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*Роль общемировых альтернативных СМИ в современной медиасреде: визуальный аспект*

# THE ROLE OF GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE NEWS OUTLETS IN A MODERN MEDIA ENVIRONMENT: VISUAL ASPECT

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### **Abstract:**

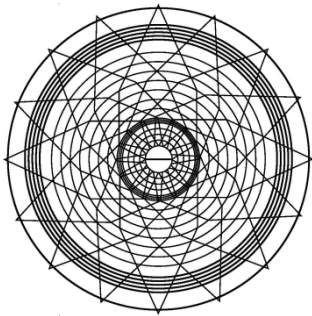
Technological progress and the development of visual culture predetermine the need for an analysis of the changes in the content and the form of video products following the example of alternative media outlets. The term “alternative media” tends to be generally defined as the variety of media projects of a certain form at a given angle that was not used in the traditional, “mainstream” newsrooms. Considering the origin of the term “alternativity” - this kind of difference is understood by the researchers in a very broad sense, namely on the basis of various criteria according to which even the state media in some countries can be alternative towards their global competitors. This article is also an attempt to track down the technology for the alternative presentation of visual information by RT and Aljazeera.

If we take a look at alternative media as the subject for scientific studies, we may clearly see that it tends to be ignored among “mainstream” scholars. This is also true when we analyse the visual component and visual presentation of the news agenda. Our special attention is focused on the way the content is re-packaged for various “new media” platforms. But before exploring the subject to a greater extent, we will try to consider the place and development patterns in new alternative media worldwide.

**Keywords:** Visual culture, Propaganda, Russia Today, Aljazeera, The Syrian conflict, International news, New media

## **The changes in definitions, essence and the role of alternative media in the modern world**

The existence of alternative media has been mentioned in several linguistic, psychological and media studies in the middle of the 20th century. For example, Jurgen Habermas, the father of the communicative rationality theory stated that “it is possible to change the society by changing the structure of communication and not the production” [Habermas, 2006]. The researcher has formulated two communication setups at the level of the society:



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“external”, in which the initiative comes from structures that regulate the society and the “internal mechanism” that comes from within.

In this case, the initiative of the public is based on the concept of “worldview”, or in other words the unity of knowledge and ideas of the people about real life. In return, the worldview is formed by a variety of mindsets and the background information about the world.

Various efforts to define the phenomenon of alternative media have caused heated debates among a number of researchers [Fuchs, 2010]. Besides, there have been attempts to classify several definitions within the framework of one description but no positive results could be achieved in this manner [Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008]. Nevertheless, Chris Atton, a UK-based researcher, compiled a summary of alternative media theories based on four directions [Atton, 2002]. The first one is connected with the various ways to form numerous communities and their subsequent involvement in content production. The second one describes the dichotomy between mainstream and alternative media according to the following parameters: size of the audience, level of political bias, ways to form editorial policy. Researchers for the third direction view alternative media as a tool to develop the idea of an open civil society. The fourth direction addresses the research of various angles for the same story.

These directions explain the diversity of a number of alternative media definitions. We tend to ground our research on Chris Atton’s point of view, who defines the concept as “a variety of media projects that differ from the traditional ways of media operation” [Atton, 2002]. He also highlighted the basic features of alternative media. Among them, reference may be made to:

- content which is not typical for mainstream media;
- innovative design;
- use of innovation technologies and new media;
- promotion of media sources that are open for the public;
- free interpretation of the anti-copyright concept;
- change of the editorial and organisational structure within the media;
- development of the community centred on a media outlet.

However, Canadian researchers Patrick Anderson and Judith Smith define alternative media on the basis of the position thereof in the entire media system. They are the “media that hold the niche between underground personal projects and massive consumer media market and unite the element of artistic, youth media to tell the story in the unusual form” [Andersson & Steedman, 2002].

Noam Chomsky, the “father of generative linguistics” and a frequent guest at many partisan TV and radio stations took another treatment of the issue [Chomsky, 1998]. He states that alternative media are the ones which do not reflect the official and corporate point of view on the news and current affairs. Chomsky also offers his own set of “filters” in order to



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define the level of media “alternativity”. It includes the following components: form of media ownership, financing schemes, sources of information, editorial policy and ideology.

At the very beginning, Chomsky used to refer to such forms of media-communication as “Samizdat” in the USSR and “pirate radio stations” in the US and Western Europe during the 1970s. However, in recent years he admitted the existence of alternative elements in popular web outlets, such as BuzzFeed and Huffington Post, as well as among various international 24/7 news channels, such as Aljazeera International from Qatar and Russian network RT, whose agenda tends to differ from the news coverage standards of the BBC, CNN, or DeutscheWelle. The researcher highly praised the potential of the channels whose views challenge the position of the US administration. Following a further development of events, it may be inferred that this challenge served as one of the reasons for the victory of Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential elections.

These trends resulted in the formation of the so-called “alternative journalism” [Chomsky, 1989]. It is viewed as the complex of media content that deviates from the standards accepted in the mainstream media. In this case, we define mainstream as the unity of all the leading trends and opinions in global and regional media.

Thus, the “criticism component” has become the key factor in the research of alternative media. Critical content can bring the coverage of world events beyond the official view on the current affairs. In some cases, the news is presented through the opinion of experts whose views tend to be ignored by the mainstream media culture. In this instance, people have opportunities to shape the social agenda by themselves and through various responses in the media, thus becoming the so-called “affective public» [Papacharissi, Fatima Oliveira, 2012] to criticise the “mainstream” information.

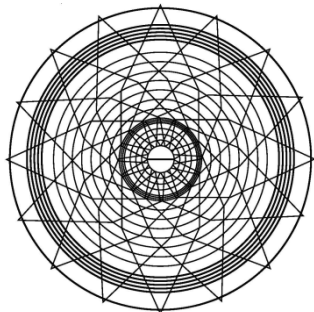
Some researchers link the critical aspect of alternative media with the “de-westernization” concept that highlights the challenge of some states towards a mainstream point of view [Benson, 2010].

To sum up, the alternativity of the media can be manifested on the following levels:

- challenging official views by various parts of the society;
- finding the angle to the story which is different from the alternative media;
- bringing the point of view which represents the position of some countries that is never expressed in the mainstream media. This refers to media such as Aljazeera from Qatar and Russian RT, TRT from Turkey, Iranian Press TV, etc.

For example, in 2012, RT held debates for “third party candidates” at the US presidential elections hosted by Larry King who by that time had retired from the CNN. The response of the viewers was mostly positive. One of them expressed words of gratitude for “revealing the fact that there are more than two presidential candidates in the USA”. This example shows the way the alternative media finds the angle in the coverage of major world media events.

Thus, we can say that information on critical alternative media tends to expand the audience's worldview. It happens when TV channels present reliable sources in the coverage of the world events. It may challenge the view of the mainstream media, for example, in the coverage of the conflict in Syria when they refer to the so-called Syrian



Human Rights Observatory based in London. At the same time, RT, Aljazeera and Iranian Press TV tend to depict local residents in order to highlight the events that are happening in the Middle East.

In this case it is necessary to review the interpretation models suggested by Stewart Hall [Hall, 1996]. He states that the decoding of the content becomes critical if it can provoke debates on important issues. It can help the audience develop alternative points of view.

The development of alternative media was made possible thanks to various format strategies and story presentation techniques. These stories create the unique worldview of the media outlet that is intended to build up the community around it. In many of these instances the personal position of the journalist (newsmaker, main character, etc.) tends to be very important to win the attention of the audience.

As a result, we can see that the story in alternative media is a set of various contradictory ideas that are not limited by one ideology and editorial policy. The audience always has the right to disagree with the story angles and opinions voiced in the media. That is why interactivity has proven itself to be among the basic ways to create alternative content. Step by step, it becomes the key factor in the formation of a new model of interaction between journalists and the audience that predetermines an equal degree of cross-influence.

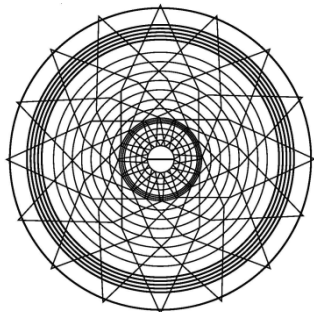
### **Paradigm of the changes in the visual culture in the news media environment**

The development of alternative media has influenced the paradigm of the visual culture that has transformed the basic journalistic principle “here and now” in the news media into “here, now and forever”. Now, thanks to the achievements in broadcast and web technologies it is possible to watch news reports thorough various sites and alternative platforms, such as social networks. In this we see that these changes follow in the line of the “New Environment” theory by Lev Manovich [Manovich, 2002: 61]. Among the key factors in this process, the researcher singles out the increase in media environment changes and the strengthening of the storyteller’s role in the video.

Speaking about the changes in the new media, we see how the content and technology may change video consumption patterns that tend to switch to mobile platforms (iPhone, Android, iPad, etc.). Conversely, the small size of the gadgets changes the technology of visual content production. Modern new media tend to include closer shots and other ways that can heighten the rhythm of the video. This leads to changes in the way the TV channels prepare their content for the new media.

In particular, RT and Al Jazeera pay equal attention to both the broadcast versions of the news and the representation thereof on YouTube and on social networks. Online video content creates additional views and an extended audience even after the news stopped being relevant in the global agenda.

The increase in the importance of the storyteller’s role in the video can be explained by the increase of the audience involvement during the process of new media consumption. Producers and editors tend to pay special attention to the quality of the story as it can foster the loyalty of the audience [Loseva, 2016].



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Who is the news audience? According to N. Loseva, this is a “news junkie” who visits online news platforms several times a day. She focuses most of her attention on YouTube and various social networks. He consumes information from different types of devices. These people, as a rule, take part in various events organised by alternative media outlets. They are also keen on commenting on the news content – they like and share the stories, thus providing links to the content of the alternative media. His involvement with these stories can be sustained for days and even months.

These tendencies influence the technology of visual storytelling in the multimedia world [Silantieva, 2016]. In this case, the storyteller builds up visual elements that break up the traditional principles of the news presentation that are accepted in mainstream television. In news media, it is also important not to overload visual products with traditional visual elements. These are the typical mistakes made by mainstream media professionals in the new media environment:

- complete dubbing of the speech in the video;
- detailed comment on the action that people clearly see in the video;
- use of music that does not convey any relevant information for the story.

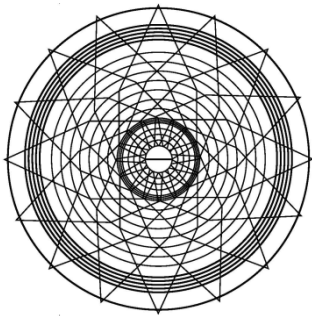
These facts let us make the following statement: in modern visual culture it is very important to build up the multi-format content with a clear structure and simple flow of the story. The narrator of the modern visual multimedia story covers the events from a certain angle that tends to be relevant and appealing for his target audience.

### **Transformation of visual culture on the multimedia platforms of RT and Aljazeera**

On the basis of the findings mentioned above we are trying to track down a transformation of the visual culture on these two platforms that we consider alternative in international broadcasting – the multimedia resources of Aljazeera International (Qatar) and RT (Russian Federation). The choice of these channels is determined by the fact that both of these media have a special agenda in the coverage of world affairs. The worldview projected by these channels sharply differs from the traditional coverage of the mainstream media. Besides, both of these channels have been successfully promoting their content on new media platforms: back in 2015 RT has become the first global media outlet that managed to receive one billion views of their materials at YouTube.

According to the MENAP data of 2014, 40 million people regularly watch RT around the world [MENAP, 2014].

This mini-research was conducted in September-October, 2016. We have set up a goal in order to determine the main features of the content of the alternative media platforms and social networks. The research was mostly centred on YouTube – the most popular visual content aggregator.



### **RT representation on YouTube.**

During the research of RT's content in relation to the multimedia resources we managed to find out that one quarter of the videos represent the broadcast content – the materials that are possible to watch on air. These are very easy to recognise by the logos as well as special graphic elements that differentiate RT from other channels. However, 90 per cent of the broadcast content gets to these alternative online media platforms only if they represent relevant interviews or the personal stories of the members of staff on important topics.

These data prove or hypothesise that in a modern multimedia world, traditional TV reports give way to the stories presented by various types of narrators. Nevertheless, this happens only if the story tends to be relevant for the target audience of the specific YouTube channel.

While researching the rest of the content, we have found out that more than 80 per cent represent the so-called “clean videos” - the materials that do not contain voiceover narratives over the pictures. This is the type of content that tends to be the most popular among the “news junkies” that were described in the second paragraph of this article.

This “clean video” can be subdivided into the following categories:

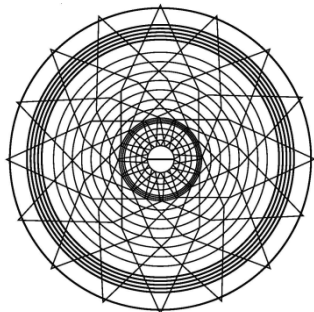
- videos of Ruptly – an RT affiliate;
- videos from other platforms that have gained popularity among the “news junkies”;
- recordings of live broadcasts – such as rallies and protests that do not get any coverage in mainstream media;
- important statements from key newsmakers in the world of alternative media (Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, etc.);
- videos filmed using the latest innovations (timelapse, 360 degrees, etc);
- RT programmes with the participation of the “alternative media icons” (Peter Lavelle, Ron Paul, George Galloway, Noam Chomsky, Larry King, etc.).

Thanks to this type of content synergy, RT has created a media platform which does not only make it possible to consume alternative news – it also produces a new perspective on the mainstream news and current affairs. These deviations from the main trends tend to be extremely popular among the target audience.

### **Aljazeera International representation on YouTube**

After the year 2000, this media outlet from Qatar has begun to present an alternative view on the events in the Arab world. The success of the 24/7 broadcasts in Arabic prompted the channel to launch an English version to operate according to the same principles. However, the traditional models of the channel's development did not bring any positive results. In 2014, the channel had to close its major broadcasting centre in the USA. This freed the resources to highlight the operations of the channel in the sphere of alternative media.

Unlike RT, the New Media department of Al Jazeera chose a combination of mainstream and alternative development for its platform. On its YouTube pages, the share of the broadcast content exceeds 85 per cent. This development paradigm contradicts the RT



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strategy for multimedia development. The reason for this lies in the fact that in the first years of their development, the Doha-based newsroom tended to recruit a lot of remarkable professionals from the leading world mainstream media - even in the new media environment their work continues to demonstrate high-level standards of journalism.

This process has secured the presence of high-quality content at the alternative platforms. That is why the promotion of high-quality content still remains the main strategy for its new media development. The newsroom pays special attention to the promotion of special projects that highlight world-relevant events from the alternative point of view. This is why in October and November 2016 the videos from the sections "Battle for Mosul" and "Battle for Aleppo" constituted one-third of the total channel new media output.

Besides, Aljazeera International is popular for its opinions of politicians, experts and other newsmakers that are regularly placed on the YouTube page. Sometimes these interviews are presented in more extended versions than it was broadcast on air. This also highlights the importance of "yesterday's news content" aired in its raw form after the broadcasts. The share of these materials amounts to 20 per cent.

Thus, unlike RT, the Aljazeera YouTube platform is designed more for the promotion of the channel's own content - they prefer it to the content gathered from different portions of the web space. This also helps Qatar-based media to hold the audience at their multimedia outlets.

To sum up, the results of our mini-research are indicative of the following: visual culture on multimedia alternative platforms is heading towards the increase of the content which is relevant for the target audience. It is especially important to pay attention to the angle of the story and the presence of the narrator which may boost viewing numbers.

This research of the video platforms is a part of the analysis of an alternative media worldview and the ways it changes the mainstream world.

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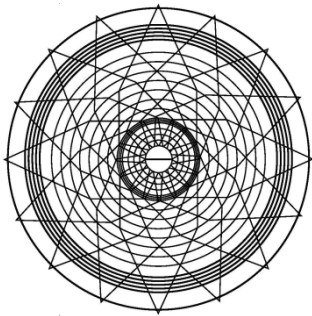
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# РОЛЬ ОБЩЕМИРОВЫХ АЛЬТЕРНАТИВНЫХ СМИ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ МЕДИАСРЕДЕ: ВИЗУАЛЬНЫЙ АСПЕКТ

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### **Аннотация:**

Процессы развития визуальной культуры предопределяют проведение анализа изменения содержания и формы видеоматериалов на примере альтернативных медиа. Термин «альтернативные медиа» определяется как разнообразие медиапроектов, которым присущи формы и углы подачи материала, ранее не выходившие на повестку дня в традиционных, «мейнстримовских», редакциях газет, журналов, радио и телевидения. Сам термин понимается исследователями достаточно широко – в зависимости от поставленных критериев даже государственные медиа ряда стран могут выступать таковыми по отношению к своим глобальным конкурентам. В статье представлена попытка выявить технологию развития альтернативных медиа на примере телеканалов RT и Al Jazeera.

**Ключевые слова:** визуальная культура, пропаганда, Россия Сегодня, Al Jazeera, конфликт в Сирии, международные новости, новые медиа



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