

COGNITIVE THEORIES AND THE CONCEPT OF JOURNALISM

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Abstract

The general aim of cognitivists – the attempt to compare logical and illogical, rational and irrational in the human behavior - can be considered as one of the main object not only in the psychology, but also in the journalism. If you don't take into account assumed problems, the truth can be treated as a lie, an importance as an irrationality, an advantage as defects. In practice the ignorance of balancing, consonance and knowledge for the benefit of “must” turned round for tendentiousness, propaganda, manipulation, rationing of authoritarian and totalitarian models of journalism or for passing from journalistic standards in total. Therefore the article describes the spectrum of cognition in the context of modern Journalism and problems of Media practices, including the balance in journalism in terms of theories of consistency.

Keywords: cognition, journalism, theory of structural balance, theory of cognitive dissonance, theory of communicative acts, congruity theory.

Journalism as a social and cultural phenomenon is interested in and requires a rich experience of the representatives of Social Psychology –cognitive theorists that professionally (theoretically and experimentally) study the “balance”. Certain features in search and observance of informational, cognitive, psychological, creative, professional equilibrium can be accounted for by an interdisciplinary character of the term because it is no secret that the concept of “balance” is a key issue in literary criticism, philosophy, psychology, mass communication, journalism etc. In the same context I would like to analyze the theory of *cognitive consistency*, inalienable from thinking individuals and institutions (ranging from the authors, media and audience to organizations, parties or ministries).

An attempt to comprehend the balance in journalism according to the theories of cognitive sustainability is determined, firstly, by elemental and functional – an object-subject – proximity to journalism (Theory of structural balance by F. Heider [Sokolowa, 1999], that of communicative acts by T. Newcomb [Newcomb, 1984], cognitive dissonance by L. Festinger [Abelson, 1968b] [Festinger, 1999]), theory of congruity by C. Osgood and P. Tannenbaum [Osgood, 1968] [Osgood, 1955] and, secondly, by the ability to overcome the interdisciplinary vacuum (between cognitive psychology and journalism).

The main idea of cognitive theories is production of concepts, thoughts, knowledge whose main source is mentality (signs, symbols, values, understanding). Cognition is a learning process, one of the three theoretical areas of social psychology that is based on knowledge of psychology. Structurally, this process contains a wide spectral-conceptual variation, incorporated, however, by common theoretical sources and

conceptual mechanism.

The essence of the cognitive approach can be summarized as “the desire to explain social behavior (my emphasis – M. Zh.) with the help of the description mainly of *processes of cognition*, particular to human” [Andreieewa, 2002, p. 90] that will, in the process, receive approximately this recreation: “Think, know, estimate, realize, understand, decide – and act (or – do not act)”. Cognition is peculiar to man, and the latter, being a member of society, is involved by this society or consciously imposed on this society, as the sociocultural, nationally-mental and psychological phenomenon, and carries out different actions that, on condition of direct or mediated influence on others, lead to socialization or, vice versa, dissociate.

The connection between “decided” and “did” and social behavior is obvious: man forms an idea about something as accurate system of concepts with the help of certain interpretations; which helps a person to be a producer of various regulators of social behavior such as ideas, intentions, tasks, expectations, beliefs, hypotheses, methods of implementation and so on. The *id est* behavior is often modified by present and/or well-organized systems of signs, symbols, images, notions, knowledge...

Traditionally, in this context, problems like these have been studied by philosophy, logic, psychology, to a lesser extent – history, political science, nation study, literature (especially in the reading-book part). Journalism is at the intersection of Science Rivers. On the one hand, it seems to be saturated with their water and fueled by their energy, on the other – journalism by itself becomes an unquenchable source. The problems, mentioned above, in any case are interdependent with journalism.

Historically, journalism has a complex genesis and has passed more than one civilizational stage. First – as the fruit of oratorical art (ancient publicism), then – clerical messages and polemics (religious and worldview publicism), and with Guttenberg’s invention – absorbed alive the concept (ideas and texts of authors), and a dead one, recreated in the printing mechanism, which made it a mass one. In the 20th century, numerous intellectual revolutions that improved and even absolutized mechanization have been held, so that sometimes a method of delivery, form, appearance (“muscles”) prevail above the content (“brains”). The documentary film, radio, television, satellite communications, internet, “digitization”, social networks – all this not only helped journalism to become more efficient, ubiquitous, global and also approached (in many cases subordinated) it to other sciences and its types of activities (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, engineering sciences, political science, Public Relations, Image science, Conflict science, mass communication, advertising etc.).

Journalism of the early 21st c., irreproachable from outside, differs in essence and is completely reflected on by the realities of the informative era, so that through functional transformation, certain objective pre-conditions of self-destruction arise. Among the symptomatic signs of devaluation of professional standards the most expressive and most notable ones, according to a destructive force, are tendentious, purposeful global changes of conceptual tasks (to control and construct – depending on the model of journalism: whether informative or analytical), on secondary tasks (to entertain and advertise). Sometimes it is combined as an incomprehensible hybrid. Here, for example, even in post-revolutionary time, covered by the war against an external aggressor, moral, professional and ethical principles remain to be a formality for mediators, as practically all the Mass Media present the meeting of the oligarch Dmytro Firtash on the European arena as a main event of the day [Festinger, 1957]. Following such facts of garbling of the reality with the aim of transformation of mass consciousness, is Ukrainian journalism far better, more honest than the so-called Russian Mass Medias (informative troops)? Where is here the professionalism, impartiality, balance? Journalism grows into an irresponsible mediator, principles and functions of journalism (as a self-sufficient Poly-socio-cultural system) seem to be objectively, but in point of fact – in an organized way and roughly – are displaced and substituted by pseudo-modern

spectacular new dominants – quasi principles and quasi functions, erected to the primitive: to please, to glorify, to praise, to entertain, to advertise. All the more distinctly we observe the “abandonment” from the role of the public tribune, representative and initiator of the public dialogue, on behalf of the speaker who praises alien theses, performer of orders, trifling and useless servant...

Even the “Courier of UNESCO” openly declares a repudiation, in the near perspective, from a paper version on behalf of electronic, national TV channels of different countries turning into twenty-four-hour melodramas and dance grounds, “Reality shows”, “Comedy” or political shows without (or with a tiny part of) an interesting, fresh idea, sober estimation, qualified analysis based on the cause-effect relations. It appears that the serial mania, show mania, traditional and hidden advertising allegedly contribute to the increase of ratings, circulation, revenues. On the background of the Mass Media stagnation in Ukraine, especially at regional level, these processes, ontologically levelling in relation to a profession, vocation, degrading for a society, are clear signs of self-destruction with the neutral definitions: “Transformation, optimization of Mass Media”.

Various externally attributable improvements, such as: redistribution of the audience (the increase of viewers and reduction of readers), emergence of new channels and radio stations, newspapers and magazines, Websites, growth of the periodicity and increase in the efficiency are insufficient compensators of losses for the majority of national public information products, national models of journalism. Even Germany, relatively safe in this sense, where, during the last decade, the number of readers is stably high and not re-formatted by digital media products, is also, it turns out, faced with serious intellectual problems, as discussed in the book “Generation stupid”, by Stefan Bonner and Anne Weiss [Krymowa, 2008].

A serious threat to the future of journalism is the setting of norms of its new “role” with a focus on a market function. The journalism, transformed into “journalism as commodity”, stands to lose positional, ideological, professional, moral principles, seeking out modern explanations such as tolerance, but it remains fundamental only in the achievement of incomes super profits.

Different mental components of cognition – knowledge, thoughts, intentions (whether of editors, or media owners or the audience) have become the key factors, confirmed by being based on conservation, development or degradation of Ukrainian media theory doctrines of Gestaltpsychology (after the good expression by Jaroshevsky and Anciferova, “psychology of consciousness” [Jaroshevsky, 1974, p.209]) and K. Lewin’s “Field theory” [Lewin, 2000].

As is well-known, the main directions of cognition are perception, attraction, forming and changing of attitudes. Gestalt psychologists focus not on the real human being and his interaction with the surrounding world, but on his consciousness, whereas human activities are diminished by the activity of consciousness. R. Abelson, a theorist of cognitivism, aptly summed up: everyone primarily is a Thinker, and then – an Actor [Abelson, 1968, p. 113]. The *Id est* actions of a person are usually realized, not spontaneous, reflex and are the quintessence of the procedural type of behavior. The journalist also constructs a certain process and follows it: at first collects the facts, eyewitness accounts, comments, studies documents, comprehends them and only then writes them down.

On the level of the human psyche and action there is an obvious connection between social psychology and journalism (in the context of comprehension of the last one as functional, perspective socio-cultural, to say, psycho-sociocultural model). However there are moments that really bring closer, combine psychology and journalism, for example, the concept of the image, once discussed among psychologists. Modern cognition theorists have denied earlier views of Gestalt psychologists that the

concept of image is an integral unit, the mosaic of the feelings. As a result of scientific debates, the phenomenological method was implemented: an observer describes his perception integrally, forming the image. This method is described in detail in the program J. Bruner "New Look" [Bruner, 1975, p. 136], relevant and valuable for both literary and journalism critics. J. Bruner has developed the idea of categorization. Another idea – isomorphism (by Köhler, structural similarity of material and psychological processes) – is borrowed from Gestalt psychology, examined by cognition theorists mainly in terms of various aspects of interpersonal relations, but not as socially organized space. For mass communication and journalism, however, more important, i.e. more promising from the point of view of scientific research, is a study and comprehension of social space.

The law of Köhler (law of centration) has become a push to the construction of numerous models of accordance and balance, important in human mutual relations in terms of the subjectivity of psychological comfort. Its essence consists in that, adequately to particular situations, there can be new structures of perception – "re-centering", in subjective practice explained as an *inside*. Reliance on the life experience is an important step in the genesis of scientific psychology. In addition, a fundamental principle of cognitivism which was based on the program of Gestalt psychologists, has become a combination of experimental practice and direct experience.

The "Field theory" by K. Lewin – a new stage, the theoretical source of cognition theorists, which supplements the previous idea, based primarily on perceptions. Principles of research of personality problems, suggested in a field theory, are broader than "image", there "motive" becomes important. Thus, K. Lewin focuses not so much on the gnoseological, but on motivational aspects of subject-objective relations. Principal in the "theory of the field" is the idea of environment and valence². The idea of interaction of individual and milieus (environments) allows to overcome especially cognitive formations by real behavior.

The predecessors of cognitivism understood "field" as perceptive structure that was directly perceived by consciousness, Lewin, however – as the behavioral variable [Jaroshevsky, 1974, p. 258]. Duality of interpretations, firstly, insufficient to deny or reject the theory of fields, secondly, fundamentally important in social psychology, social information, mass communication, as it balances the different types of structures – from cognitive to human relationships – makes the changes possible between them, provides a transition to another. The idea of valence justifies the "locomotion" of an individual in a vital environment: positive valence is an aspiration of an individual for a certain part of the power field, and negative is the motion to an opposite side [Andreieewa, 2002, p.95].

The influence of Lewin on development of social psychology is unique in that sense, that, on the one hand, from now on cognition theorists normalize the analysis of humanistic aspects of behavior, and on the other, – works by his students (L. Festinger and F. Heider) present the basis of cognitivism as a separate trend.

The concept of "cognitive organization" or "cognitive structure" is the main conceptual component of the mechanism of cognitive theories. In the interpretation of R. Zajonc, "cognitive organization" is "any form of the interaction between cognitive elements (despite their determination) that has motivational, affective, constituent, behavioral or cognitive effects" [Zajonc, 1968, p. 321]. By the way, as to the definitions of "elements" of the structure, there is no common platform, and scientific debate has been simmering over the decades. To provide an example, L. Festinger believes that

these *elements* are "any knowledge, ideas, persuasions about surroundings, about itself, about somebody's behavior" [Abelson, 1968b, p. 200], and J. Brehm calls them "points of information" [Andreieewa, 2002, p. 97]. Inside the cognitive structures three main processes are distinguished, viz. a) differentiation, b) integration, c) matching of the items.

They can be interpreted, firstly, in terms of psychology (role of the individual in separation and identification of different data and events), secondly, in terms of psychology of creativity in journalism (role, methods and ways of popularizing "Ideas, topics, goals, objectives, motives and images..."), and, thirdly, in terms of the theory of mass communication (roles of the

The concepts of “stimulus” and “response” complement the conceptual mechanism of cognitive theories. A “stimulus” is the dynamic, activated object as element of general situation, and a “response” is a process of constructing a cognitive structure with taking into account of the stimulus. Instead, the most important variable of human behavior is, according to C. Osgood, “meaning” [Osgood, 1968, p. 32], which J. Bruner calls “the consequence of categorization” [Bruner, 1975, p. 138].

Explanation of “meaning” without “linking” it to psychology, such as concept of understanding of the importance, necessity, engine stimulus, etc., would – we believe – be incomplete. Science, however, owes cognition theorists a “meaningful” polemic-stimulated emergence of the “frame of reference”, irreplaceable in logic, during the analysis of “methodological and theoretical problems of knowledge for description of certain general context which is taken into account by a researcher or which is inherent to some theoretical orientation” [Andreieewa, 2002, p. 95-96]. “Frame of reference” is one of the most universal, often irreplaceable methodological keys of the social sciences, humanities, including journalism, which, if not the main one, is, then, an extremely important principle of constant comparison-scaling (large, greater; small, smaller). It is this principle that makes it possible to give a detailed examination of certain objects and to contextually compare behavior.

Among the two groups of cognitive theories, viz. a) theory of cognitive consistency (the most prominent representatives: F. Heider, T. Newcomb, L. Festinger, C. Osgood, P. Tannenbaum, R. Abelson, M. Rosenberg), b) theories of S. Asch, D. Krech and R. Crutchfield – in terms of suitability to the theories of mass communication and journalism the works of representatives of the first group should be considered more, because the second group of cognition theorists does not accept the ideas of consistency.

The work *Theory of Cognitive consistency* [Abelson, 1968] is an illustration of the phenomenon, when at a certain period of time there approximate theories of different authors with no direct scientific contacts. In the late 1950s, theories of cognitive consistency occur under different names: balance, congruence, symmetry, dissonance, the common thing for them being a maximization of internal and intergroup accordance, as the disparity generates psychological discomfort that assists the reconstruction of cognitive structures with the aim of recovery (establishment) of accordance. Ebbinghaus, however, generalized: these theories have the “long past, but short history”, the followers of theories of consistency saw the connection with a medieval notion of “logical man”, and with later philosophical concepts of “rational man”, “economic man” [8, p. 99].

The general aim of cognition theorists – an attempt to compare logical and illogical, rational and irrational in human behavior – can be considered as one of the major tasks of not only psychology but also journalism. Without taking into account the already mentioned problems, the truth can be interpreted as a lie, importance – as irrationality, illogicality – as logic, advantages – as defects... In practice, ignoring the balance, consonance or knowledge in favor of the “necessary” turns into tendentiousness, propaganda, manipulation, normalization of the authoritarian, totalitarian type of

journalism or total rejection of journalistic standards.

With the awareness of the complicated forms of social life, search for new and rational forms of behavior induced to rethink many problems and phenomena. It is believed that direct sources of theories of consistency are, firstly, the ideas of K. Lewin about the causes of conflict (types of conflicts: "approach – approach", "avoidance – avoidance", "approach – avoidance", then they have been experimentally confirmed by Miller), and secondly, the collective work under the direction of T. Adorno "Authoritarian personality" [Adorno, 1997]. Directed against the Führer cult, the book contained a chapter "Cognitive structure of personality", where the notion of "tolerance of ambiguity", which appeared as the prototype of the idea of "tolerance of disparity" (the theory of cognitive dissonance) is comprehended.

In terms of practical journalism, issues and ideas raised in the works of cognition theorists are important, though almost not comprehended.

Speculation (unjustified use) of concepts of "tolerance", "Freedom of speech", "balance", first of all generate a caricature of media (professional and social), and secondly, contribute to the effectiveness of specific communication technologies that are incompatible with the media, and close to media plus propaganda and manipulation, implemented with the help of theories "subcutaneous" model, spirals etc.

From the point of view of the new challenges, which journalism of the future is facing, still having a chance not to lose journalistic potential (described in particular, in the books by Yo. Los' *Journalism and trends of the world and Perspectives of ideological journalism* [Los, 2008] [Los, 2014], in my monograph *The socio-cultural model of journalism...* [Zhytaryuk, 2008]), it is necessary to take a fresh approach not only to definitions, but also to the understanding of the social and global phenomena. Therefore, not so much following dictionary explanations, but basing things on the common sense and comprehension of the well-known tendencies and phenomena, designing new ones, I consider that freedom of speech is, first of all, a responsibility for a word: balanced, intelligent, honest, competent, but not a right to be irresponsible, fraudulent and destructive words-producers of corresponding ideas and actions. Tolerance is, in fact, a culture of dialogue, but not a connivance to the impudence of the monologue, it is a prohibition to lie, defamation, glorification; a utilization of the verbal-text waste, but not silent or mute nodding of the head.

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