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THE RUSSIAN MEDIA SYSTEM: SOMETHING SPECIAL?

This presentation is based on my long-term cooperation with Yassen Zassoursky, Elena Vartanova and other colleagues in Moscow, leading us to ask: is there something special in the Russian media system? Recalling the beginning of our cooperation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Soviet media system was naturally very special, even unique. But today the special nature of the Russian system is no longer so obvious as this country has undergone a dramatic change, and the rest of the world has also changed a lot. Indeed, the question leads us to specify against which geopolitical direction we compare the Russian media system: different from what?

First of all, different from our own countries, in this case Finland: separated from Sweden 200 years ago, Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of Czarist Russia and remained part of Russia until Finnish independence in 1917 in the aftermath of the Great October Revolution. This common history brings us Finns close to Russia – especially us in Tampere, where the socialist revolutionaries held two clandestine party conferences in 1905-06 and where we still host a Lenin museum. However, nowadays Finland does not identify itself with Russia but rather with the European Union, and Russia's difference from Finland is quite obvious.

Then there is a broader perspective of Europe – West, South and Central/Eastern Europe – from which we may see Russia to differ. Here we can use the classification into three by Daniel Halin and Paolo Mancini (2004): the North Atlantic liberal model, the Northern European democratic corporatist model, and the Mediterranean polarized pluralist model. But these cover only the Western part of Europe and need to be complemented by a fourth, post-communist model of the Central/East European countries which has been well analyzed by Karol Jakubowicz (2008; see also Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, and more generally Christians et al., 2009).

In a still broader perspective, we may relate Russia to the so-called Third World in Asia, Africa and Latin America with all the variations in their political and media systems. Ultimately, we may think about the

world at large – a global system, or an average of all the national and regional specificities from which Russia is considered to differ.

In this general context, let us look at the Russian media landscape through three windows provided by academic anthologies published during the past decade.

First, the book *Russian Media Challenge* which I edited with Yassen and Elena eight years ago, with a foreword by Mikhail Gorbachev based on the lecture he delivered in the Faculty of Journalism. The point is that Russia provides something that is parallel to other post-communist countries in Eastern Europe but still in many respects a unique case. In *glasnost* in the late 1980s, freedom was imposed from above, a kind of paradox. Then a situation developed when there was no dominant power, and the socially owned media were run by journalists and media managers who were not necessarily wealthy. With the new media law introduced at the time, I present this situation in my classes as the freest media in world history. Think of any other country or period where the media are highly developed in society and are operating under so little control, are so independent as they were in 1991-92. Later in the 1990s, the oligarchs seized the common Soviet property, and there was a major manoeuvre to join forces behind Yeltsin to prevent a communist comeback, and television was the major medium to elect a president as described by Andrei Rashkin in the above-mentioned book. Finally, after 2000, we have the well-known situation led by President Vladimir Putin with “guided democracy”.

This reading of the early 2000s offers a fantastic narrative with Russia presenting itself as a really special case. Later, in 2009, another collection of Russian and Finnish articles, *Perspectives to the Media in Russia* was published with Elena and two Finnish colleagues as editors. This book provides a slightly different picture. Its review of what Western scholars write about Russia shows that the dominant Western framework for approaching the Russian media system is still pretty much a Cold-War dominated Kremlinology. As summarized by Hannu Nieminen in this book, there are two schools of thought: the similarities school looking at the extent to which Russia meets the Western criteria of democracy, freedom, etc., and the exceptionalism school emphasizing the historically specific socio-political conditions in Russia. Anglo-American experts typically represent the similarities school, while Finnish experts lean towards the exceptionalism school. Russians themselves look at similarities and differences throughout the world and find

relevance in the framework called Eurasia. As Elena Vartanova summarizes, market and technology are the driving forces of change. In general, this book suggests that Russia is no longer such a special case. If it was unique in 2001, it is certainly less so in 2009.

The latest book, *World of Media: Yearbook of Russian Media and Journalism Studies 2009* was given to us at this conference. It is an excellent package of readings, which suggests that the Russian media landscape today is far from unique. Surely there are some special features in Russian reality such as the “double-face of democratisation” whereby political pluralism is accompanied by authoritarian government, as summarized by Lyudmila Resnyanskaya and Ekaterian Voinova in this book. Yet most of the chapters, from digital divide and information society to new paradigms in mass communication studies, address the same issues that concern scholars elsewhere. The big picture is indeed that the Russian media system is moving closer to the rest of us in Europe.

A fresh reminder of this movement is President Dmitry Medvedev’s article calling for political reforms, with strong words also regarding communication: “The growth of modern information technologies, something we will do our best to facilitate, gives us unprecedented opportunities for the realisation of fundamental political freedoms, such as the freedom of speech and assembly... Society is becoming more open and transparent than ever, even if the ruling class does not necessarily like this.”³

In contrast to these liberal words coming from the top we should not forget the sad reality on the ground of journalism in this country, particularly regarding the protection of journalists. Russia ranks among the worst in the number of journalists killed.⁴ Although Freedom House’s “Freedom of the Press Index” suffers from an American bias, it is symptomatic that in its annual “Map of Press Freedom” of 2003 Russia lost its status as a “partly free” country; since then Russia has remained “not free” along with China and most other Asian as well as Arab and African countries.⁵ Much of the same concern is shared by the Glasnost Defence Foundation of Russian journalists themselves.⁶

Let us, however, return to the big picture and think about the presentations made by colleagues at this conference. Denis McQuail

³ http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/speeches/2009/09/10/1534_type104017_221527.shtml

⁴ <http://en.rsf.org/safety-of-journalists.html> <http://www.cpj.org/>

⁵ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2009>

⁶ <http://www.gdf.ru/digest/item/1/714#gdf>

raised the problems of the audience, common problems in Britain, America as well as in Russia. Likewise, Paolo Mancini: although he started with the Berlusconi case, his reflections on three points in politics are equally valid in Russia. Elena Vartanova's points could also be applied to most of our countries; they are nevertheless more extreme and dramatic in Russia but qualitatively very much the same as in the rest of the world. Media economy confirms this perspective, as would be elaborated by Robert Picard if only he could be here. His estimate of the share of media economy is 2.3 per cent of the total world economy. Elena Vartanova and Sergey Smirnov give roughly the same estimate for Russian media economy. The share of advertising in media economy is about 30 per cent in Europe and North America, and today the Russian figure is roughly the same.

To conclude my overview, the Russian media system is unique in its historical development. On the other hand, its contemporary character is no longer so special but rather a more or less typical case for highlighting universal problems. So thank you for providing us with such a good case.

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Faculty of Journalism
Lomonosov Moscow State University

CONTENT, CHANNELS AND AUDIENCES IN THE NEW MILLENIUM: INTERACTION AND INTERRELATIONS

Moscow, 2010



Elena Vartanova (ed.)

**CONTENT, CHANNELS AND AUDIENCES
IN THE NEW MILLENIUM:
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CONTENT

Preface	6
---------------	---

The Media-Audience Relationships: Communicating under New Conditions

<i>Denis McQuail</i> The Media Audience Concept: Decomposition and Recomposition	9
--	---

<i>Wolfgang Donsbach</i> Audience Selectivity and Media Power - A Brief Research History	22
--	----

<i>Jeroen De Keyser and Karin Raeymaeckers</i> Are Fear-Based Fortresses Finished? A Technology Fuelled Shift in the Flemish Journalist-Public Relations	30
---	----

<i>Ingela Wadbring</i> Satisfactory Content. Free Dailies Good Enough for a Specific Readership	45
---	----

<i>Albert Kulla and Imrich Gazda</i> The Analysis of the Thesis of Impacts of Desocialisation of the Media on the Basic Social Unit	60
---	----

The Online Universe: Newer Platforms, Newer Creators, Newer Consumers

<i>Pamela J. Shoemaker, Philip R. Johnson, Hyunjin Seo and Xiuli Wang</i> Readers as Gatekeepers of Online News: Russia, China and the United States	73
--	----

<i>Ulrika Andersson</i> Journalists' Opinions on Audience-Created Content in Online Newspapers. A Swedish Case Study	104
--	-----

<i>Tim Dwyer and Fiona Martin</i>	
News Diversity in Online Media Systems: A Preliminary Report on the Concept of Voice	116

Transforming Media Systems in Europe: Structural and Technological Factors

<i>Elsa De Bens</i>	
Success and Failure of Digital Television	145

<i>Pieter Bakker</i>	
Print Media Shifts in Central and Eastern Europe: the Development of a Hybrid Model	166

<i>Kaarle Nordenstreng</i>	
The Russian Media System: Something Special?	183

<i>Jukka Pietiläinen</i>	
Russian Middle Class and Media: Glossy Magazines as an Indicator of New Trends	187

<i>Rogério Santos</i>	
Trends in the Media Market in Portugal over the Past Three and a Half Decades	201

Changing Media – Changing Politics and Regulation Strategies

<i>Bertrand Cabedoche</i>	
Open Source Strategies and Media in Political Elections of the New Millennium: an Emerging Script on Technological Determinism?	215

<i>Ana Edin and Kristina Widestedt</i>	
Communicating Politics – Theoretical Perspectives	235

<i>Laura Bergés</i>	
Culture and Business in Copyright Regulation	248

David Goldberg,
Freedom of Information in the 21st Century:
Bringing Clarity to Transparency 265

Analyzing Media Content: How Close is the Reality?

Murat Güreşçi and Ece Karadogan Doruk
Discourse of Mobbing (Psychological Violence
in Working Place) in Turkish Press 285

*Murat Mengü, Ceyda Ilgaz Büyükbaykal
and Güven Büyükbaykal*
The Image of Russia in Turkish Print Media 301

Seda Çakar Mengü, Ayşe Cengiz and Şebnem Çağlar,
Formation of the Prejudice against Women
and Women's Freedom in News Discourse 316

Usharani Narayana and Priti Kapur
Media, Public Attitude and Mumbai Terror of 26/11 332

Ömer Özer and Neda Saraçer
Critical Discourse Analysis and Ideological Presentation
of Custom Killings in Newspapers: An Example
in Hürriyet and Sabah Daily Newspapers 349

Sema Becerikli and Didem Özkul
Online Public Relations Campaigns of NGOs in Turkey:
an Inquiry of HAYTAP 369

Authors and Contacts 380

PREFACE

Faculty of Journalism of Lomonosov Moscow State University, the oldest Russian institution for teaching and researching media, journalism and communication, is progressively integrating in the international academic community as both participant and organizer of research and discussion. Currently, the Faculty of Journalism interests cover almost all major fields of media studies. On the way to support its strong and influential scientific brand it has established a new strategy of internationalizing its studies focusing on organizing international events of visible scale that contribute to Russian and global media studies.

Among its new contributions to the international academic universe was the 1st International Media Readings in Moscow hold on the MSU Faculty of Journalism in the autumn of 2009. The book that is presented now is a collection of articles written by some of its participants from Europe, Asia, Australia and both Americas.

Today the number of approaches to mass communication research in modern media and scientific environment is hardly countable. And the list keeps growing as more of the personal and mass communication processes relocates to new media space with its opening infinity of technological and communication options. The areas of contributors' interest also varied widely, but more detailed examination made it possible to see that most of the research of various academics from gurus to gifted young doctors could be linked to understating audiences and regulation, analyzing content and representation of modern social issues, dealing with technological challenges and opportunities and examining transformations in regional media systems and models.

Editors