

ON REFLECTION OF CHERNOBYL DISASTER
AND ITS AFTER-EFFECTS IN BELARUSSIAN NEWSPAPERS.

1. SPECIFIC FEATURES, THEIR REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES
A GENERAL GLIMPSE

V.S. Lazarev

Hematology Research Institute, Minsk, Belarus

The unique character of radiation exposure caused by Chernobyl disaster complicated by the shortness of knowledge in radiology possessed by clinical medicine scientists and by the absence of true medical statistics and experience of scientific epidemiology at the moment of disaster seemed to be the most important general background of Chernobyl health hazard notion in the ex-USSR.

This notion was immediately transformed by the population of neighboring and both hypothetically and really affected areas in the most dramatic manner. A great specific impact to the rapid formation of the feeling of stress, discontent, hopeless etc... was made by the Communist mass media that provided the "first wave" of desinformation by either keeping silence or transmitting optimistic nonsense. The politicians kept in secret the details of the disaster, the data on immediate dosage exposure were lost, but the censorship worked perfectly till 1989. The inevitable ignorance of the population and unbelievable optimistic rubbish of mass media were the fertile soil for spreading off the most threatening rumors.

After the final removal of censorship (1989) the flow of reports from the area of incidence appeared about supposed congenital abnormalities among animals, supposed increase of the incidence rates of childhood leukemia and diseases of thyroid [1]. 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 [unwilled] desinformation. As the Japanese author writes [1], the reasons were confusion and discontent of inhabitants, the negative reaction to the longterm supremacy of the Communists. It was a flow of the noncompetent information which was not in the least checked by professionals [2] (due to the first wave of

desinformation people did not believe them so much if they even interfered), and the ongoing formation of stress, hopeless, despair caused a certain deformation of the national consciousness [3]. "The [Belorussian] Law on protection of the citizens who suffered from Chernobyl" gives **privileges**, but **not the compensation for the losses of health and moral damage...** As a result, the personal activity is being directed to the only course: to the defending one's right as the right of **victim...** This resulted in deformation of the consciousness of the whole society" (3, p.4).

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: thus, the forecasted increase of thyroid cancer in Belarus was most likely to come true **in contrast** with childhood leukemia [4]. Little by little the sober reports appear in the newspapers.

The following hypothetical periodization might be proposed:

1) (1986 - approx 1989:) only formation of the public opinion; "optimistic desinformation", the outcome is counter to the design

2) (approx 1989 - 1991 (?):) shift to reflecting the public opinion; "threatening desinformation"

3) (after 1991 (?):) more normal balance between formation and reflection the public opinion; the slow reduction of threatening desinformation

References

1. Mori K. **Atoms in Japan**, N 6 (1991): 2-4.
2. Jovanovich J.V. **Unpublished**, 1991, 10 p.
3. Belookaya T.V.; in: **Chernobyl Disaster: Prognosis, Prophylaxis, Treatment and Medical-and-Psychological Restoration of the Victims**: Minsk, 1994: 3-6 (in Russian).
4. Ivanov E.P. **Atoms in Japan**, N 4 (1993): 24.

**ON REFLECTION OF CHERNOBYL DISASTER
AND ITS AFTER-EFFECTS IN BELARUSSIAN NEWSPAPERS.**

**2. CONTENT-ANALYSIS APPROACH,
SOME RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES**

V.S. Lazarev

Hematology Research Institute, Minsk, Belarus

It is of a special interest to observe and to trace how Chernobyl and post Chernobyl events are reflected in Belarussian newspapers since this ex-USSR republic suffered from the disaster to the greatest extent: 1/5 of the whole population of Belarus live in the radionuclide-contamination territories as compared with 1/30 for Ukraine and 1/200 for Russia; 18% of Belarussian territories are radionuclide-contaminated; 17 out of 28 administrative regions ("raions") with the settlements with the level of contamination with radioactive cesium over 15 Ci/sq. km are situated in Belarus etc...

Since it is normally believed that mass media are both a reflector of public opinion and the aid of its formation, the valuable results on public opinion history on Chernobyl tragedy might be found through newspapers analysis approx since 1991 (Communication 1).

The vivid style is more characteristic for interviews than for information reports. Some details of the style evidence for the lack of knowledge possessed by the journalists. The precision, logic and fullness of a lot of publications are not sufficient; the causality is evidently broken in some of them, too: some medical projects that are obviously associated with Chernobyl health hazards are described without an appropriate context, some diseases, which are never caused by ionizing radiation are associated with Chernobyl by journalists etc. Some of these features are typical for all Belarussian mass media information, some of them are attributed to the special authors ignorance of the subject.

A pilot study was made of some 1991 publications by fixing, sorting and counting all the journalists notions of

- 1) "victims",
- 2) "heroes",
- 3) "culprits",
- 4) projects for overcoming the after-effects and of organizations, which, in Chernobyl context, are assessed either
- 5) positively or
- 6) negatively.

} of Chernobyl

The results are shocking, they reveal a great emotional impact of newspapers on the public opinion: thus, during but two weeks the inhabitants of Savichi village were twice called victims, Academician Ilyin - twice called a culprit; 22 "victims" were mentioned 26 times and 21 "victims" were the population of the whole settlements and cities (such senseless statements as the whole population of Minsk city which was not at all radio-nuclide-exposed are quite typical). Another nonsense is the promotion of some organizations which activity does not at all influence the situation.

The above approach seem to be very fruitful for a project that would include: 1) retrospective retrieval of different notions as reflected in Chernobyl-related newspapers publications, 2) digesting the publications, 3) creation the database, cumulative retrospective index and periodical bulletin that would include digest, cumulative and systematized notions picked up in accordance with the heralded principles and the most extraordinary, paradoxical and acute quotations, 4) content-analysis retrospective and follow-up study of the vast documentary reflected layer of the post Chernobyl subculture. The objectives and possibilities of such a project are most multifold: it would enable to make journalists more competent and responsible, it might reveal a part of the living history of the country etc... etc...

Nowadays, when some reliable results on Chernobyl medical aftereffects are achieved, it seems reasonable to compare the findings published in Belarussian scientific literature with frightening forecasts and false sensations of newspapers articles as well as to promote these results from special literature to newspapers.

The project is labor-consuming and neither a matter of enthusiasm nor supported by the state. The detailed proposal, uncluding proposal budget, will be featured.