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Innovative thinking or distortion of journalistic values? How the lack of trust creates non- transparency in the Russian media

This study focuses on Russian journalism as an example of an institution in which the changing business media model and financial pressures provide a unique opportunity for innovation in how business is conducted. The Russian innovation ecosystem faces severe challenges that have led to a rethinking of the traditional journalistic principles of objectivity, fair coverage, and newsworthiness. The results of this study indicate that non-transparent media practices exist in Russian journalism as a result of unresolved issues, specifically the lack of generalised trust among members of Russian society. This research also demonstrates that Russian journalism is in some ways similar to advertising as journalists are paid not to be objective but to follow the orders of publishers. This paper discusses the implications of such distortion of fairness and objectivity as they relate to the existence of an innovative ecosystem and non-transparent media practices and provides recommendations for future studies.

Keywords: Russian media, lack of trust, non-transparency, innovative thinking, journalistic values

Introduction

Countries and cultures aiming for sustainable competitiveness often focus on innovation and aim to build a supportive ecosystem that consists of several different factors and

stakeholders who contribute to success. Tradition holds that these innovation ecosystems need trust to function. Thus, countries having high levels of generalised trust can better enable the ecosystem to thrive (Estrin 2009; Fukuyama 1995). Journalism as a key part of the innovation ecosystem provides a sphere for different players in the innovation ecosystem to connect (Nordfors 2009). Today, a traditional journalistic business model is failing, and the functions and roles of journalism are under scrutiny in many regions throughout the world (Miel and Faris 2008; Kruckeberg and Tsetsura 2004). But in countries where generalised trust does not exist or where it contributes little to the innovation ecosystem, not only does an innovation ecosystem face special pressures, but also the nature of journalism becomes distorted. Because it is easier to distort the ecosystem when trust is absent, Russian journalism is much more vulnerable to distortion.

The media can be considered important social institutions, shaping not only public perception, but economic life (Deephouse 2000; Kennedy 2005). Trust in institutions becomes generalised trust in society as citizens make strong connections between the impartiality of institutions (e.g., the media) and the trustworthiness of society-at-large (Rothstein and Stolle 2002). As individuals develop varying levels of trust depending on their experiences, good experiences lead to more trust while bad ones diminish trust. Societies having well-functioning institutions are more likely to have higher levels of generalised trust. That may be linked to media transparency. As many newspapers throughout the world are struggling to survive by eagerly seeking new business models, it is essential to understand the limitations of certain innovative business models in the context of generalised trust. For example, on 19 April 2009, when the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the leading daily newspapers in the United States, placed an advertisement that looked like a regular article on its front page (which traditionally has been reserved for news only in US newspapers), critics attacked the newspaper for violating journalistic standards and principles. The article, which promoted the latest NBC show, had a typical news article structure. It did have a border around it and the word 'advertisement' above the headline. But many critics found this frivolous publication of paid material on the front page to be appalling.

Was this an indication of a new era in US journalism? What does this incident – and the critiques of the incident – say about the

profession of journalism in the United States and, more importantly, about society at large? Are we witnessing the birth of new media business models? Or does the fact that this case was widely criticised and that the *Los Angeles Times* lost credibility in the eyes of the readers demonstrate that the traditional values of journalism are still well and alive? To answer these questions, one may choose to look for clues elsewhere – on the other side of the globe. Eastern European media have been practising paid publicity for quite some time, and the lines between advertising and journalism in countries of the region, such as Estonia, Russia, and Ukraine are increasingly blurred (Harro-Loit and Saks 2006). Why is this so? And why is this practice criticised in some societies, but not in others? This article seeks to understand how journalistic values can be manifested and scrutinised through the examination of the levels of generalised trust within a society (Rothstein and Stolle op cit; Sztompka 2000).

Freedom of the press is linked to trust in society as individual experiences of trustworthy practices generalise into attitudes at large. This is important because organisational influences attempt to mould reporters' story selections (Kennedy op cit). If the media systematically violate this trust, other functions of society will suffer because distrust in the media will lower levels of generalised trust in society.

Lack of trust has created many gaps in daily journalistic practices. This study reported examples of some timely and innovative, though ethically questionable, new solutions for collaboration between journalists and sources. The study looked at journalists' self-evaluations of media transparency in one country, Russia, where generalised trust is low or virtually non-existent. Corruption is a reliable indication of the level of trust within a society. On Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2008 (Transparency International 2008), Russia was ranked 147th out of 180. In addition, previous studies have demonstrated that Russian media contribute to creating distrust in society by constantly engaging in non-transparent media practices. For instance, in the International Index of Media Bribery (Kruckeberg and Tsetsura 2003), Russia was ranked 16th out of 33.

This article focuses on Russian journalism as an example of an institution in which the changing business model and extant financial pressures provide an opportunity for innovation. Innovation occurs as a result of an unresolved

issue: in this case, a lack of generalised trust in Russian society. The functions of Russian journalism are distorted as many media rethink the concepts of objectivity, fair coverage, and newsworthiness. One way to distort these concepts is to let organisations and companies sign 'information service contracts' with the Russian media. These business contracts let the media earn money by publishing newsworthy information and publicity materials of organisations for a fixed monthly fee (Klyueva 2008). Implications of such distortion, as they relate to the existence of an innovation ecosystem and recommendations for future research are presented here.

Trust and the media

As the new media gain ground and as more individuals and organisations participate in preparing news stories, the role of trust becomes more central (Holmstrom 2007; Webley, 2003). Trust can be defined as a 'bet about the future contingent actions of others' (Sztompka op cit: 25), and it is vital for survival in the increasing uncertainty of modern society, where risk is always present. Luhmann (1979: 33) explained that the clues used to form trust 'do not eliminate the risk, they simply make it less...They simply serve as a springboard for the leap into uncertainty'.

Since the 1980s, the concept of trust has received special attention from communication, sociology, psychology and economics. This attention was a result of the search for balance between social cohesion and individualist choices that a modern society requires, along with added responsibility and risks (Misztal 1996). The interest in the concept of 'trust' increased in time of 'crises of trust' in the media and society at large (Monck and Hanley 2008).

Monck and Hanley claim society has a 'trust obsession', and they note that the media are only as good as the people involved in production of news. They argue that our trust in the media is related to our trust in individual reporters, and thus any failure is human related as 'all news involves some form of artifice' (ibid: 91). They call for transparency: opening up of public life areas previously accessible only to the media. Some may argue the internet fulfils this role, and that the pressure is now off the mainstream media to be the only information providers and gate keepers. However, the mainstream media still carry responsibility for delivering credible, trustful content to the public as so many members of

the society still depend on them to deliver the news.

Today, readers no longer trust the journalistic content; but despite this, society trusts media more than other social institutions, such as governments: a recent BBC, Reuters and the Media Center poll of media users of 10 countries (BBC 2006) showed that media channels are trusted by about 61 per cent of respondents. In contrast, only 52 per cent of respondents across ten countries trusted governments (BBC 2006). According to this poll, in Russia, the media is more trusted than the government: the results for Russia in that study indicated that 58 per cent trusted the media, whereas only 54 per cent trusted the government. Similarly, the Edelman Trust Barometer (2009) noted globally the media as the third trusted social institution globally, only behind NGOs and businesses. These results, however, should be taken with caution, as previous studies show that tabloid journalists, for example, are much less trusted than broadcast media (Cushion 2009).

Independence is a constitutive value in journalism, yet sources play an important role in leveraging media attention (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Journalistic content aims to be creative, novel, original, or unexpected but this content is increasingly produced under acute timepressures (Craig 2006; McQuail 1985; Schudson 2003). Increasingly, journalists rely on sources to produce information and share it with the media. This source-produced publicity information then becomes news. Media often use publicity materials produced by sources to fill news pages or airtime. Some estimate that 50 to 75 per cent of all journalistic content is public relations driven (Gower 2007; Wilcox and Cameron 2009). This number might be even higher in Russia (Koltsova 2006). But does the reader or viewer always know that much of the news is a result of publicity efforts by various organisations and individuals? When journalists do not disclose the sources of information or hide the very fact that information was a result of publicity efforts, media transparency is in question.

Media non-transparency

Media transparency can be defined as the complete disclosure of sources and any influences on editorial decisions, such as a clear indication in the finished product of the media (e.g., an article or a programme) about what services were provided to a journalist (e.g., the journalist kept a product he or she tested). Media transparency assures not only that citi-

zens at all levels receive information necessary to make informed decisions, but also that the information is reliable, newsworthy, and thus trustworthy. Citizens place their trust in the media, and, when they have continuous positive experiences with these media and when their expectations of newsworthiness and reliability are satisfied, society as a whole has well-functioning social institutions.

Media non-transparency is defined here as any distortion of an open and transparent exchange of information subsidies between media and news sources, such as public relations practitioners. If information newsworthiness, without monetary or non-monetary influences, defines media choices, media transparency is achieved (Tsetsura and Grynko 2009). Media transparency is hard to achieve as media outlets worldwide experience pressures from advertisers, information sources, publishers, and other influential groups (Kruckeberg and Tsetsura 2003). Often media in Poland and the Ukraine, for example, put pressures on information sources to pay or provide non-monetary benefits for publications (Tsetsura 2005).

Russia is no exception. The practice, known as 'hidden advertising' or, using slang, *zakazukha*, or *jinsa*, (translated as 'pay-for-publicity') (Cassara et al. 2004) was extremely common in the 1990s (Holmes 2001). Startseva (2001) revealed that selling paid news space in newspapers or accepting money for not running a particular story was so widespread and routine in Russia in the 1990s that most publications had an 'official price list', distributed discreetly to public relations firms. For instance, the second-largest newspaper in Russia, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, alone pulled in an estimated half million dollars from *zakazukha*, followed by *Izvestia*, *Trud*, and *Novaya Gazeta*. Together these newspapers together earned more than \$25 million a year through *zakazukha* (ibid).

Previous research on media non-transparency confirmed that the media in Eastern European countries often have three levels: interpersonal, intra-organisational and inter-organisational (Tsetsura and Grynko 2009). The first level, interpersonal, happens at an individual level when a journalist agrees to cover or not to cover a certain story because she or he receives a payment or non-monetary compensation from the information source, such as a public relations practitioner. The second level, intra-organisational, is present when a business agreement about publishing or not publishing material is

reached between an editor (or an advertising department) of one media outlet and an organisation or a company. An editor or director of advertising can then ask a journalist to write about the organisation or company because the story ostensibly is defined as 'newsworthy'. But the journalist would not know whether the coverage has been promised or paid for.

Finally, the most sophisticated level is inter-organisational. Here, formal legal contracts are signed between the media and the company guaranteeing that the media will cover news and events about the organisation regularly. The organisation, in turn, promises to pay a certain amount for a 'news service' each month and/or provide advertising to the media (Klyueva 2008). Often organisations and companies sign information-service contracts with the Russian media. These business contracts let the media earn money by publishing newsworthy information and publicity materials of organisations for a fixed monthly fee, which guarantees that favourable news about organisations will be published and unfavourable news will be minimised or concealed (*ibid*).

These contracts become formalised, legal agreements between the media outlet and the company or organisation and now are increasingly popular in countries such as Russia, Ukraine and China (Tsetsura and Zuo 2009). Although these contracts are rarely publicised, they illustrate how a lack of generalised trust in a society can lead to innovative ways of understanding how traditional publicity practices can be distorted to achieve 'guaranteed' coverage that is ostensibly newsworthy and interesting to readers or viewers in Russia. This contractual obligation assures both parties that the desired outcome, in this case publicity, will be provided. In a society where distrust is a starting point for any transaction or a business engagement, these contracts may become essential for elevating the generalised trust. At the same time, these contracts ensure media's existence in tough changing economic times and guarantee that the media will have a balanced accounting sheet. This is especially relevant today because advertising revenues are in a sharp decline and new media are emerging to challenge the traditional field (Miel and Faris *op cit*).

These non-transparent practices can be deemed unethical, and hence analysing them could contribute to better understanding the pressures and challenges faced by Russian journalists. The following research questions were put forward:

RQ 1: What influences can distort trust in the Russia media, according to Russian journalists?

RQ 2: How do Russian journalists understand contemporary, sustainable media management and what are their opinions about whether new business efforts are able to combat media non-transparency?

Methodology

This study adapted a survey from previous research on media transparency in Poland (Tsetsura 2005), adjusting several questions for relevance to Russian journalists. The final survey instrument, which had been translated from English to Russian and back once again by one of the researchers and a graduate research assistant, had a total of 67 Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Questions required journalists to share their perceptions of media-transparency practices, such as payments for news coverage as well as advertising departments' and editors' pressures on journalists. Media professionals were also asked whether they perceive Russian media to be credible and trustworthy. Participants could share personal experiences and thoughts on the role of trust and credibility in contemporary Russian journalism. For the purpose of this study, only responses from primary sources and public relations practitioners to questions about trust and the credibility of media and of news information were used in the data analysis.

Surveys were used to collect the data from Russian journalists who participated in the annual conference of the Russian Union of Journalists in October of 2007 in Sochi, Russia. All registered conference participants (N=1,095) were invited to participate in this study by filling out a survey. The first researcher distributed surveys in person to journalists who were attending keynote speeches, panels, workshops, and other conference events during all five days of the conference. Participants could choose to answer questions in person or to take a copy of the survey, complete it, and then return it to the researcher directly or put it into a collection box at the conference information desk. The researcher continually reminded conference participants to complete and return the survey and to contact the researcher for a follow-up interview if they chose to share additional information.

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS software. To answer the first research question, the researchers posed questions on whether it was still possible to trust media outlets, even if

they were being controlled by the government, news sources, advertisers, or publishers (or corporate owners), on a Likert-type scale (1 being not possible to trust at all to 5 being completely possible to trust). Questions about the credibility and trust of the Russian media compared to that of similar media in other countries were evaluated on the Likert scale, 1 being lowest level of trust to 5 being highest level of trust.

Open-ended responses were transcribed, translated into English, and then translated back into Russian for accuracy. The data were analysed using a three-step data analysis (Lindlof 1995). The analysis is similar to a thematic analysis technique: it identifies recurring themes within the data and scrutinises them against the participants' explanations (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This analysis is particularly useful in qualitative research when recurring themes might lead to a grounded-theory approach to further understand participants' narratives and to systematically analyse the reasons behind these narratives (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Findings

Ninety-seven usable surveys were collected from Russian journalists in five days of the annual professional conference, yielding an 8.8 per cent response rate. Although low, this response rate was better than was expected. Russian journalists are often reluctant to complete surveys or have little time to do so (Klyueva 2008; Pasti 2005). Initially, many journalists initially agreed to participate in the study but later dropped out of the study or did not complete the entire survey because they described the topic as 'provocative and sensitive'.

The findings confirmed that the culture of trust and personal experiences matter to the practice of media transparency and, more importantly, to journalists' understanding of how lack of trust and credibility lead to innovation in the Russian media. The following section is organised as follows: first, findings from questions about general media trust are discussed; then, the finding on whether Russian journalists perceive contemporary media management and business efforts as sustainable and able to combat media non-transparency are discussed; and finally, the discovered journalism innovation practices are presented and scrutinised.

The first research question asked whether, according to Russian journalists, the Russian media can be trusted, even if the media are

controlled by government, advertisers, publishers, or news sources. The results demonstrated that surveyed Russian journalists were most inclined to still trust the media outlets even if they were controlled by the government ($M=2.87$, $SD=1.132$), followed by news sources ($M=2.72$, $SD=1.031$), corporate owners ($M=2.66$, $SD=1.269$), and then advertisers ($M=2.21$, $SD=1.250$). Interestingly, this sample of Russian journalists reported that they trust government-controlled media most and advertiser-controlled media least, contrary to the majority opinion of Western journalists (Kruckeberg and Tsetsura 2004).

Perhaps light can be shed on these results through additional open-ended responses. One wrote: 'Because the media have long been under governmental pressures and played the role of a servant to the Soviet government, today, Russian journalists do not see a difference between dependence on the government and dependence on advertisers or publishers.' Some openly pointed out that the media, especially local and regional, are 'completely dependent upon advertising money so *new, innovative ways of making the money*' are welcomed by editors and publishers. Never mind that these new business ideas displace journalistic integrity. One journalist summed up the frustration experienced by many: 'The media have always been of service: in the past to government and now to publishers.'

When the journalists were asked about Russian media credibility compared to that of similar media in other countries, they, on average, responded that they believed Russian local and regional daily newspapers were more credible and trustworthy than were similar local newspapers in other countries ($M=2.66$, $SD=1.436$), whereas the trustworthiness of Russian national newspapers was perceived to be significantly lower than that of similar media in other countries ($M=1.92$, $SD=1.904$, $t=-3.787$, $p<.000$). One journalist explained: 'Local media are easier to call on for irresponsible practices. We do not have legal departments and we meet our readers in the streets daily. That is why we clearly identify the source, advertising, etc. in our materials.'

The second research questions asked how Russian journalists understand contemporary, sustainable media management and whether new business efforts were able to combat media non-transparency. To answer the second research question, open-ended responses were

analysed. The results showed that participating journalists were critical and distrustful of both local and national media. The main problem for distrust was labeled as 'business-driven existence of the media'. Several journalists expressed concerns that modern Russian media often cover events, publish articles or even write news pieces only if these materials are paid for by the news sources in advance. 'This practice is very problematic as it minimizes the credibility of the media.' Another journalist echoed: 'We are paid not for being professionals but for obeying the publisher's orders.' Finally, the results showed that, similar to previous studies, the problems with paid materials that appear in the media go beyond a simple inter-personal level and reach intra-organisational and even inter-organisational levels. Here are two illustrative quotations:

Sometimes, advertising and politico-promotional materials are inserted into our news programs on TV under 'the sanctions of the administration'. Often, we are not even aware of these materials ahead of time so we try to identify them and, if possible, 'hide' them in less noticeable time slots in our TV news briefs.

An actual journalist or correspondent often does not know and can only guess that certain material that he [sic] writes as part of his editorial assignment was paid for or requested by the publisher. As a result, this journalist is put in a position to violate professional codes of ethics, including the ones put forward by the Russian Union of Journalists.

Other journalists indicated that this is 'a normal of way running the business' and that paid publications have long become a norm in the Russian media:

On regional TV, even socially responsible projects are not covered if they are not paid for. I think that advertising needs to be presented as a journalist's article so that this material will attract more attention to a product or a service. It is interesting to read when something is 'tested on myself'.

I have an experience working in a local daily newspaper. Here, we rarely identify the material as 'paid for' because such material will automatically attract less attention and be less credible as we know that our readers have this stereotype to distrust paid materials. Often any sign that material has been paid

for is missing from commercially-oriented materials. However, any respectable media outlet always indicates whether the material has been paid for.

Journalists who participated in this study generally agreed that there is a general distrust of the media in Russia, especially when paid materials are published in the media. However, they seem to accept this fact as a given without critically assessing why this distrust exists in the first place. The paradox was clear: on one hand, these journalists were genuinely concerned about public distrust of the media; on the other hand, they were sincerely surprised at why paid material cannot be trusted if it is good and newsworthy material:

An advertising department head just says to our editor that this paid news material should go to the news front page. So this paid material is put in place of a non-paid news article.

If material is good and readable, it is practically impossible to figure out whether it was paid for or not. Plus, if someone pays for material and the newspaper does not lose anything, why not try this [business model]?

As US newspapers throughout the country are attempting to find new ways to run their businesses and to re-invent their business models, journalists and their publics should be aware that the level of generalised trust can be lowered if similar business models of payments for news coverage are adopted. At the same time, if Russian journalists who participated in this study had been asked what they thought about this case, they would have been surprised to hear that this practice was considered inappropriate and appalling.

This example illustrates the original premise of this study: the level of generalised trust in a society will often determine what conduct is appropriate or inappropriate in many situations, including those situations associated with professional journalism. It seems that Russian journalists, who are products of a society with generally low or almost non-existent levels of trust, create innovative business models to sustain their media without thinking twice about how these innovations can affect the traditional trust between the media and the public. The levels of trust in the media as a social institution within a society have to be considered when evaluating long-term effects of non-transparent media practices on the

society at large. Simply, there is no need to worry about destroying the public's trust in the media in countries where little or no trust exists.

From the start, non-transparent media practices are expected in societies such as Russia in line with the rules of distrust. On the other hand, in the case of the *Los Angeles Times*, the trust expectations were severely violated, leading to strong criticism of the newspaper by professionals, journalists, and publics alike. More broadly, the high level of generalised trust in US society sets specific expectations about the work of US media as a social institution and about journalism as a profession. Generalised trust also set expectations and defined the relationship between the public and the media.

Thus, while in some countries such as Russia innovative business models to sustain the media (e.g., non-transparent media practices at three levels, interpersonal, intra-organisational, and inter-organisational) based on general societal distrust can thrive, in other countries where the level of generalised trust is high (e.g., Finland, Sweden, the United States) these innovative solutions may lead to distress, confusion, and, most importantly, to lowered levels of trust between the media and the public.

Conclusion

An ecosystem where different players meet to achieve new, innovative solutions can function only under certain conditions. Countries with high levels of generalised trust can better enable economic success and support an innovation ecosystem (Fukuyama op cit; Estrin op cit; Rodrik 2000). But, in countries where generalised trust does not exist (or in countries with extremely low levels of trust), innovative solutions are needed for a society to function. Because it is easier to distort the ecosystem when trust is not present or the system is out of balance, the roles and functions of journalism and media sustainability in such countries can often be rethought and are often misused.

This study examined how journalists in Russia, a country with a low or almost non-existent level of generalised trust, generate new, innovative business solutions that enable them to sustain the Russian media system and contribute to the innovation ecosystem, which lost its economic stability with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The research showed that Russian journalism is in some ways similar to advertising as journal-

ists are paid not to be objective but to follow orders of publishers. This research builds on previous research by Harro-Loit and Saks (op cit) about the blurred boundaries between journalism and advertising in countries of the former Soviet Union.

The results of this study demonstrated that Russian media practices, specifically non-transparent media practices, cannot be separated from the culture of trust within which journalists operate. Thus, it may be of little value to share with journalists from other countries the Russian innovative business models that presume the non-existence of trust in society, and, at the same time, to educate Russian journalists on ethical matters related to media transparency. That would simply be 'putting a bandage on a broken foot' (in the words of one participant) to yield a false sense of healing. Moreover, the way journalists in countries such as Russia feel may or may not be directly linked to what they actually do in practice to survive. Thus, the innovative business models of sustaining the Russian media by practising media non-transparency at three levels – interpersonal, intra-organisational, and inter-organisational – may be a functional, if not useful, way for the Russian media to survive.

We suggest that the impact of a culture of trust/distrust should be more profoundly noted when journalistic practices are analysed. The idea of an 'innovation ecosystem' requires the additional evaluation of the impact of the culture of trust/distrust. The traditional Western idea of democracy may never take hold in certain areas of the world, but this is not to say that these areas need be non-innovative. In fact, such challenging settings may be the breeding ground for innovations, as individuals and organisations try to survive, as demonstrated by Russian journalists who create new, innovative ways to continue media operations. The media business model evolves in a lack of generalised trust in the environment by transforming and distorting traditional journalistic values.

The conclusions to be drawn from this study are that an innovation ecosystem cannot be separated from its surrounding culture of trust/distrust. Journalism holds a key role in the innovation ecosystem by providing a place of connection for the different players. Journalistic practices themselves are also reflections on the innovation ecosystem. Moreover, ethical principles need to be established first in the daily lives of the members of each society

and their professional experiences, not only as proclaimed but disregarded codes of ethics. Trust in the journalistic processes cannot be expected if trust has not been generalised in the surrounding economic environment. Drawing up and adopting codes of ethics and policies are a good start, but, to be efficient, change must happen at the practical level of daily media practices. Individual journalists may, however, contribute greatly to this change by doing right according to their means and by cultivating good, trustworthy relationships with their publics.

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