM AND CONTENT MARKETING

Arrese and Perez-Latre (2017) proposed the matrix which can be used to visualize and compare different modalities of content marketing (and other activities of brands' communication mix), along two main aspects: the emphasis on informative, persuasive or entertainment formats and genres; and the key media strategy for content publishing, e.g. paid media, earned media, or owned media (p. 132). Of course, the difference between these aspects is not clear-cut, and many hybrid formats are possible, but this conceptual matrix can help to put brand journalism practices into the context of other marketing communication activities.

Brand journalism as a new approach to the presentation of the material allows, in essence, implementing the idea of promoting a single message, a single idea within different channels of communication on different platforms. Moreover, brand journalism as a convergent approach allows using PR tools and technologies, marketing, partially advertising and communications in practice, while remaining within the framework of the new multimedia journalism.

Edita Kowal identified several differences between content marketing and brand journalism (Kowal, 2018, p. 1). First of all, content marketing increases the product demand by providing useful information. Brand journalism in turn builds awareness and affinity. Content marketing builds the brand credibility with buyers. The main task for content marketing is selling the product. Content marketing generates leads and conversions. As for brand journalism, there is another task. Brand journalism helps to create the story of the brand. Brand journalism with different channels of promotion stories conveys the brand's personalities. Simply speaking, content marketing makes the content of the brand, brand journalism in turn makes the positive context around the brand.

5. THE KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CONTENT CREATION IN THE BRAND JOURNALISM APPROACH

In the process of content creation within brand journalism, the following points become important. First of all, there are five key questions which need to be answered when the content is being created. The first question is who? Who is the audience for this particular message or idea? Why is this content or idea important to this audience? The clearest and structured argumentation of the point of view allows getting maximum support from the audience. The second question in this regard - what kind of idea or news is told? That is what the content itself is. The third question is content localization. This is important for the story and storytelling. The format, key points, etc. depend on the location of content localization. The fourth question - why the question or idea may concern the selected audience? It is necessary to explain

why this particular idea should concern or excite this audience. And finally, the fifth question – how this idea will affect the chosen audience.

Secondly, a distinctive feature of the approach consists in the provision of the true value or ideas for the selected audience. Brand journalism appeared when direct advertising stopped working. This is a way to make organization's brand or idea trustworthy in a broad sense, offering information, and not "openly selling" it.

The next important principle is the interactive communication with the audience in a multichannel environment. Using all possible channels of communication, promotion and support of the key idea within different contexts helps to solve the set task and achieve the planned result of informing or changing attitude.

The task of brand journalism is storytelling, i.e. storytelling through the formation of readable and relevant content. Brand journalism is storytelling for a brand or idea. In the framework of the implementation of this task, it is necessary to essentially talk with the audience, and not to bombard them with direct facts only. It is important to give real stories that are relevant to the idea or brand. Stories must be genuine, full of real people doing real things. They must be balanced, factual, timely and, above all, convincing. As did George Martin in the "Game of Thrones", forming his own universe.

With all these goals in mind, brand journalism provides the organization with the opportunity to attract the audience which will always be there and will return for more information, recommendation, analytics and survey. The next opportunity for the organization and customers lies in forming the source of reliable and verifiable content about the brand, product, and idea. This approach allows the organization to ensure that the audience becomes part of the loyal adherents of the organization. And in fact, this is the ultimate goal in this new form of content formation and distribution.

6. BRAND JOURNALISM IN THE MODEL OF INFORMATION INFLUENCE

The brand journalism approach could be used not only in the brand or service or organization promotion. On the basis of this approach, it is possible to suggest a new model of information influence in the modern media space. The model of information influence is primarily a model of the formation and distribution of information flows. As Stephen D. Reese mentioned with these perspectives, the "hierarchy of influences" model can be laid out containing five levels of influence: individual, routines, organizational, extra media (institutional), and ideological (sociocultural) (Reese, 2007, p. 35). Alexander G. Chkhartishvili et al. (2019) mentioned that in the social networks, information influence is based on the following components in triangle: the agent with an opinion, influence / trust and reputation (p. 14). According to this, information influence refers to new information or arguments provided in a group discussion that change a group member's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviour (p. 15). In the entire social media literature, influence is a marketing term that describes an

individual's ability to affect other people's thinking in a social online community. The more influence a person has, the more appeal that individual has to companies or other individuals who wish to promote an idea or sell a product. The work of social media influencers is based on this statement. Media effects are indirect, conditional and transactional (p. 17). In the new world of brand journalism, everyone needs to re-evaluate their place in the global information space. It is necessary to understand well that the social media and multimedia content in different formats are the most popular and making the information space in the global media world. Currently, social media are publishers. Therefore, there are serious challenges for developing and changes on the way of information influence.

Based on understanding the information influence and the process of impact in media space and the main technologies of brand journalism, it is possible to suggest the model of media influence. The components of the model are the following. It includes professional journalistic content; the user-generated content; a multiplatform for content distribution; multichannel opportunities for reaching the relevant audience and stakeholders through information and communication; communication mechanisms with the audience, stakeholders, and the audience itself; the strategy of building support and loyalty to promoted ideas from stakeholders; opinion leaders and influencers; the broadcast format and storytelling.

The new approach itself was designated in 2004, and since then, it has been developed and used not only by large megabrands. It is necessary to pay special attention to the use of tools and technologies of the brand journalism in the media field. The idea of the multiplatform and multi-channel in the framework of the approach is implemented not only in the framework of the formation of a brand product, service or organization, but also by purely media organizations.

7. BRAND JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN THE MEDIA WORLD

The good example of how the approach of brand journalism can be used by media organization is the media holding China Global Television Network (CGTN) which uses the approach to promote the ideas of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and to promote a positive image of China in the global information space. The CGTN is the new international media organization of China. The CGTN is a group of multilingual and multi-platform media; it includes 6 television channels, CGTN Digital and CGTN Plus. The group was established in 2016 on the basis of China Central Television and broadcasts in English, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, and French. The Mobility First strategy is aimed at meeting the needs of an international audience and simplifying access to content hosted on various platforms. Production centres are organized in Beijing, Washington and Nairobi. Work is underway to create a similar centre in Europe.¹

1 Official CGTN website. Retrieved from <https://russian.cgtn.com/about/>

It is necessary to note multiplatform broadcasting and distribution of information. The CGTN broadcasts globally outside of China and it uses tools and platforms that are popular with the target audience. Social media are currently the most popular in terms of content placement and promotion. 95% of adults prefer to follow their favourite brands in social networks (Marketing Sherpa Consumer Purchase Preference Survey, 2015, p. 1). The largest audience involvement is observed on the Instagram network – the audience engagement rate is 4.21%, which is 58 times more than on Facebook, and 120 times more than on Twitter. At the same time, it is media brands that are most active on the Instagram social network – the business, financial sector and FMCG companies are less represented on the social networks. Media are more active here (A Long List of Instagram Statistics That Marketers Need to Know, 2019).

The CGTN has official accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Google+, and Weibo and WeChat, as well as other social networks in different subsidiaries.² This is all despite the fact that most of these tools are forbidden to be used in the territory of China. But the main goal of the CGTN is to form a positive image of China in the global media space on the one hand, and to form a single information space in the framework of the BRI initiative on the other.

The CGTN media model is constructed as follows. It includes content, a web-based multiplatform for content distribution, multichannel opportunities for reaching the relevant audience and stakeholders through information and communication, communication mechanisms with the audience, stakeholders, and the broadcast format. Actually, we can speak about the media model of information influence based on the brand-journalism approach. The news content is divided into several areas: culture, sport, politics, economy, science, education, and society (in the Russian version). The same division is preserved in other language versions. This division allows, on the one hand, to cover a lot of issues, on the other hand, it allows taking into account various interests of stakeholders, and significantly expanding the target audience. Finally, the task in the content layout is to present as fully as possible the achievements of the People's China Republic and the countries of the BRI initiative. In the Russian version, for example, there is a tab "Eurasia", which allows you to place information in general about Eurasia, the countries, events, or initiatives. The choice of broadcast languages is also associated with this. From the point of view of brand journalism, this approach allows the organization to create a variety of content, subordinate to a single idea and form a media image in the right tone, maximally attracting the audience with not only news content.

It is important to note in this regard that the CGTN does not only represent region-specific or inter-regional content. Global content is also quite widely represented, which gradually puts the CGTN as a news agency in a number of global ones along with well-known market players such as AlJazeera, AP, France Press, or RT.

The second important component of the media impact model is the distribution

² Official CGTN website. Retrieved from <https://russian.cgtn.com/about/>

of content through social media. It should be noted here that since the CGTN task is broadcasting to Europe, Asian countries, North and South America, and Africa – that is, at the global level, bans on the use of social media in China do not apply here. As a result, the impact media model makes a full and wide use of modern social media capabilities. The model includes almost all popular social media in order to maximize, on the one hand, the reach of their stakeholders, while on the other hand, providing an opportunity to get a variety of convenient formats for them. Here, the principle of 3A is implemented in the influence media model: any content anytime, anywhere. Placing content on various digital platforms in real time allows you to create the single information space. The formation of what is called YoUniverse, that is, the individual information space for all interested parties also lies in the mainstream of brand journalism. Separately, it should be noted that the set of used social media depends on the country of broadcasting and the popularity of social networks. For example, for the Russian-speaking audience of broadcasting, it is proposed to use VKontakte (VK).

Interactive communication with users also includes brand journalism tools. Interactive polls and special projects are conducted; there is a mode of questions and answers. Storytelling as a content creation tool is widely used in particular in special projects and special selections. Interaction with users both on the platform itself and in social networks and various interactive tools for influencing and studying the audience make it possible to use the multi-channel approach of interaction with stakeholders.

In this model of information influence, an important place is occupied by the format of the content, depending on the channel of its distribution. Depending on the type of social media, the content is not just in different formats, which is natural, but depending on the social media and the audience, the content itself is also selected.

Except of this, it is necessary to mention live broadcasting, which is offered both on the site and on Twitter, Facebook, etc. Such opportunities not only make it possible to increase the reach of the audience, but also form a digital space within which the positive media image of the People's Republic of China is growing. Using a mix of its own media and other platforms, the CGTN has the ability to maximize the flexibility to deliver the necessary content in different formats. This approach is characteristic of brand journalism as a whole. It is precisely the consistency and manufacturability that are the basis for influencing public opinion and a significant change in the perception of the People's Republic of China in the global media space. It should be noted that the multi-channel interaction with a fragmented audience provides the CGTN with more advantages. The implementation of the 3A concept allows the media to significantly expand its influence.

An even more interesting case in this regard is Russia Today. With its first international news channel launched in 2005, the RT is now a global, round-the-clock news network of eight TV channels, broadcasting news, current affairs, and documentaries, with digital platforms in six languages and the RUPTLY video news agency.

Round-the-clock news channels in English, Arabic, Spanish, and the documentary channel RT Doc, in English and Russian, broadcast from Moscow, while RT America airs from Washington, RT UK from London, and RT France from Paris. Today, the RT is available in more than 100 countries spanning five continents.

The RT creates news with an edge for viewers who want to Question More. The RT covers stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events.³

First of all, it should be noted that the RT uses the same approach as the CGTN. It is important to note the multiplatform and multi-channel interaction. The RT is divided by countries and broadcasting languages. Multichannel communication ranges from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. As it was mentioned, these are the most popular social media in the information space.

The fragmented audience of the RT receives its information in a convenient and convergent format. As part of an integrated model of information influence, multimedia journalistic content is distributed in an integrated format. The RT website is a multiplatform. It combines Live Broadcasting, podcasts and an online gift shop. Social media are also attached here. Considering that we are talking about the information impact and promotion of Russia's position in the global information space, the content is divided in tabs into key information blocks. Among them, there are blocks about Russia, News, Sports, Shows, Projects, and Podcast (there is no podcast section on the CGTN website).

It would be especially necessary to single out the implementation of one of the parts of the integrated model as opinion leaders. In the modern global media space, it is one of the most powerful tools for influencing an audience, supporting a brand or position of a company or a country, and possibilities of interaction with an audience. The RT uses this tool quite actively.

Anuj Nawal (2019) highlights the following features of opinion leaders in social media: they are knowledgeable in their field; they are respected and trusted by their followers; their views carry weight and significance; they interpret the media messages and put them into context for the wider population; they have a giving spirit and often share their knowledge with the followers on social media (p. 1). In the era of the Internet, opinion leadership has even become a profession. Professional opinion leaders (also called influencers) put in efforts to constantly improve their judging skills by following a particular topic closely, getting hands-on experience with various products of their area of interest or professional domain. Opinion leaders are considered to be expert in a particular area and their influence sphere is limited there. Their opinion over other areas holds little to no importance. The RT uses this

3 Official RT website. Retrieved from <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>

tool widely.⁴ From the point of view of creating, and most importantly, distributing content and forming a media audience, this is an extremely effective tool.

In the model of information influence, opinion leaders take not the last place and play an important role. They are influencers, in fact, with their opinion and their support, they verify the information and make them trust in what they report. When the RT selects this tool of influence on the audience, in the era of fake news, it works perfectly. There is another aspect of working with opinion leaders. This is the use of the RT accounts in social media by the leaders themselves. Twitter accounts of talk-shows presenters, for example, significantly contribute to the expansion and audience of the RT.

So at first, shows on the channel are presented by a media famous person. One of the shows on the channel is anchored by Larry King or a sports show is hosted by Jose Mourinho. These are not only professionals in their field, they are also media professionals. Secondly, all the presenters have their own accounts in social networks. And they use their social media accounts widely posting both their own materials and their materials for the RT, keeping talks in the comments, etc. It is important to mention that it is the formation of good quality journalistic content, attracting an audience, expanding the audience of the channel at the expense of followers and readers of social networks of media people. It offers not only the interaction with users, but also discussions, and comments, and inclusion in the discussion. It allows creating and developing journalistic content. The influence of opinion leaders on the modern audience is difficult to overestimate.

8. CONCLUSION

In the cases of the CGTN and RT, the brand journalism approach contributes not only to the effective solution of tasks, but also provides an opportunity for development in the global information space. Within the framework of the integrated model, the two media holdings take into account the hierarchy of influence and build influence on mind-sets in accordance with the hierarchy of influence (Reese, 2009, p. 32).

Analysing the work of two media holdings, it is important to note that in their work, they address unconditionally different strategic tasks. But one task is common for the CGTN and RT. This is the promotion in the perception of the target audience of the China and Russia points of view on various events and the impact on mind-set of the foreign audience. They simply try to show the point of view of their countries.

Comparing the two cases, it is possible to mention the following. The CGTN and RT use a fundamentally new approach in the interaction with their target audience and influence on the mind-set. This is due to intense competition in the media and the need to convey their messages in conditions of fake news and disinformation. As

⁴ Official RT website. Retrieved from <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>

the text showed, the CGTN and RT use the integrated model of media influence based on brand journalism in their activity.

The RT uses the integrated model of media influence in interaction with the media audience, opinion leaders and social media. It creates the media context and special informational space around their content and influence, by means of which the RT promotes the expansion of Russia's influence in the information space, conveying and promoting its own position on a number of issues.

The CGTN is developing very fast. But compared with the RT, the Chinese media holding uses the technologies of creating content and informational space. The economy of China is the first economy in the world (Report of World Bank, 2017) and it is necessary to understand that due to the economic influence, the media influence changes significantly. Using the brand-journalism approach, the CGTN has the ability, within the framework of the presented model of information influence, to change the perception of the country as a whole, the activities of Chinese companies and organizations at the global level.

Despite the differences, using the tools of brand journalism allows the two companies to build communications with users, readers, and listeners in the new environment more effectively. Using the multiplatform and multi-channel as a developed basis of communications, the company, including the media one, has the opportunity not only to communicate with its audience, but also to expand such communication. The 3A concept actually allows holding, and most importantly significantly expanding the target audience. And brand journalism tools are effective in solving this problem.

Brand journalism as an approach, combining the tools of marketing, PR, communication and journalism, provides answers to the challenges of modern marketing communications and most importantly allows effectively keeping the focus of attention of the audience, including the Y and Z generations.

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