

BELARUSIAN MASS MEDIA AND POST CHERNOBYL PUBLIC STRESS FORMATION

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Abstract

The Republic of Belarus is the country that was mostly affected by the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident; so the right of the Belarusian population to be informed about the scope of the catastrophe and about its proven and potential consequences is literally vital. It is also believed by sociologists that the scope of affection of Belarus by Chernobyl accident challenged the need in formation by mass media the special skills in population for overcoming the consequences of the accident. The role of Belarusian mass media in realization of this objective is under discussion. Unfortunately, the Belarusian newspapers often misinformed the population -- first (till 1989) in an optimistic manner, then -- in an intimidating manner. The reasons of such an activity are discussed, the examples are given and the remedy approach that is free from the encroachment on the freedom of press is proposed.

Key words:

Chernobyl consequences, health effects, Belarus, public stress and discontent, mass media

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INTRODUCTION

In the previous paper devoted to the Chernobyl-related information service FOR RESEARCHERS in Belarus [1] the author has featured the major data on the scope of the affection of Belarus with radionuclides that proves that the Republic of Belarus is the country mostly affected by the Chernobyl accident. Also, information problems concerning the specific lack of scientific information possessed by Belarusian researchers who were involved in the studies of Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident health hazards were plotted. Since it was substantiated and demonstrated in [1] that this lack of information for specialists was inevitable in Belarus, it seems only natural to expect at least the analogous state of affairs with the information for the population. At the same time, it is believed by sociologists that the scope of affection of Belarus by Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident challenged the need in formation by mass media the special skills in population for overcoming the consequences of the accident (called the "Chernobyl subculture") [2]. The analysis of Belarusian newspaper articles is the way to understand how sufficiently it is being done and what is the role that the domestic mass media are really playing in physiological consequences of Chernobyl accident.

The consideration of this subject is also of importance because among the health consequences of the radiation exposure there are such consequences as the DEVELOPMENT OF NEURAL AND PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS CAUSED EXACTLY BY RADIATION EXPOSURE [3; 4]. Therefore, a separate problem of possible neural and psychiatric disorders caused (or stimulated) by "INFORMATION FACTORS" (such as ignorance of population, absence of true or relevant information in media, threatening rumors, threatening sensational prognoses transmitted by media etc.) that make people very much over-anxious about their health should be considered in order to distinguish the direct radiation psychiatric effects from the consequences of the "information factors" [5]. The findings of [5] that demonstrated the apparent worsening of the psychiatric status in people under such "information factors" DESPITE the radiation effects are the basis of the challenge for for the mass media to form the so-called "Chernobyl subculture" [2] and, generally, TO BRING THE PEOPLE COMPETENT COMPREHENSIBLE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE EVENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES. But what is the actual role that Belarusian mass media play in this content?

OBSERVATIONS AND SPECULATIONS

Due to the mass media censorship of Chernobyl-related information (following Olga Klauber, censorship is defined here as "any interruption by an authority into the communication process aimed to cut off the connection between its different parts, at any stage of the process" [6, p. 135]), the Belarusian population absolutely could not exercise its lawful right to be informed about the scope and the content of the consequences of the Chernobyl accident till February, 1989, when the map of radiation contamination of Belarus was at first published. (The publication of this map was the actual end of "Chernobyl censorship" in the USSR.) The understanding by the population that censorship prevented it from knowing the truth naturally transformed in the most dramatic manner in the feeling of fear, discontent, skepticism. That was especially characteristic for the population of the areas, neighboring to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and - both hypothetically and really - affected by the consequences of the disaster [5].

So, we may say that a great specific impact to the rapid formation of the feeling of stress, discontent and hopelessness was made by the previous regime mass media that provided "the first wave" of misinformation by either keeping silence or transmitting optimistic rubbish, while the details of the disaster were kept in a secret. The inevitable ignorance of the population and unbelievable optimistic nonsense of mass media were the fertile soil for spreading off the most threatening rumors.

After the removal of "Chernobyl censorship" the flow of reports from the area of the accident appeared about supposed congenital abnormalities among animals, supposed increase of the incidence rates of childhood leukemia and diseases of thyroid [7]. (Out of the mentioned sensations only the increase of thyroid diseases -- a very sufficient one -- was later confirmed, but such reports looked very much verisimilar from a reader's viewpoint because the population was quite shocked with the data of the above-mentioned map.) The journalists feeling of freedom, longing for sensation, the reflection by newspapers of the already formed skepticism and fear of population were the basic reasons of this "second wave" of misinformation. As it was also noted [7], the reasons were the already formed confusion and discontent of inhabitants, the negative reaction to the long-term supremacy of the Communists. As it was stated in [8], there was a flow of non-competent information which was not in the least checked by professionals (due to the "first wave" of misinformation people would not believe them so much if even they interfered), and it might be said that the ongoing formation of stress, hopelessness and despair caused a certain deformation of the national consciousness so that a person's activity often was "being directed to the only one course: to the defending one's right AS THE RIGHT OF VICTIM..." [9].

So, 1986-1989 years were basically the years of optimistic misinformation, while since the year 1989 the period of "threatening misinformation" started. We think, that the year 1991 might be -rather conditionally -- accepted as a starting point for at least the slow reduction of threatening misinformation: in 1991 the first issue of the book of collected papers "Chernobyl nuclear power plant catastrophe and assessment of health of population of the Republic of Belarus" appeared containing the first reliable data on Chernobyl health effects. Some prognoses were verified by this time: thus, concerning the forecasted increase of thyroid cancer incidence in Belarus, this prognosis occurred to be coming true IN CONTRAST with the analogous prognosis of childhood leukemia incidence. Step by step some results of SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS were becoming available to the public, and some researchers started to make use of the newspapers so to inform the population about the medical consequences of Chernobyl. Unfortunately, the newspapers editors often looked somewhat suspicious if such reports contained no dramatic sensations, and e.g. the severe criticism of the data obtained in our Institute on no visible increase of childhood leukemia incidence rates in Belarus was

expressed in a couple of newspapers by incompetent persons. So, in spite of the challenge for the mass media to form the so-called "Chernobyl subculture" the mass media activity looked more as playing somewhat an opposite role.

STUDIES AND FINDINGS

The preceding special studies of Belarusian Chernobyl-related newspaper articles [2; 10] were based on the analysis of subject structure of publications. Though it was conditionally assumed in these works that one publication entirely corresponds to an only one subject -- a reader is welcome to kindly bear in mind that there is no system of automatic scanning of the newspaper articles in the Republic of Belarus --, the cited studies efficiently demonstrated that small attention was being paid to the medical and ecological aspects (while these aspects are most important for the normal life style formation) and the least popular were the vital problems of life conditions and hygiene. At the same time, the social and political problems prevailed.

The obtained notions feature some major trends of public press activity concerning Chernobyl consequences, but they are too much generalized to point out the most acute specific viewpoints. We think that the best method that could be used for such a study is a content-analysis of newspaper articles (i.e. reduction of the elements of the texts under study to a fixed number of certain "categories" (subjects), fixing, sorting and counting the frequency of occurrence of the "categories" in the texts). However, this method is very labor-consuming, and only some pilot "demonstration" work was fulfilled of a restricted number of 1991 publications. A limited number of premeditated "categories" were chosen. They are: "victims" (the notion focusing the exaggeration of Chernobyl consequences, a focus of longing for sensation after removal the censorship), "culprits" (singled out because of the observed "accusatory" character of plentiful publications [10] and of the offense of the Belarusian to the authorities), "heroes" (as one more focus of longing for sensation after removal the censorship), "Chernobylrelated projects" (focusing journalists vision and assessment of projects for overcoming Chernobyl health effects or of projects that look as such in journalists imagination, a touch-stone of journalists common sense) and "medical consequences of Chernobyl" (a touch-stone of journalists literacy).

The results may be illustrated by the following data: during just two weeks Academician Ilyin was trice called a culprit (later the specialists agreed that exactly his reassuring assessment of the post Chernobyl radiation risks for the health were THE MOST realistic one -- but since the assessment was reassuring the journalists were calling him a culprit); the inhabitants of Savichi village were trice called victims (and two absolutely contradicting versions of the reasons of their returning back home from the evacuation were presented); THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF 21 CITIES WERE MENTIONED AS COLLECTIVE VICTIMS 25 TIMES (INCLUDING THE INHABITANTS OF THE CITIES THAT WERE NOT IN THE LEAST EXPOSED TO IONIZING RADIATION); some organizations and projects were promoted as facilitating to overcoming Chernobyl consequences that had no imaginable influence on it at all; there was a couple of publications ignoring the possible association between blood diseases and radiation exposure, while in one paper it was implied that poliomyelitis cases are associated with Chernobyl-induced radiation. Such ridiculous examples are quite typical, they demonstrate a character of the impact of newspapers of the year 1991 on the public opinion without any further special sociological studies.

The vivid style was more characteristic for interviews (especially -- with politicians of the new generation) than for information reports. The precision, logic and fullness of a lot of publications were often not sufficient; the causality is evidently broken in some of them, too. Some of these features are possibly not specific for Chernobyl-related publications, but some of the seem to be specific for the subject.

DISCUSSION AND FOREIGN EXPERTS OPINIONS

But how such an ignorance and lack of common sense (apparently demonstrated in some of above examples) could take place? To some extent, such ignorance is somewhat natural: if a number of medical scientists had no sufficient information backgrounds to interpret the nature and possible consequences of the catastrophe [1], how could the journalists be literal enough to interpret the facts correctly even five years following the catastrophe and only two years following the "Chernobyl censorship" removal? Besides, the longing to sensation was stimulated exactly by the newly obtained freedom of the press in this period.

As for the tendency to intimidation the readers (in some cases the intimidation was quite unintentional), it seemed to be caused by at least two reasons.

As for the unintentional intimidation, we think that it is nothing than a reflection of the public fear, additionally stimulated by the learning the former secret that it is exactly Belarus that was mostly affected by the Chernobyl accident. But as for the quite conscious intimidation, it seemed very much to have been stimulated by the certain circles of politicians of the new generation who used mass media to their own benefit making use of the already formed public stress for creation of their own political capital (creation the image of the fighters for truth, searching for assistance from abroad etc. -- we have such examples). And, unfortunately, it ought to be said that even some of the researchers and practical physicians also aggregated the feeling of fear in the population by publishing corresponding materials in press. The reason was their concern only about the creation of the corresponding publicity by any means and about raising funds for their teams from abroad. At the same time, certain researchers did their best in promotion true understanding of Chernobyl consequences -- often meeting obstacles on behalf of some new politicians and mass media workers.

However, such political speculations would be of no sense if the public opinion abroad was intolerant to them. But very often the world mass media plays the same intimidating role. E.g. in the paper published in the "British Medical Journal" [11] T.B. Brewin gives some examples of the British media activity in the context of medical consequences of Chernobyl. Describing and discussing the television relayings about childhood leukemia cases in Chernobyl-contaminated areas he writes that "any reasonable sense of proportion goes out of the window and little or nothing is done to explain either the needs for numbers and percentages in order to make a comparison of the incidence or the basic facts about radiation -- natural or artificial, concentrated or dilute". He gives some other examples of the British mass media statements. For instance on account of the statement that "thousands ... will ultimately develop cancer" T.B. Brewin writes -- in the only possible correct and literal way -- that "thousands possibly will, given a big enough population and a long enough time. But this is a misleading from the point of view of the effect of an exposed individuals..." Also, he tries to describe the mechanism that often prevents scientists from speaking the truth: "when reassurance is greeted by anger it becomes counter-productive. So both politicians and scientists are reluctant to speaks out. And the truth suffers".

Concerning the reasons of the intimidating misinformation of the western mass media the author writes: "It is not a conspiracy or a result of the pressure by any lobby. It seems to be just the operation of a free market, combined with A POPULAR THIRST FOR DRAMATIC NEWS OF DISASTERS, WRONG IDEAS ABOUT TWO EMOTIONAL SUBJECTS - CANCER AND RADIATION -- A MISGUIDED IDEA OF THE LINK BETWEEN NUCLEAR POWER PLANT AND NUCLEAR BOMBS" (italicized by the author of the present paper). The italicized reasons are also quite acceptable for our Belarus, but their consequences are more dramatic: first, because of relatively low educational level of the

population [2], second, because of the lack of relevant scientific information that made the cited misguided idea more popular among even the researchers. Finally, there is a STRONGER THIRST for really sensational news: they were seldom transmitted by the Soviet mass media. Also, it cannot be said that our mass media were not pressured by a lobby (of the new generation of local politicians who well felt that dramatic sensations presented by them in the interviews with corresponding comments often would be uncritically retransmitted abroad -- due to the reasons mentioned in [11] and to the favor of their international image).

Taking into account our small piece of data, the findings of the cited colleagues [2; 10] and the observations of some foreign mass media experts [7; 11 etc.] we can conclude that, instead of formation of the useful skills, Belarusian mass media often facilitate to the formation of public stress, discontent, hopelessness, concern etc. (As T.B. Brewin stated, "the media have done more injury to the truth that was ever done by cover up or whitewash" [11].) The significance and topicality of this unfavorable conclusions are determined by the content of the global problem of transformation of a national consciousness and manipulating it. On the other hand, the dramatic significance is determined by the context of the really discovered influence of radiation exposure on the development of psychoemotional disorders (e.g. [3; 4; 12]) and by non-adequate understanding of the Chernobyl accident influence on the health state by the children [13; 14] and teenagers [15] who are NOT zealous newspaper readers.

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