

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT OF THE PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY INDUSTRY IN RUSSIA: MACRO- AND MICROANALYSIS.

## *Summary*

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This article analyzes the organizational structure of the public opinion survey industry in Russia as an independent market and society sector. The article consists of two parts: the first part attempts a macroanalysis of the principles of the industry's organization; the second part consolidates the results of the author's research conducted within the framework of organizational ethnography, allowing insight into this industry's work on a micro level.

Special attention is devoted to changes that took place as a result of the expansion of a managerial ideology throughout the practices of organizations within this industry. The first part of the article draws on the analytical possibilities grounded in neo-institutional sociology. The main thesis of this section is that, despite the ontogenetic and organizational differences in the sphere of market research and that of public opinion surveys, a gradual isomorphism has taken hold: over time the public opinion survey industry has adopted standards of governance and representation conventional in marketing. The second part of the article demonstrates the logic of managerial expansion through a case study of organizational changes in a leading Russian company specializing in public opinion surveys. This example is drawn from my own ethnographic research. The main conflict discussed in this second part is the struggle between managers and professionals over who will control the work process and dominate the organization's management. I draw on the theories of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, as well as work in the sociology of professions and critical studies of managerialism by Alasdair MacIntyre.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION OF THE PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY INDUSTRY

Sociologists have maintained a consistent interest in the functioning of the public opinion survey industry. The public role of sociology is legitimized by the work of survey companies, which emerged out of the political and social transformation in Russia at the end of the twentieth century, when a political need for measuring public opinion arose.

The industry leaders in public opinion research are the All-Russian Center of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), Levada-Center, and Public Opinion Foundation (FOM). The success of these three companies is linked to a number of factors: first of all, their surveys are considered to be the most reliable sources of information about the electoral ratings of the President and Prime Minister of the Russian Federation; secondly, these companies have high visibility in the press, where results of their surveys are frequently cited; thirdly, according to Russian independent research center ratings, VTsIOM, Levada-Center, and FOM rank consistently high among companies not specializing in market research.

All three leading companies share a similar genesis despite significant differences and even conflicts: their shared pedigree is evident in both organizational structure and in their preferred methods of market positioning. Additionally, these companies experience similar institutional pressures, which contribute to the isomorphy of their structures. Survey companies in Russia emerged at the intersection of several institutional subuniverses. The academic subuniverse connected the founders and key professionals of all three companies with the academy, which initially served to legitimize these companies as the key experts on the question, "What is happening in Russian society?" The academic subuniverse is not an ivory tower where scholars and faculty congregate in isolation from real life. It is a functionally necessary institution where different professional knowledges compete to create demand and foster a favorable economic atmosphere for their services. For that reason, even in the early stages of the establishment of the public survey industry, the role of the academic subuniverse was crucial.

The public-good subuniverse allowed the survey companies to legitimate their existence as organizations producing an objective and accessible body of knowledge about society. Access to this information is free despite the significant costs incurred in its production. To this day, the websites of all leading public opinion survey companies feature survey results updated every week. By offering open access to the results of their surveys, the companies fulfill their public mission of informing the society about itself.

The subuniverse of political and state contract ensures financial stability for the survey companies—stability that is necessary for them to realize the public-good function of providing open access to survey results. The national public opinion survey industries are the result of demand by modernized Western countries for reliable, understandable, and universal instruments measuring feedback from the "clientele" made up from the electorate. Breakthroughs in

social research methodology during the 1930s–1940s allowed public opinion surveys to become important elements of the political system, on par with stock indices in the business sphere.

The market subuniverse manifests primarily through studies commissioned by non-state organizations and businesses. The leading companies of the survey industry do not have a highly noticeable presence in the market subuniverse. Their trajectory has involved efforts to develop a presence in this market niche in order to have alternative sources of income in the event of diminished demand from the political sphere. Already in the beginning of the 1990s, VTsIOM, under the leadership of Iurii Levada, considered marketing surveys to be within their professional mandate.

In the beginning, the Russian survey companies did not share an institutional template following which would lead them to a sure success or failure in their competitive struggles. Thus, for many years the opinion survey companies in Russia followed their own trajectory, acquiring unique organizational structures compared to market-survey firms. The history of the establishment of sociology as a scientific discipline, together with the unique political situation of the 1980s and 1990s, contributed to the organizational segregation of the public opinion survey industry.

### **LIFE OF THE SURVEY FACTORY: AN EXERCISE IN ORGANIZATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY**

This section is a sketch written within the framework of organizational ethnography. It describes observations of practices of an organization with which I collaborated from 2008 until 2010 as a lead analyst and director of projects. The events described in this overview reflect the organizational state of affairs between October 2008 and April 2010. The research positionality of the author is best described as participant observer immersed in the everyday practices of the organization. The research methodology is unstructured participant observation with case-study elements.

The company under study—I will call it “Tyrell-2”—became well known in the first half of the 1990s and since then has been a leader in the industry, one of the “big three” Russian survey firms. The company can list prominent sociologists and journalists among its collaborators. Until 2008, “Tyrell-2” was notable for its high staff-retention rate. Throughout its history, the company’s owners and top managers have remained unchanged. The functions of the owner and the company CEO were always performed by one person: the founder and leader of “Tyrell-2,” who was responsible for any and all corporate changes. The company always had a significant number of staff with roots in academia.

Initially, the company functioned as a sort of collective of kindred spirits and frequently had the atmosphere of an intellectual club. By the middle of 2008 this club-like organizational form and corporate culture were in crisis stemming from the company’s expanding profile as it sought to break into the market of commercial surveys and took on a growing number of personnel.

The new ideology of “Tyrell-2” shifted the company’s practices away from the public-good functions and towards the market functions. The realization of this new strategy triggered changes in the company’s system of governance and its intracorporate ideology. The problem emerged because these organizational innovations, announced by the company’s leader, turned out to be contradictory, supporting very different trajectories for the company’s development. At the inception of this intensive restructuring of the corporate order, the leadership of “Tyrell-2” issued a number of critiques aimed at the company’s professional analysts:

- weak involvement with the current company goals, which necessitated active deference to the company’s administration;
- inadequate work discipline: flexible working hours were cited as an impediment to managerial control over staff;
- “delusions of grandeur”: supposedly, the analysts perceived their professional role as unique and their expertise as nonreplaceable;
- academic orientation: the focus on academia as the main consumer of research results at the expense of other potential clients.

Thus the analytical workforce was constructed as the source of problems in the organization, becoming the object of special administrative attention. The management adopted a series of organizational reforms to solve these problems.

A competition-based leadership style, in harmony with the spirit of neo-capitalism described by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, supplanted the style of creative collaboration that closely resembled the organizational culture of a Soviet science lab. As a result of these changes, the analytical workforce ceased to be a unified entity, and the leader of “Tyrell-2” negotiated separate agreements with each individual analyst.

The result of this personalization of responsibility and the elevation of the interests of a single professional sector over the interests of the company was “Balkanization.” Managerial obscurantism as a new form of managerial ideology became a part of the process of the deprofessionalization of the personnel. The resultant discourse stigmatized academic sociological conventions and research practices as “archaic” and “ineffective.” The new paradigm minimized analysis eliminating “thick description” in favor of “self-evident, simple, and clear” presentation of results. Gradually, old-timer analysts with significant social and symbolic capital accrued over the course of their time at the company were replaced by “new specialists” who were unburdened by status that would allow them to oppose managerial interventions. These new specialists, who did not have strong credentials in the field of sociology, were assigned to evaluate project results. Managerial obscurantism presupposes that the professional autonomy of sociologists must retreat before the market-oriented logic of managerialism.

From the perspective of economic growth and strategic achievements, the creation of an intellectual machine with sweatshop elements turned out to be justified and functional. The transformation of “Tyrell-2” cannot be reduced to a mere conflict between managers and professionals. Rather, what is described here is

an attempt to reorient an organization away from the state and academic subuniverses and towards the market subuniverse. The conflicts between professional and managerial logics reflect massive shifts in the status of professionalized skills in the labor market: marketization and institutional pressure have forced certain professions to move from a collective organizational system to an individualized “expert professionalism.” Thus, this case is not unique—it is just one example of complex transformations in the overall organizational and professional contexts of the public opinion survey industry. The Russian public opinion survey industry is subject to the same organizational changes as the ones affecting most companies under neo-capitalism. Social theorists note the total ubiquity of the contemporary capitalist regime, a ubiquity buttressed by the lack of alternative projects for social change.

This study shows that neo-managerialism successfully occupies spaces previously marked by professional autonomy, resulting in a paradoxical syncretism of industrial and project-based models. The specificity of the Russian situation also leaves its mark—here, the government is the main client of the public opinion survey industry, thus rendering survey companies dependent on the subuniverse of state and political demand.

The case of “Tyrell-2” offers insight into intraorganizational collisions between management and professionals and explicates the contradictory logic of the company leadership’s struggle for results via increased bureaucratic control over the creative potential of staff. My encounters with the current staff of “Tyrell-2” attest to the success of the neo-managerial revolution as a strategy for introducing new forms of labor organization and to its simultaneous failure to maximize the utility of the staff’s intellectual labor: with the project managers now encouraged to use a “light touch,” the possibilities for substantive development of the company’s work have been lost. And although infographics are flourishing as the dominant format of the data presentation, there is a risk of losing the key quality that defines think tanks—the capacity to produce new meanings.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Veronica Davidov*