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1. Introduction

Given the recent influx of "fake news" in the United States and state propaganda in Russia, media literacy, defined as the ability to access and analyze media messages as well as create, reflect, and take action, using the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world (Lee, 2018), has probably more than ever become a critical skill to teach to university students. Misinformation in the media is associated with swaying elections (Gunther, Beck, & Nisbet, 2018), increasing political polarization (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016), or leading to violence (Haag & Salam, 2017).

A recent analysis of "media literacy" definitions used by scholars found more than 400 definitional elements (Potter, 2022). This speaks to the evolving complexity and diversity of skills within the "media literacy" field but also reflects a continued debate over its meaning, especially its distinction from "media education" (Fedorov, 2015). The current geopolitical climate, coinciding with the global COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneously illuminated the necessity of teaching critical evaluation of media information and created challenges in specifically U.S.-based Russian-language instruction. Creatively addressing both needs became the focus of an advanced Russian language course taught within an intensive foreign language university program, where examining journalism as a profession became the main vehicle of learning.

2. The original course design, challenges, and solutions

The original modular semester-long course was designed in 2020 as a survey of various topics for students at the Intermediate High to Advanced levels who have had six or seven semesters of Russian. Our goal was to support the students in becoming media-literate individuals or "capable recipients and creators of content, understanding sociopolitical context, and

using codes and representational systems effectively to live responsibly in society and the world at large" (Smelser & Baltes, 2001, p. 94). The modules covered a range of topics including ecological economics, cuisine and nutrition, journalism, and human rights. The intention of the course was to go beyond providing students with the language to speak about important topics, but to contextualize the language as well, making it personally relevant and engaging. Throughout the course, instructional methodology emphasizes active learning and evolves in tandem with student interests and changes in current events.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it has become much more difficult to gain access to uncensured media sources. The majority of independent media outlets have been shut down or gone "underground." The existing textbooks in the field, including *News from Russia: Language, Life, and the Russian Media* (Bogomolov & Nummikoski, 2004) and В мире новостей [In the World of News] (Moskvitina, 2019), despite their obvious linguistic and pedagogical merit, have suddenly become obsolete, as many sources mentioned in them have ceased to exist. These developments, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, created the need to revise the curriculum and the approach to teaching media literacy in the *Professional Russian Tutorial* course taught in the Russian Flagship Program at the University of Georgia.

3. The revised journalism module

In teaching media literacy in the Journalism module, we decided to go beyond simply familiarizing students with Russian media language; instead, we focused specifically on media literacy skills as they are practiced and acquired by journalists. In this way, students would experience what it is like to become a mindful, self-reflective journalist: how to select sources, how to question what they see in general media and social media, how to analyze any given article or post information or opinion with accuracy as the guiding principle. We thus designed a series of hands-on interactive activities, prepared a collection of audio and written materials, and invited prominent Russian journalists working in independent Russian-speaking media TV Rain, Meduza, and Helpdesk.media as guest presenters. Two years of remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic had expanded

the instructional format, so that it became possible to invite guest speakers from outside the U.S. to participate in class discussions remotely. Out of safety concerns, we will not disclose their names. The main themes covered in this module were objectivity of news presentation, credibility, and the overall importance of accuracy and availability of information. Assigned materials included excerpts from Russian language textbooks, news articles published in state-owned and independent Russian-language media, journalistic investigations, testimonials, and interviews.

We opened the Journalism module with the subject of news analysis – that is, what is allowed (or censored) in state-owned Russian media. A case study of Vladimir Pozner provided a good example of a classic Soviet/Russian journalist who has worked for the state-owned media, although he has spoken somewhat openly about political matters in the independent media. This example gave students a sense of journalism in the state-owned media, a basis for comparison with the experiences of the journalists from independent media invited to speak to the class. The students watched excerpts about journalism from Pozner's talk show spanning many years on Channel One (the main Russian government-owned TV channel), as well as his lecture on journalism on the independent TV channel *Дождь* [TV Rain] from 2014. The students then analyzed a range of topics covered in Pozner's talks, including the profession of journalism itself, blogging as a source of information, and the politicization of journalism as a profession and the history of how that came to be. The former two were discussed in Pozner's talk show on Channel One, the latter in his conversation with TV Rain. There are many reasons why Pozner served as the first example of a journalist for the course. On the one hand, there are textbook materials available that introduce the vocabulary and grammatical constructions essential to the topic in question based on Pozner's persona. On the other, he is a perfect example of a journalist still living who has appeared on both pro-government and independent media. Contrasting videos of both types provided students with a stepping-stone to the discussions of both journalism as a profession and media coverage in Russia in particular. Without this example, the appearance of the much younger class guests who became journalists in the early 2000s would have made a less striking contrast.

After the Pozner assignments, students were presented with a series of guided activities designed to help them recognize and discover elements of objectivity, more generally, in the media. For example, students were asked to analyze and critically evaluate news articles and multimedia materials, such as videos and podcasts, identifying characteristics of clearly biased views in contrast to those that were unbiased. They were assigned to prepare an oral presentation on a particular news item appearing in two different sources (i.e., in both state-owned and independent media) and to elaborate on the differences they found between the two sources. The students identified the following features as evidence of a lack of objectivity: 1) emotionally-laden words and epithets; 2) quotations exclusively from representatives of a certain political view; 3) use of collective pronouns in relation to the armed forces or sports teams; 4) lack of sources; 5) personal opinions presented as facts; 6) story selection; 7) presentation of the writer's view as the predominant position; 8) euphemistic word choices (the most obvious example being "special military operation" in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as the use of the words "criminal," "terrorist," "fascist," and similar in the same context). By contrast, students identified the following features as evidence for objectivity: 1) citation of at least two credible, verifiable sources; 2) reference to specific sources rather than using a generalized "they," "it is established, well-known," etc.; 3) evidence of a variety of opinions and points of view; 4) the use of neutral rather than evaluative vocabulary; and 5) clear distinctions between facts and opinions.

To better prepare for the meeting with the representative from TV Rain, the students were required to read articles on the then-recent scandal surrounding the channel and its coverage of the war. They watched both the fuller version of the broadcast that led to the firing of program host Aleksey Korostelyov and the excerpts that were taken out of context and later circulated on the internet. This case served as a good example of how any piece of information can be presented in a different light depending on the perspective of the presenter, the media outlet that publishes it, and the hand that pays the media outlet. This case led to interesting conversations before and during the seminar.

After several in-class activities directly addressing media literacy, two times throughout the module the students also had the

opportunity to speak directly (via Zoom) with more contemporary Russian-speaking journalists from independent media. The guests were asked to briefly describe their journalistic careers and to elaborate on the challenges they faced in their profession under the Putin administration. The students asked questions about the dangers that the journalists and their families face because of what they do, as well as the steps they have to take to continue reporting when it puts at risk not only their own lives but the lives of those who might be willing to serve as their sources. On more than one occasion the notion of "unbiased" media was raised, and the guests were asked to defend their position and explain how news could be unbiased if journalists "must" have a certain point of view. The guest speakers discussed the kinds of sources they believe to be credible and honest, and the ways that these sources are supported. After these conversations, students were presented with a few ethical dilemmas that journalists might face and were asked to discuss the steps they would recommend in resolving these ethical dilemmas. This assignment is based on a game previously but no longer available on Meduza.io. A more current example of the instructions might be (in Russian):

> Discuss with your partner the following case: You are a journalist working from outside Russia. Your most accurate source is a Russian citizen still residing in the country. They give you details of a high-ranking corruption case. You are not allowed to publish an article of this magnitude without at least one named source and two corroborating anonymous accounts. If you publish your main source's name, you will undoubtedly get them imprisoned or otherwise prosecuted. Do you bury the lead or endanger your source? Why?

One of the assignments created to elicit output from the students was to present one of the recent cases in Russian investigative journalism. They were offered a list of cases from which each student chose one to study and present. They were asked to describe the problem under investigation, the process of investigation, its findings, and the reasons it had succeeded. Topics ranged from corruption in the Moscow funeral industry, Yevgeny Prigozhin's rise as Putin's Grey Cardinal, the problem

of child brides in the Caucasus region, to Navalny's investigations into the corruption of power in Russia and the assassination attempt against him. The groundwork for these presentations was laid by one of the guest speakers who in their capacity as one of the editors of helpdesk.media has had to conduct investigations into the atrocities in Mariupol and other cities in Ukraine (*Девятиэтажка*, 2022). He explained how they collected data and how they came up with the idea for Instagram "stories" to function as a means of creating a picture of what happened utilizing both visual and verbal means. This approach especially resonated with the students as they are all very comfortable with the platform but had not seen it used as a news source in this manner before. The journalist's experiences helped the students see the investigations not only as sources of information but also as personal and professional journeys of people who are passionate about their work and the craft that goes into these stories.

One other project for this segment of the module was to create either a biased or an objective piece of news reporting. Students were paired and offered two options to choose from: to role-play an interview between a famous politician and a journalist, sharing or opposing their point of view, or to present the same news item in two ways, biased or neutral. The latter option was the most popular by far. Classmates in the audience then analyzed the recorded newscasts and interviews for evidence of biased and unbiased reporting. This type of analysis demonstrated challenges in identifying more subtle features of biased and unbiased reporting and revealed the most prominent "tools" of the former: emotionally colored words, exaggerated political opinion, and fabrication or complete lies.

A prompted writing assignment at the end of the module helped bring all of these experiences together for the students. They were asked to imagine and reflect on what it is like to be a journalist in Russia and in the U.S. and to compare the two. The prompt asked the students to discuss cross-cultural differences and similarities in the profession and to express their opinions on the concept of "objectivity" in journalism. Students gave examples of how journalistic standards are set, what expectations news consumers have, and what obstacles journalists might face in each country. This assignment encouraged students to reflect on and integrate all their observations from the conversations they had, all the articles they read, and the independent analysis they performed.

4. The human rights module

The course's exploration of media literacy as essentially an ethics tool in developing interest and commitment to the truth is inextricably bound to the topic of human rights. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the previously law-centered module turned into a module fully dedicated to human rights violations in Russia. The inspiration came from a conversation with one of the journalist guest speakers who used to work as Meduza's Deputy Editor for the division called "new formats" [*новый формат*]. This division of the media was dedicated to finding new ways to deliver news to a wider range of audiences, specifically younger users accustomed to shorter formats as opposed to longer op-eds. One of the formats the team at Meduza came up with was games, a highly popular form of entertainment during the pandemic that was unfortunately cut after Meduza lost its advertising support in 2022 after being named a "foreign agent" by the Russian government. One of the games was about playing out Roskomnadzor's desire to control the internet and all the laws passed to give it more power to turn websites off (Meduza). The premise of the game was to act as Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, where the task was to cut people off the internet piece by piece.

Akin to this process of shutting down the internet one website at a time, Russian people's rights as citizens have been taken away bit by bit. This became the premise of the Human Rights module. We looked at new legislation introduced by the Russian government to strip its citizens of their rights in chronological order. Predictably, starting in the early 2000s, the main rights that were chipped away are the right to receive information and freedom of speech. Both take us back to journalism: if journalists are not allowed to speak freely, they cannot present truthful information, and the citizens of the country will not know what is going on and will thus be more receptive to state propaganda. Stifling of independent voices can also be observed in neighboring Belarus; that might be one of the reasons why the country has played such a menacing role in the current war.

Numerous other human rights violations in Russia also stem from lack of publicity and open conversation. Some of the rights discussed in the module are the following: LGBTQ+, with samples of Masha Gessen's videos on the topic, and the history of the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in the U.S.; decriminalization of domestic abuse in Russia and the open

treatment of the topic in U.S. popular culture; the decline of independent journalism in Russia due to the "anti-extremism" law and the current "foreign agent" law. Students are prompted to the conclusion that this process of chipping away at the rights of Russian citizens has led to the situation that most of its population is ignorant about what is going on around them. The majority in Russia have no access to non-governmental sources, as they have all been ousted from the country. Even before 2022, there has been massive financial persecution of independent media in which many lost their advertising deals and thus most of their financial backing. Independent media has largely been operating from the web while according to polls, most adults in Russia still consume news from TV (РБК, 2021). The students first heard about these happenings from the guest speakers in the Journalism module and later read about them in published articles or heard about them on the news. The personal connection made from conversations with guest speakers after students saw familiar names in publications drew the students' attention to the issues that Russian media face and naturally bridged the topics of Journalism and Human Rights in the course.

5. Student assessment

The course is designed to use both formative and summative types of assessment. As formative assessment, for each module the students are asked to write a summary or a short reflection paper on each assigned reading, video, or concept discussed. They are also required to write a description of a graph, chart, or infographic about a matter pertinent to class material. None of these assignments are graded per se, but all students receive thorough feedback on each assignment. As summative assessment, for each module the students take an exam comprised of a reading comprehension assignment (a short editorial or news article closely related to the topic previously discussed), a vocabulary check exercise, and a mini-composition in which the students are asked to reflect on a particular concept discussed in class, such as objectivity in journalism or the fate of a human right. Finally, throughout the semester, each student conducts research on a topic of choice related to one of the modules, writes a paper, and then presents their findings in a voice-over presentation. All students are required to watch all the presentations and to provide a written critique addressing both the linguistic aspects

and subject matter of all the presentations. A guided full-class discussion follows the presentations.

In their final essays and course evaluations, the students indicated that they felt that the course increased their awareness of the role journalism and media play in our everyday lives. The course raised several ethical questions that led to deep discussions, and students' presentations on journalistic investigations sparked genuine curiosity about geopolitics. The students reported that they started paying more attention to local and world news. They learned how to critically evaluate not only news sources coming from Russian-speaking countries but managed to transfer that skill to news sources in the U.S. They developed a habit of questioning information that they received from friends and asking for the sources. The students became much more connected to the world around them and therefore more self-aware.

6. Conclusion

The experience of adapting an advanced Russian language course in the U.S. in response to the global pandemic and to the geopolitical crisis which arose from Russia's invasion of Ukraine left no doubt that teaching media literacy is essential for language learners. If we want to help students navigate the avalanche of information they face every day, to help them make sense of the language and its realities, we need to make foreign language instruction responsive to the present and personally relevant. Our hope was to demonstrate an approach to making instruction more personal and practical: introducing some faces of contemporary journalism and familiarizing students with their craft, their goals, their ideals, and their struggles.

Student assessment showed that raising difficult and timely questions, providing students with rich material that is responsive and reflective of current public discourse, animating it with personal accounts of those pursuing truth professionally, and letting students work out answers to challenging ethical dilemmas all turned out to be elements of a meaningful and rewarding experience for all course participants. This immersive and emergent curricular approach, responsive to pedagogical obstacles, promises to make language classes inspiring, exciting, and more effective in their stated primary objective of language acquisition.

If in the future a larger portion of the course were devoted to the formal study of media literacy, it would be interesting to offer students readings on the topic published in both English and Russian. Comparing news coverage of the same topics or current events in U.S. and Russian media would be another fascinating project. A formal assessment of the students' media literacy skills before and at the end of the course (using, for example, the New Media Literacy Scale; see Koc & Barut, 2016) will offer an additional measure of the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach and provide a metric for comparison with other approaches to media literacy in language instruction.

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