

# Violations of Journalistic Ethics in Television Programs as a Subject of the Modern Russian Television Criticism

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*Abstract: The article reveals and studies the regularity and quality of coverage by television critics in newspapers of the journalistic professional ethic violations in television programs of five most popular television channels ("Channel One", "Russia 1", NTV, STS and TNT). Using the content method and comparative analysis, the authors of the article found that out of 1583 published in three years the topic of journalists' ethical violation was covered only in 228 articles (14.4% of the total number of articles). Of the ten authors who regularly analyzed the content of television channels in the Russian press, only four critics did not remain indifferent and tried to draw public attention to violations of ethics on the part of television journalists. I. Petrovskaya, the reviewer from Novaya Gazeta, covered this issue more often than other critics. The most common ethical violation revealed by critics was the discussion in talk shows of not always proven mysteries from personal life of media people on the occasion of their passing. However, there were no special public discussions about the cases and reasons for ethical violations between critics and authors of TV projects, as well as critics and the audience. The article concludes that at present, apart from a public discussion of such cases, television critics have no opportunity to influence on the situation and change it. The authors of the article also concluded that there is a need for further constant and objective reflection of the quality of journalistic work at various levels, especially the practice of regional television journalism. The results of the study supplement the conclusions through the examples from the current practice of the Russian television criticism to the results in the articles and scientific literature of S.K. Shayhitdinova (2007), A. Kaun (2014), P.B. Orlik (2014), J.R. Linder, K.A. Lyle (2011).*

**Keywords:** media criticism, television criticism, television, television channel, ethics, morality, standard, violation, assessment, I. Petrovskaya, Yu. Bogomolov, A. Melman.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the article is to reveal and study the nature of coverage of journalistic professional ethic violations in the federal TV channels' broadcast. At the beginning of the study, we were interested in whether there are such cases in the practice of broadcasting federal television channels, and the regularity and frequency of their coverage by critics. Secondly, how did the authors of the articles interpret and explain to their readers these facts; did they formulate any

trends, in which they saw the causes of the cases identified; did they organize public discussions in the press?

The further development of channels for the transmission of various data, the improvement of the sites for a public exchange of views, the growth in the number of media and, consequently, the volume of media content should make not only journalism researchers but also practitioners and the general public think about the quality of the distributed and consumable media products. Television is the most popular source of information for the Russian population: a sociological survey conducted in the spring of 2018 showed that 71% of the Russian watch television at least one minute a day [1]. With the increase in the number of television programs and channels, the quality of TV shows remains extremely heterogeneous in content. The genre palette is shrinking: only those programs that can give a high rating receive the right to life, and the rich advertiser will accordingly give money.

The powerful manipulative potential of the mass media is constructive only if it is aimed at overcoming the information vacuum of the population, increasing information and news literacy among ordinary people, and serves the tasks of consolidating society, promoting democracy and self-government of citizens.

The time has come when every person should not only consume, but also filter and screen out unnecessary, and even harmful information for him and his family. This is especially important for teenagers and students, who often do not know how to recognize in media the hidden effects on the psyche of certain forces or structures that use the audience for their own purposes.

This can be done with such a relatively new area for the Russian journalism as media criticism. This is "a special area in the domestic journalism, designed to help the society to know new realities and trends in the media. It is both a unique way of reflecting, self-knowledge of the modern printed and electronic press, and a public mirror designed to reflect the 'splendour and misery' of mass media caught up in the market environment" (A.P. Korochensky) (2002) [2]. Television criticism is one of the components of media criticism. For ordinary citizens, media criticism should realize its educational function through which it is possible to form media culture in the society "affecting the public to the print and electronic press, to the degree of development of the audience's skills of independent analysis and assessment of media content" [2].

**Revised Manuscript Received on July 22, 2019.**

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One of the tasks of media criticism is comprehensive knowledge of information production. Thus, it enables to reveal a manipulative ‘arsenal’ of the modern media activities and explain to citizens the reasons and extent that media companies pursue using it. It can be assumed that violation of journalists’ professional ethics is one of the collateral tools to manipulate public consciousness or its behavior. The authors of the article consider that media criticism should become a conductor in the backstage of the media world for the audience, promptly identify and inform about the most significant trends in the functioning of modern mass media. The results of the study complement the conclusions of S.K. Shayhiddinova (2007) [3], W. O'Donnell (2017) [4], S. Craft, T.P. Vos, J.D. Wolfgang (2015) [5], A.A. Berger (2013) [6], P.B. Orlik (2014) [7], J.R. Linder, K.A. Lyle (2011) [8], A.S. Rancer, T.A. Avgis (2006) [9], A. Kaun (2014) [10] in the field of contemporary Russian and international media ethics, as well as problems and quality of media criticism. Furthermore, the data obtained can be included in training and professional development programs for journalists and critics at universities, special courses or professional educational seminars as additional examples of studying the quality of expertise of media texts and projects raising their level both among those engaged in media production and the ordinary population of Russia.

## II. METHODS

The empirical base of the study became seven Russian social and political newspapers, in which there is television criticism: “Komsomolskaya Pravda”, “Literaturnaya gazeta”, “Moskovskiy Komsomolets”, “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, “Novaya Gazeta”, “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” and “Trud”. Television content is currently being discussed only by these newspapers (out of tens of thousands in Russia) and specialized journals “Journalist” and “Journalism and Media Market”, but they are not intended for the general reader. Television criticism in radio programs and online media was not the object of the study.

The chronological period of the study is 2015-2017.

In the course of the study, we used the following methods:

1. *A content analysis* of publications that have an evaluation of media works enabled to identify the availability and analysis of television content; to determine what place the coverage of violations of the standards of journalist professional ethics took in the “agenda” of media criticism in the programs of the main Russian TV channels, and whether this was an issue; how regular the issue was covered if there was any.

2. *Comparative analysis* of coverage by television critics of journalists’ ethics violations: specifics of information submission, level of reasoning, presence/absence of an author’s vision of a problem, quality of interpretation of revealed facts for the audience to increase its level of media literacy.

## III. RESULTS

In total, we found 1583 articles containing an assessment of television content. Of that amount, 228 publications covered the facts of journalists’ professional ethical violation. “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, “Trud”, and “Komsomolskaya Pravda” did not consider ethical issues in the publications,

and “Literaturnaya Gazeta” occasionally mentioned the issue in its articles (only 14 times, mainly covering the problem of distortion of historical facts in feature films). The TV critic of the “Novaya Gazeta” I. Petrovskaya addressed the issue more regularly than other authors: during a 3-year period she published 109 articles, in which the examples of ethical violation in the broadcasts of federal TV channels were discussed. A. Melman (“Moskovskiy Komsomolets”) and Yu. Bogomolov with (“Rossiyskaya Gazeta”) did not stay indifferent to this problem publishing 83 and 22 articles accordingly. We revealed that the problem of violating the norms of journalistic ethics by creative TV journalists was not realized by media critics as the primary and most important one.

Critics drew attention to the following problems related to violation of journalists’ ethics:

1. Discussion of not always proven mysteries of one’s personal life immediately after the death, and even before tragedies (68 articles).
2. Incorrectness in assessing certain situations, as well as people’s actions (pasting labels without sufficient reasons) (65).
3. The dominance of one point of view in newscasts and discussion programs, with clear disregard for alternative opinions (49).
4. The predominance of the entertainment “agenda” during the days of nationwide tragedies (32).
5. Distortion of historical facts by the directors of feature films and thereby misleading the audience (14).

I. Petrovskaya became the most irreconcilable author to the facts of ethical violations. In each of her works she tried to present the problem as unacceptable professional behavior, but at the same time as the norm for modern Russian television, which is constituent of high ratings. Every second of her articles, if not completely dedicated, contained separate paragraphs in which she described certain situations and made an unambiguously negative assessment of ethical pluralism shown by both journalists and invited guests. In one of her articles I. Petrovskaya formulated the following trend on federal television: “It is allowed to spit in the soul, it is allowed to delve into someone else’s dirty laundry, and if there is not, throw up your own, you can trample on someone’s life and death with dirty boots” [11-14]. The reader could understand her attitude looking at the headings. They have something in common with the popular Russian expressions and proverbs. Here are examples: “Mikhail Zelensky and his comrades smashed face in the eye”, “Mamontov vs. Sodomites”, “Sorrow for hour, fun has time”, “Exhibition of dirty laundry”, “TV that chills soul?”, “Where is conscience, Borya?”, “At the bottom”, etc. A rare weekly review of the television programs by this author did not touch the cases of journalistic ethical violation [16].

The substantive analysis of the reviews by Yu. Bogomolov, A. Melman and I. Petrovskaya showed that they made ethical claims primarily to the leading talk shows. The reviewers reproached media group were ready to go to great lengths, including distortions and fraudulent facts, for the sake of raising the rating. Estimating the quality of the television programs according to the laws of the genres,

the television critics stated that almost all the works that were analyzed did not meet the requirements for journalism, because they contained: propaganda of one position, sometimes beneficial for the state, on many issues and suppression of alternative points of view; the desire to make a sensation by accusing one side of the conflict without sufficient justification; attempts to present on the air a commentary or an assessment of the phenomenon, etc. Appealing to the Code of Professional Ethics of Russian journalist, and also to the fact that television is a type of mass media (rather than misinformation or manipulation), the reviewers addressed the TV journalists and broadcasters not to deceive the audience into favor at any price [12-15]. Instead of praising professionalism, searching for and releasing relevant and socially important information, the reviewers regularly had to criticize them for retreating (often consciously) from the canons of journalism and misleading the audience.

I. Petrovskaya made it clear that she does not accept violations of journalistic ethics in television programs from the first lines of her articles.

Yu. Bogomolov and A. Melman mostly maintained neutrality in assessments until the last paragraphs of the articles. Discussion programs of the state's three main TV channels became the object of their attention, but the stylistics was meeker than I. Petrovskaya's position. These reviewers did not blame television workers immediately, but tried to understand the causes of such ethical violations. They did not acquaint the readers with the situation of violations of ethical norms, confining to the simple statement. There were few actual accusations against journalists reduced to the general arguments about the reasons for inducing media people to deviate from the declared norms. As a result, Yu. Bogomolov and A. Melman agreed that almost all cases of journalistic ethical violation are not spontaneous examples, resulting from the lack of editors' and talk show hosts' professionalism, but, on the contrary, those were the ways deliberately used to increase the ratings. The critics believed that journalistic ethical violations on television should also be considered as the ways to manipulate public opinion and the viewers' attention.

Unlike his colleagues the editor of the Televedenie department (Literurnaya Gazeta) A. Kondrashov was much less likely to incriminate television journalists in violating ethics, but he also assumed that rating is to be blamed primarily, "people of the screen" are its slaves. 'They do not care about people, parents and children. Not their interests, but the money decides everything on commercial TV channels. From "Channel One" to the last one. And they will show any American television rubbish, if only it gives ratings. And Urgant will talk with whom they will say. And the scriptwriters will write what they are ordered', – he wrote in one of his articles [13-17]. In the critic's opinion, the operation rule of any modern television manager can be formulated as follows: an honest person in the conditions of "television pop" will not remain popular for a long time.

Compliance with professional ethics is one of the components of journalists' skill. In this regard, deviation from the generally accepted norms or standards of conduct by correspondents or broadcasters of the country's TV channels can and should negatively affect the image of violators not only in the professional environment, but also in a society. Regular failure to comply with ethical and moral standards

can lead to a further decrease in the audience's trust to journalists.

It is not easy to maintain objectivity even for media professionals when they cover social problems, living in market conditions, when from a public person "selling his face" the media management demands a rating at any cost. Our study of the Russian media critics' publications over the past three years has shown that they tried to form a negative public opinion in cases when journalists' ethics on TV was violated.

Several other television critics, working with the federal newspapers that we analyze left this problem without attention. They wrote about their impressions from the series, about how an actor professionally portrayed a role, the guests who came on the air and their clothes, who said what in the studio, etc. Thus, we found that television critics can be divided into two groups depending on the subject of the study: authors who drew attention to the compliance of journalistic ethics in TV programs and authors who left this issue without attention. In total, 14.4% of publications for three years, that covered the facts of violations of ethics by employees of TV companies, is insufficient for a comprehensive and objective analysis of television content.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

The study confirmed and extended the conclusions made by S.K. Shayhiddinova (2007), A. Kaun (2014), P.B. Orlik (2014), J.R. Linder, K.A. Lyle (2011). The results contain the examples from the modern practice of the Russian television criticism and the facts of the journalists' ethical violation. Following V. O'Donnell (2017), A.A. Berger (2013), A.S. Rancer and T.A. Avtgis (2006) we believe that the Russian media (particularly, television) critics need to regularly identify and publicly discuss the cases which have violations of ethics in the media sphere.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

Infrequent cases of revealing facts of the journalist's professional ethical violation actualize the need for regular comprehensive and qualitative analysis of not only the content of television channels, but also print media and online media. There is a need for further constant and objective reflection of the quality of journalistic work at various levels, especially the practice of regional television journalism. Both the creative staff of the television companies and their audience should be interested in the issue. In a modern market system, honest criticism of the media is not beneficial even for the media audience, as it makes people think on their own position. Media criticism should promote the development of pluralism of opinions and promote publicity.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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