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“Yandex.zen”: Platform as a Tool for Media Education

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Abstract

The article analyzes the experience of using the *Yandex* platform *Zen* or *Yandex.Zen* in professional media education. This research is based on a practice-oriented approach to training media professionals. The authors of the article suggest linking the idea of practice-oriented education with the process of implementing a full-cycle media project by each student. The research includes all the stages of media project from creating their own channels to monetizing them. This model was created and successfully implemented as part of the training of journalists and specialists in advertising and PR in two universities and it's considered as an integral process of preparing media specialists for the market realities of digital communication.

The article shows why the platform *Yandex.Zen* is a suitable tool for training specialists in contrast to groups and personal accounts in social media. The use of this tool in media education has shown both the positive aspects of project learning and the fact that the project model of learning is not suitable for all students. It includes the stages of implementation of the model during two semesters from choosing of thematic areas for students' own channels and the organization of the educational process to receiving feedback from students in the form of a survey and self-reflection in coursework. The author of the article offers his own experience as a possible scenario for professional media education to colleagues from other universities.

Keywords: professional media education, *Yandex.Zen* platform, project, content, algorithm, student self-reflection.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, there have been significant changes in media formats, and the profession of a journalist and PR specialist has changed. The entire everyday life of an ordinary person has been mediatized, and the trend to turn each person into a media is maintained in the context of the development of new digital communication tools. Every year, updated formats and tools for online communication impose new requirements for training professional media communication personnel in terms of technological competence. Media platforms provide more and more opportunities for all market participants: new channels and new tools for agencies, media, social activists and bloggers are emerging.

At the same time, journalists and communicators working online need almost uninterrupted text activity: editors and publishers are puzzling over the problem of 24-hour updating of media channels. In these conditions, media education plays a huge role, and the education of specialists in the field of mass communication has to be transformed based on new market demands. The increasing competition, the demand for new skills and professions, and the development of

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new rules of the game encourage the use of new tools in teaching practice today. “In society, there is a strong need to search for and form modern models that provide predictability” (Tarasenko et al., 2019: 592).

2. Materials and methods

The main sources of writing this article are, first, the results of using the project learning model in two universities, and secondly, the texts of students written in the form of self-reflection (questionnaires based on the results of the semester and term papers on the research of the *Yandex platform.Zen*). The questionnaires that students completed at the end of the course included questions about the positive/negative qualities of the *Yandex* platform itself (for authors), and also included questions about the pros and cons of project learning for students using the platform.

The author's reasoning is also based on the problem-chronological approach and the method of included observation, which allow evaluating a specific model in professional education. The authors suggest linking the idea of practice-oriented education with the process of implementing a full-cycle media project by each student: from creating his own channel to its monetization. This model was successfully implemented into educational process in two universities (Novgorod State University and Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation) within the studying “Theory and Practice of Media” and “Promotion of Projects on the Internet” disciplines.

The comparative method allowed the author to compare the results of students' work within the framework of the platform and their conclusions with the conclusions of researchers about its use by large media projects.

3. Discussion

Professional media education has always played a key role in reviews of various approaches to media education, its transformation in the post-Soviet period, and studies of the current state (Fedorov, 2015). The researchers note: “the main directions of media education are: media education of future professionals in the field of mass communication – journalists, editors, directors, producers, actors, camera men, etc.” (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2018: 12). At the same time, the practice-oriented model of education is becoming more and more popular today. This applies both to the training of journalists and education of other communication specialists, whose work effects are usually measured in quantitative terms (the number of views, the growth of the resource's audience, etc.). Listing the difference between practice-oriented education and academic education, I.A. Fateeva notes that the main conditions are the involvement of practical journalists and project technologies (Fateeva, 2008: 24). Design technologies need tools and platforms. Since the digitalization of all life, especially the communication of the youth audience, has been repeatedly pointed out by researchers (Kaminskaya, 2015), it is necessary to use online platforms and modern media tools for training.

The experience of using project-based training of journalists in leading Russian universities has received scientific understanding in recent years. Thus, L.A. Kohanova, summarizing in a number of articles the experience of using project training of journalists at MSU, notes that it “contributes to the formation of a new digital culture, the carriers of which are mainly young people. In addition, it is used for inter-generational dialogue, which in many ways contributes to the resolution of the digital divide” (Kokhanova, 2018: 319). L.P. Shesterkina, A.R. Marfitsyna comprehend the experience of the faculty of journalism of the South Ural University, where students under the guidance of a teacher make public television projects on the shopping center “SUSU-TV”. The researchers conclude that media projects are the dominant component of modern journalism. The media project defined by the researchers as “a kind of social engineering in the field of media, which is a creative development with goal setting, tasks, and character design changes, scale, and time-bound implementation; performed using various technological platforms and aimed at achieving goals that are of great social importance for the development of society” (Shesterkina, Marfitsyna, 2019: 41).

In understanding the Russian practice of project-based professional media education, researchers mainly present projects of traditional media (TV programs, Newspapers, radio scripts). The development of new media platforms is very slow, although the students can use them to express their opinion.

Speaking about emerging new platforms online and the use of artificial intelligence in the education process, the researchers emphasize their importance (as well as risks) for the digital generation: "For youth, these platforms offer new opportunities and risks for participation, and suggest corresponding implications for civic education" (James, Cotnam-Kappel, 2019).

When projecting into the future, various use cases are considered in science new technologies in the educational process. Nobody can ignore the duality either the role of technology in the educational process, which today began pay attention in scientific discourse. So mastering new technologies can give equal opportunities to all students for self-realization. On the other hand, they can become a means of control and operation, and prepare students for readiness to be exploited in the economy (Dencik et al, 2019; Doxtdator, 2017; Macgilchrist et al., 2020; Vetter, 2018). At the same time, the use of technology and understanding of this experience gives rise to discussions about the role of the teacher in the education process. In particular, there is a possible decrease in its influence and its role in the educational process (Macgilchrist, Felicitas, 2017). Criticizing the traditional e-learning system as not adapted to individual requests of students, as well as reduced opportunities for students to work with texts (as opposed to visual information) the authors offer various options algorithms for personalizing systems (Benhamdi et al., 2017).

Russian universities, however, today tend to meet the needs of the economy, and not personal requests of students. At the same time, it is especially difficult for them to integrate into the rhythm of its rapid changes, when the situation around the world is as follows: "Big data has the power to transform education and educational research. Governments, researchers and commercial companies are only beginning to understand the potential that big data offers in informing policy ideas, contributing to the development of new educational tools and innovative ways of conducting research" (Heed, Kubyskin, 2018; Williamson, 2018).

Media projects have changed the very nature of journalism, and today professional media education cannot do without project technologies. At the same time even the very methodology of project training is not universally recognized and well-established, and it is perceived as experimental. In the universities where the authors work, have used such forms of design as creating their own educational newspaper (paper and online versions), creating and promoting *Vkontakte* thematic groups, and information channels on Instagram for a number of years.

Yandex.Zen was used for the first time, the author faced the need to understand this training experience and evaluate the channel as a training tool. The platform phenomenon is distinguished by the involvement of millions of people in a short period of time. *Yandex.Zen* managed to achieve good results despite the fierce competition online for the target audience and for the activity of the authors. Today, this media format is both a media and an economic project. Using artificial intelligence, this platform selects the most popular content for a specific user and analyzes it using different technologies. The system determines the subject of texts, categorizes them, analyzes images and recognizes what is depicted on them. Then it promotes the material to a specific user and offers to view it. The system analyzes the user's browser history, preferences, time zone, and many other factors.

At first, *Yandex.Zen* appeared in order to help the news aggregator *Yandex* to increase its turnover and profit exclusively at the expense of internal resources – a free audience and a team of developers. However, many authors were involved in the system, some of whom, under the terms of the project, were able to get monetization of their author's efforts to create content.

Using various media formats (video, text, photos), the channel is not a media in its traditional sense. It is difficult to register it as a media according to the rules of Russian legislation. *Yandex.Zen* is also a research problem today – in terms of genres, images of the author, recipients of texts and other familiar criteria, it does not fit into the accepted typologies of media. Its creators note that *Zen* was treated by its authors as a universal product in order to increase the consumption of media and adjust it to the interests of people. It is not limited to one format, but includes all possible formats. *Zen* is also different from *Yandex.News*, where the main task of the service is to aggregate news and display the most important thing to all of the same, on the main page of the portal.

At the same time, the algorithm offers earnings to authors who can open their own channel within the project. It strictly defines and periodically changes the rules of the game for authors and improves the technology for delivering content to the audience.

In 2018, the project's Executive Director, V. Lamburt, announced the goal of making *Zen* a competitor to *Instagram*, *Vkontakte*, and *YouTube* worth several billion dollars. In an interview

with the *Bell*, he notes: “We are aiming for something extraordinary, we are building a kind of “TV of the future”... It is based on artificial intelligence technologies that will very soon completely determine media consumption. Even the stream of TV broadcasting in the home TV in 10-20 years will work on the same algorithms that we are currently developing in *Zen*. As a result we will have a mix of the formats that we can already see in social media-video, TV broadcasting, text, and images. There will be a personalized newsfeed that will accompany us everywhere on different devices, especially on smartphones.

If we talk about the business sense for *Yandex*, then *Zen* is an opportunity to increase the mobile audience and enter the social media market. The market that has traditionally been a stranger to *Yandex*. *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and other social networks and services are located in This area. And we started working on this territory" (We..., 2018).

Some of Russia's leading media outlets are actively and successfully attracting new audiences to *Zen*. These are *Lenta.ru*, *Kommersant*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, and others. *Zen* has also proved attractive to marketers of some brands. The platform itself contains both guidelines for working on it (how to create and monetize a *Zen* channel) and descriptions of successful cases for using it. For example, it places a self-advertisement in the form of news (“Eat Village food”). *Yandex* runs its own channel-*Zen* magazine (<https://zen.yandex.ru/zenmag>). It reports on various innovations of the system, publishes its own narratives and gives useful advice to authors and recommendations to subscribers. So, in March 2019, a new version of the algorithm was released, which is called Alpha Centauri (both in the closest star system to Earth, three stars, and in *Zen*, three new algorithm changes: A, B, and “Proxima”). *Zen* changed its technology for selecting articles for recipients, increased the speed of selection, and improved machine learning technologies. A large number of channel authors, however, criticized these updates: they wrote that they did not notice any improvements at all. Many of them suggested that *Zen* decided to “squeeze out” the old channels, so as not to pay them and live at the expense of new authors, promising them success and convincing them that they need to write and write, while at the same time he will use free unique content and collect money from it.

However, the phenomenon of *Yandex.Zen* despite significant financial indicators and active growth of those involved in the 4 years of existence in addition to the optimistic predictions received a negative evaluation. All of them are in the form of short reflective reviews primarily from the authors of the platforms that tried to monetize their channels or to express themselves creatively in it. The main negative effect connected with *Yandex.Zen* and interfered with the practice of teaching, is a great dependence evaluation of author's work by the audience. This inevitably gives rise to pandering to the audience, the desire to please the most uninspiring readers. So S.M. Shakirov giving a detailed analysis of the algorithm of the platform and finding it even intellectual narratives, however, notes that the platform is intended to be “closer to meeting the demand of mass culture” (Shakirov, 2019: 131).

Today, there are only a few scientific publications, mainly related to understanding cases of using the platform for traditional media. So A.A. Morozova, O.V. Murzina show how this platform is successfully used regional site 74 (summer 2019), noting that “promotion and advertising, in its usual sense, it happens by itself and does not require financial investments” (Morozova, Murzina, 2019: 110). N.A. Larina, A.Yu. Tsitsinov, on the contrary, present the result of an unsuccessful experience using the platform in the military journalism for the weekly *Zvezda* (Larina, Tsitsinov, 2019). The case of failure to promote *Zvezda* explained by the specifics of the submission of texts in military journalism, which is not suitable for algorithms of the platform. The project of the blog *Zvezda* on *Zen* platform today should be recognized suspended and has not received the widespread popularity of the little commented on, the audience is only 294 subscribers (as of 24.09.2019).

There are rare attempts at scientific understanding of the *Zen* phenomenon itself. I.V. Novikova notes that the narratives of *Yandex Zen* are a new trend in filing media content. However, listing tips for using and creating a successful one the narrative of *Yandex.Zen*, the author adds to them their own, very general recommendations for using photo materials in online communication (Novikova, 2019). The use of a new media tool in teaching practice, despite to all the existing contradictions of the platform and criticism of the project approach to media education seems promising in the conditions of digitalization of reality.

4. Results

The process of using the *Yandex* platform *Zen* in project training was as following. Firstly, practice-oriented teaching included collaboration with editor-in-chief of the regional online publication *53 news* (<https://53news.ru/>) who worked as an expert. The publication uses mass media in Russia for its promotion social networks, but the most successful experience was using the platform *Yandex.Zen*: over the past year, *53 news* has managed to double the number of views and it reached the top attendance figures among regional online media.

In the course of teaching the courses “theory and practice of media” and “promotion of projects on the Internet”, third-year students of the two universities created more than 30 own channels, but only 10 % of them managed to monetize.

The topics of their own channels chosen by the students met their daily interests: cosmetics, sports, celebrity discussion, and study. Some students decided not to focus on a specific topic, but to write their opinions on the current events of a particular day on a daily basis. There were also those who, after starting to write on one topic, changed the format and subject of their channel several times. One of these “changeable” students found his niche and received monetization of the channel. In addition to monetizing channels, it was important for students to learn how to write texts for 40+ audiences, which today make up the majority of the platform's subscribers. The situation with the target audience, whose information requests are difficult for students to understand, represented an additional problem area of training.

Students had to first study the rules for working on the platform and audience feedback on similar channels. At the same time, they realized that readers leave mostly negative comments. Next, students had to present their observations and research on the platform in their own essays.

Then, after opening and promoting the channel, students recorded their own achievements and mistakes together with the teachers. Monetization of the channel and compliance with all stages of presenting their results to teachers meant that they automatically received the highest grade in the subject for the semester.

In the next semester, two students, having successfully monetized their own channels, chose understanding their results as the goal of the course work on the PR specialization.

In the course of training, research of the platform and their own experience as authors, students identified the following advantages of the *Yandex.Zen* platform:

1. Compared to many other platforms, *Yandex's* policies and algorithms are aimed at ensuring maximum impressions of the author's content, based on the interests of users similar to the proposed topic. It is also important that the use of this platform is free.
2. An ever-increasing number of users of the platform: more and more businessmen, advertisers and ordinary users are included in the work on this platform, which makes the possibility of monetization of the channel more and more likely.
3. Unlike networks like *Instagram*, monetization on this platform is possible without having a huge number of subscribers.
4. Impressions of this platform are present in almost all *Yandex* services. This property allows you to get the maximum flow of impressions and readouts on the author's channel.
5. The possibility of almost unlimited placement of links to other resources of the author, which in the end only increases the popularity of the use of this platform by authors, increases the possibility of providing information, also allows for additional monetization in other platforms.
6. The absence of restrictions on the volume of author's articles allows you to give out the maximum of useful content.

Imperfections of the *Yandex* platform *Zen* were also identified:

1. The platform's recommendation engine fails, giving users content that doesn't match their interests. For example, if a user is interested in digital technologies, they can get a selection of anecdotes.
2. Geolocation functions that link to the user's location do not always work correctly, which ultimately leads to negative responses to the content of the proposed platform content, since many users are more interested in news from their native region. The user will not read various articles and news about incidents in Kolomna while in Veliky Novgorod.
3. According to the observations of students and user reviews of the platform, on *Yandex.Zen* there are problems with unsubscribing and blocking content that users want to exclude from their feed. Many people notice that even if you use the “Block source” function provided by the platform,

after a while, this source appears again in the feed. However, this happens in both mobile and browser versions of the *Yandex* platform *Zen*, even when using *Yandex.Web* browser.

4. The disadvantages of the platform also include the abundance of ad blocks in the personal feed. Despite the fact that advertising allows the audience to use the platform for free, and channel authors to get monetization, excessive advertising negatively affects the number of users of the platform, which in turn leads to a commensurate decrease in the key indicators of channel monetization.

5. A significant drawback of the platform is the small functionality of the content submission capabilities due to the capabilities of the built-in editor (this affects the key indicator—the completion of publications).

The survey also concerned the project form of training itself. Disadvantages of the project format of training using the *Yandex* platform are identified. *Zen* highlighted by students can be divided into the following two groups. The first group of shortcomings was related to objective points (the above-mentioned features of the *Yandex* platform *Zen*). The second group—with subjective feelings of students: “not everyone likes this Internet platform and not everyone could find themselves in it”, “it is easier for me to write texts on the topic proposed by the teacher”.

Among the positive aspects were the development of practical skills and the habit of constantly practicing writing texts, a useful skill for a journalist and PR specialist to explore their audience and match it, as well as the opportunity to earn money from professional activities. Examples of positive feedback about the course methodology are as follows: “This prepared us for future professional activities. In addition, if a student receives monetization on the channel, he has a stable income, this motivates further growth”; “I had almost no difficulties. I wrote about what I was interested in, what I did in my daily life. While doing sports in the gym or cooking, I took photos. Then I wrote small texts and published it. With the advent of monetization of my efforts, it became much more interesting to work in *Yandex Zen*.”

Based on the analysis of students' work on the platform, we can define the most important influence on the success of monetization:

- 1) Correctly selected title to the text;
- 2) Creative design of the article / narrative
- 3) The volume of the article (do not publish too large texts);
- 4) Writing text in an accessible language;
- 5) Correctly selected tags;
- 6) Using the most popular topics for your target audience.

The ability to meet these requirements will be useful, in the opinion of the author of the article, when working in any field of media.

5. Conclusion

1. Today, difficulties in organizing practice-oriented education of professionals are associated with a rapid change in media reality: constant updating of communication tools and the emergence of new formats. One of the ways to organize such training is to introduce project work on new online platforms as part of special courses.

2. Choosing the platform *Yandex.Zen* for the practice of media education was very successful. Platform *Yandex.Zen* offers authors an algorithm of work, defines the rules for creating texts and allows the teacher to follow all the stages of performing the algorithm and getting the result. However, the work of the platform is not yet without drawbacks. Motivating students to notice the platform's capabilities and shortcomings is one of the goals of training future communication professionals. To get the best effect from such project training, it is necessary to attract communication professionals who have mastered new online tools.

3. The learning process will be most effective if students' reflection is organized based on its results. This can be achieved not only with the help of survey methods, but also within the framework of course work on specialization. In this case, self-reflection combines with an analytical approach to the communication tool that is used.

4. The described project approach is effective for those students who are communicative leaders and are able to show responsibility and creativity at each stage of the project implementation. One of the options for such project work is to work in groups with the distribution of roles among students.

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