

“In March 2020, Russian online media increased their audience by 65 million people. In the fall of 2020, the level of requests for the virus did not return to spring levels, despite a more severe pandemic situation and the ongoing development of vaccines. Today, this phenomenon in the world of science is known as ‘infodemia’.”

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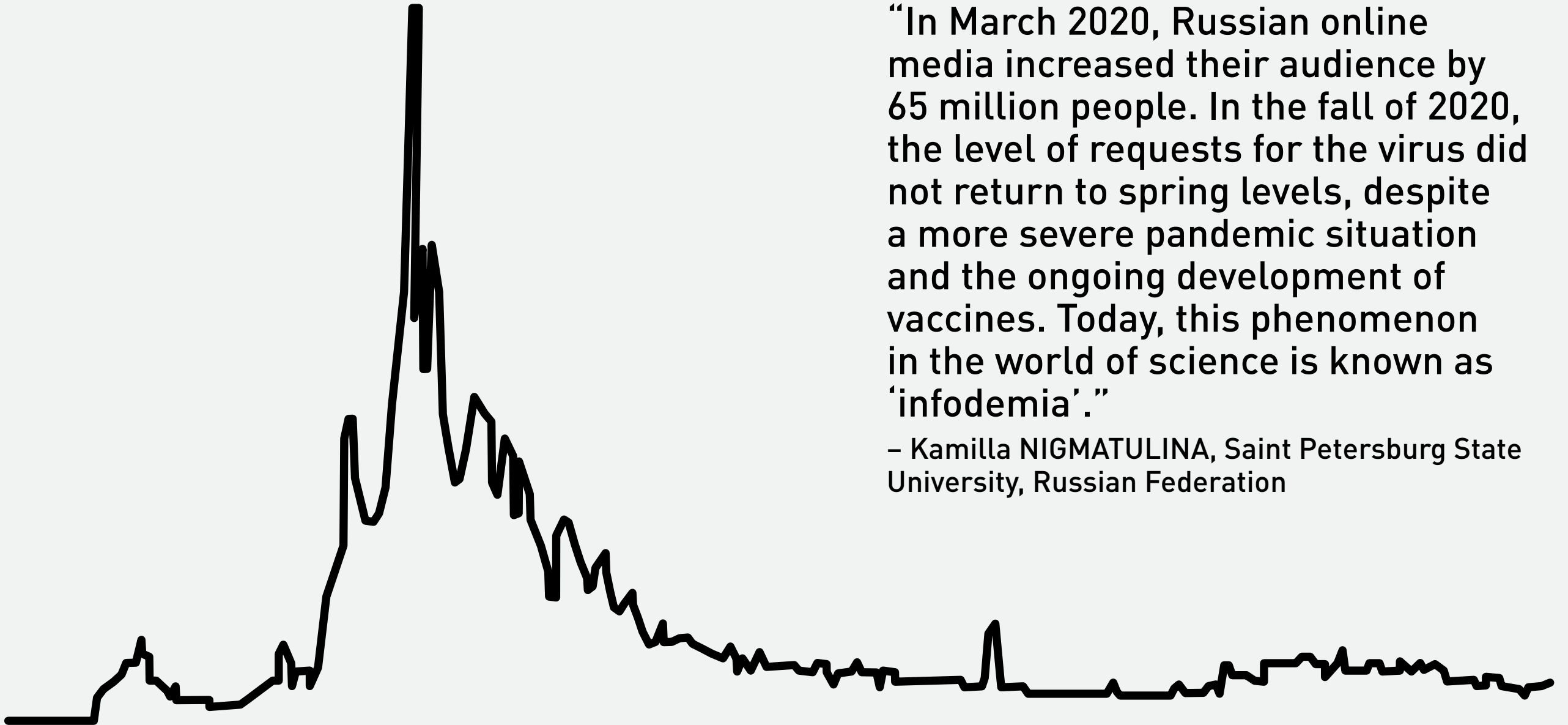


Image Source: Google search about Coronavirus in Russia in 2020.
Illustration redrawn from screen shot (12/07/2020).



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FROM PANDEMIC TO INFODEMIA

In March 2020, Russian online media increased their audience by 65 million people. People searched for information about the virus, symptoms, remedies and statistics for the regions of Russia. But this interest quickly subsided, because it was important for people not to receive information promptly, but to relieve tension - to laugh at the situation of self-isolation, discuss possible scenarios for the development of events in the Russian context, get support and reassure themselves with understandable explanations. Despite this, the Russian media turned out to be unprepared for a stream of new readers and offered low-quality information and unverified experts. This is not about fakes, but about a general decline in the quality of the work of professional journalists. Two main directions of publications were related to the pandemic situation and ways to engage yourself in self-isolation. Over time, both have exhausted their potential, and other social issues received less coverage. Finally, by June, the topic of coronavirus smoothly flowed

into amendments to the Constitution and voting for the country's new main law. In the fall of 2020, the level of requests for the virus did not return to spring levels, despite a more severe pandemic situation. Today this phenomenon in the world of science is known as "infodemia."

It was not a surprise that people mostly searched for memes, humor, and positive stories, because they needed getting rid of fear and a stress relief. The interest of the audience of Russian media and social networks in memes and humor has always been quite strong, but the infodemia exposed this trend even more clearly. The largest and most popular flash mob was the #Isolation movement, when Facebook users recreated painting masterpieces at home and became heroes of famous plots. The flash mob not only did not end in the fall of 2020 but was also embodied in a printed album of selected works with comments by an art critic. The movement became famous not only in Russia and abroad, the initiative was taken up by the world's leading museums and photo banks. Its Russian creator, Ekaterina Brudnaya-Chelyadinova, did not expect such a viral effect; today a separate article on Wikipedia is devoted to the flash mob. Along with grassroots initiatives a lot of official effort went into social media activism. In Russian social networks, both international and own hashtags with calls to stay at home spread quite quickly. The analytical company BrandAnalytics carried out measurements by hashtags on March 30. It turned out that in just one day the hashtags "better at home", "stay at home", "be at home",

“choose a home, not a disease”, “stop coronavirus”, “ wear a mask, it saves lives” 23 thousand posts were published (for 81.2 million messages in general on social networks), and 77% of them were pictures. Some of the pictures were distributed by accounts associated with the state project Stopcoronavirus. At the end of March, the United Russia party launched the hashtag #Thankyoudoctors with a call to photograph yourself with a piece of paper and a written phrase on it. The flash mob was supported by famous people. In November 2020, the #don’tgetsick call became the official hashtag.

Finally, professional media got into a complicated situation – their obligation was to provide information and analytics; however, this did not meet audiences’ expectations. Successful media practices have been all about creating a space for the audience to communicate and empathize. The easiest way is online bars and online parties, more complex options are photography contests, virtual tours, e-sports tournaments, social photo projects. Among the latter, one can name a photo project of the “Poster” outlet, where graduates of Tomsk schools were photographed in dresses that they never managed to wear to the presentation of diplomas, or a photo project of the NGS55 media (Omsk) about doctors before and after the coronavirus working shift. The Village media has launched an outdoor social advertising featuring doctors’ daily statements to draw attention to their daily work. This is how the media helped people cope with their fears and gave space to speak out.