

A brief history of newsmaking in Russia

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Abstract

In this introductory article to our special issue on newsmaking in Russia, we provide a context for how the study of journalism evolved in Russia in contrast to Europe and the US. This brief historical overview helps make sense of the specific trajectory of journalism studies: from normative Cold War perspectives to a highly diverse and vibrant field that considers journalistic agency, the interplay of commercialisation and media control and the complexities of a rapidly changing media environment. The contributions to this special issue present nuanced approaches to self-censorship, the impact of digital technologies and political intervention.

Keywords

Journalism, news aggregators, newsmaking, Russia, self-censorship, Yandex

Introduction

Despite an ever intense fascination in the West with ‘peculiar’ Russia, journalism study scholars have never taken any great interest in the specificities of newsmaking in the country. Scholars have traditionally seen Russian journalism as a spawn of the Kremlin’s power, and therefore hardly paid any attention to what is going on in the newsrooms and how technological and political developments of the regime affect journalists’ daily work. This special issue is a first step to make up for this neglect. The focus is on newsrooms in Moscow as well as across the whole country. It looks at the impact of new government legislation, the daily processes of news production and the handling of major international news stories.

Russian newsmaking: A historical overview

The label of uniqueness with regards to Russia and its history is usually badly overused and often carelessly applied. It does have a case in point with regards to journalism and newsmaking, however. Journalism in Russia evolved on a different trajectory than in the West. The history of journalism in Russia was an integral part of the country’s Westernisation since the 18th century. Peter the Great, Russia’s legendary reformer-tsar, brought the idea of a regular newspaper from his European trips. On his orders, Russia’s first newspaper, St. Petersburg News [Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti], appeared in 1702. Catherine the Great in 1769 established a journal that called for moderate satire [Vsiakaia vsiachina]. Other

members of the elite cautiously critiqued the autocracy, such as one of the country's leading Enlightenment era philosophers, the publisher Nikolai Novikov, who established several satirical journals.

In contrast to the establishment of an increasingly independent press in Britain, France, Germany and the United States, in Russia autocratic censorship made the decade's best writers seek to express their ideas through literature criticism rather than printed journalism (see [Brooks, 1985](#); [McReynolds, 1991](#)). An expression of this trend was a number of journals, the most prominent of which was *Sovremennik* [The Contemporary]. It was set up by the poet Alexander Pushkin in 1836, who modelled it along the *Edinburgh Review*, a liberally-minded cultural magazine. Leo Tolstoy's writing career took its beginnings with publications in this journal. During his editorship from the 1850s onwards, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, later a prominent literary critic, *Sovremennik* became a major voice for liberal reform. By that time, the voices of liberal intelligentsia were no longer to be suppressed, and the autocratic attempts to undermine the emergence of journalism channelled the generation's energy and spirit into the production of some of the best works in world literature (see [McReynolds, 1990](#)).

The February revolution of 1917 that cancelled state censorship opened briefly the floodgates to a sea of new publications. When the Bolsheviks took power in October that year, they severely pushed back on freedom of speech, while at the same time worshipping the power of mass communication. In fact, the party newspaper [*Iskra*] had been the main instrument around which activities were organised prior to the revolution, whilst Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party, back in 1905 stressed the importance of journalism for the socialist state. Shortly after the Revolution, *Pravda* had replaced *Iskra* as the main party organ. Many Bolsheviks were writers and reporters and enthusiastically joined in the state's propaganda efforts ([Kenez, 1985](#)). The state actively invested into technologies and rapidly developed the radio and film industry to 'reach the masses' ([Lovell, 2015](#)). The artefacts they produced, especially posters and short films, have fascinated scholars ever since ([Berkhoff, 2012](#); [Cook, 2007](#)).

By the time of Stalin's rule in the 1930s, public life was fully in the grip of tyranny. Even in those dark years, journalists retained some, albeit most minor, level of autonomy in their daily work, at least the most trusted among them (see, e.g. [Balmford, 2015](#)). After Stalin's death and throughout the late Soviet Union, journalists maintained a strong sense of being in service of the people; to act as a public watchdog, be sensitive to readers' concerns and, if necessary, remind the state of its obligations to look after its people ([Wolfe, 2005](#)). There were even cases of journalists undertaking investigative research, which led to the revelation of corruption and arbitrary behaviour among local bureaucrats ([Roudakova, 2017](#), pp. 51–97).

This did little to prevent Soviet citizens to be tired out by the repetitiveness and emptiness of most media products, which they deeply distrusted. They either read between the lines or simply disappeared into a world of (science) fiction, historical novels and literary magazines that created a parallel reality of the late Soviet man. Everyone was convinced that this would last forever ([Yurchak, 2006](#)) and nobody expected that Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* in 1987 would set off the freest period in Russian news-making to date ([Turkova, 2017](#)).

Boldly ignoring the official party line and proactively reporting on previously unmentionable issues, such as human rights offenses, corruption in the highest ranks of power, unemployment, alcoholism, ethnic hatred or police brutality, they became icons of change and were trusted more than any party member. Popular television programmes (such as *The View* or *Vzgliad*, launched in 1987) were broadcasted at prime time. Talk show hosts and their investigative reporters became superstars; their public appearances filled whole football stadiums ([Kinopoisk, 2020](#)). The rapid and radical reforms and developments of

these years changed the country beyond recognition. In June 1991, even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December of that year, censorship was banned. Russia's first post-Soviet constitution, passed in 1993, enshrined freedom of speech as a core constitutional law.

There was a powerful sense of optimism, drive and vision for the new Russia: journalists wanted to do things better. However, by the mid-1990s, their enthusiasm receded: nascent, independent media outlets were being taken over by the newly risen media tycoons. Next followed the rapid oligarchisation of the media landscape as well as an unprecedented media campaign in 1996 to get Boris Yeltsin's popularity lifted from the ground. The country's powerful oligarchs pulled their forces to see him win over his main contender, the highly popular Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, who they feared would destroy private business. The campaign was joined by the country's most respected new journalists, who had spearheaded the liberal-democratic reforms but now readily applied the smearing techniques they knew from Soviet times: kompromat, character assassination and right-out lies (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017a). Without this oligarchy-financed media intervention, Yeltsin would have stood no chance to be re-elected for a second term. He rewarded the oligarchs who supported him with lucrative media assets. Some, among them the late oligarch Boris Berezovsky, were left empty-handed. They retaliated with yet another media campaign hoping to force the government to change their mind (Fossato and Kachkaeva, 1997; Mickiewicz, 1999; Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017a; [Zassoursky, 2004](#)).

After Putin's election as president in March 2000, he cemented his position by publicly attacking some of the most powerful 1990s oligarchs. His first targets were those among them who possessed large media empires ([Ostrovsky, 2015](#)). The Putin Administration was determined to bring them under their control. They started ever-increasing constraining hurdles and restrictions for them. Eventually almost all free and independent media were shut down. As a result, the employment market for quality journalism has dramatically shrunk.

The study of contemporary Russian journalism and newsmaking

The 1956 publication of *Four Theories of the Press* by the political scientists Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm set a template of how to conceptualise Soviet media: complete state control over the press and its instrumental use for Communist Party objectives. This normative reading echoed in many subsequent works, most in *Comparing Media Systems* by [Hallin and Mancini \(2004\)](#). In later works, [Hallin and Mancini \(2012\)](#), when including the Russian media system into their analysis, they had parted with many normative elements they held onto in earlier writings. In general, however, normative approaches have distracted media scholars for decades from discovering the complexities embedded in the Soviet and Russian media system.

Scholarly interest in practices of journalism in the West go back to the early twentieth century. According to [Belair-Gagnon and Revers \(2018\)](#), the sociology of journalism takes its European beginning with Max Weber, who pushed for public opinion and media studies. Around the same time, in the US, the Chicago School of Sociology carried out their first urban ethnography on immigrants' foreign language press. After the war, many sociologists of journalism were integrated into media communication departments, as a result of which the sociology of journalism developed in a slightly different trajectory than sociology overall. On both sides of the Atlantic many newsroom ethnographers were recruited from former and still acting journalists.¹ By the late 1970s (strongly influenced by Gaye Tuchman), media scholars had embraced the idea that news are socially constructed and objectivity is a ritualistic performance.

Meanwhile, humanities and social science scholars who worked on twentieth-century Russia came to be dominated by Sovietologists. Their primary interest was in political-science analyses of the totalitarian system (see Engerman, 2009). The language they spoke was very different to the one used by newsroom ethnographers in the West. Western media scholars, in turn, used concepts and frameworks which were not applicable to the study of Soviet journalism.

Sovietologists made no effort to challenge this generalising view. In any case, they were sealed off from Soviet newsrooms and could not possibly dream about carrying out any ethnographic studies. When Western scholars were allowed into the country, the best they could hope for was to receive access to strictly-controlled and pre-selected archival materials ([Remington, 1985](#)). They were left to reading in between the lines of Pravda and Izvestia ([Axelrod and Zimmermann, 1981](#)). There was value in this; the Soviet Union's political elites did the very same ([Rogers, 1970, 1971](#)).

When journalism got energised in the late 1980s, it developed so rapidly that Western-based Sovietologists could not keep pace. Some nevertheless tried and did so successfully: Mickiewicz (1988) and [McNair \(1991\)](#) traced the tectonic changes in glasnost media in general and television in particular. In the early 1990s, David Edgwood Benn, a Cold War veteran of British broadcasting, travelled to Russia to interview journalists and editors about how they experienced the transition from the Soviet to post-Soviet media conditions of work ([1996](#)).

At the turn of the century there was a major change in studying journalist practices across the globe and scholars started to pay more attention to non-American, non-European contexts (see, e.g. [Curran and Park, 2000](#); [De Beer and Merrill, 2004](#); [Hallin and Mancini, 2012](#); [Murphy and Rodriguez, 2006](#); [Löffelholz and Weaver, 2008](#)). This trend brought Russia back onto the radar. Scholars were mostly interested in the newly rising state control and censorship in the 2000s (see, e.g. [Becker, 2004](#); Castells, 2009; [Vartanova, 2012](#)). A great example of this is Sarah Oates' 'neo-Soviet media model' ([Oates, 2007](#)): the Kremlin exerts censorship, oppresses opposition media and facilitates loyal coverage of Kremlin policies. Some have criticised this model for not considering nuances that show that Russia's media system today in many respects differs from that in the Soviet Union and its methods of control (e.g. [Tolz and Teper, 2018](#)).

By the late 2000s Russian journalism studies had caught up, greatly thanks to emigrant scholars from Russia and the Soviet Union, many of whom had worked in journalism at some point. They drew upon their experience and relied on scholarly concepts to combine theories and practice ([Lipman, 2005](#); [Lipman and McFaul, 2001](#)). The former radio journalist Svetlana Pasti realised the importance of generations in Russia's young journalistic community and their potential to raise tensions and conflicts ([2005](#)). Adjustment to new and ever changing environments was also the focus of a study by Olesya [Koltsova \(2006\)](#). Beyond this question, Koltsova examined how the St Petersburg-based journalists in her study negotiated their various attitudes towards professional ethics and organised their daily interaction with colleagues and newsmakers (see also [Chupin and Dauce, 2017](#)).

Exploring the concepts of media ecology in a tradition of [McLuhan \(1964\)](#) and [Postman \(1970\)](#), [Hoskins and Shchelin \(2018\)](#) traced how the Panama Papers investigation was covered in Russian media, both state-controlled and independent online media. In a similar vein, but under opposite signs, Vera Tolz, Stephen Hutchings, Precious Chatterje-Doody and Rhys Crilly in this special issue looked at another controversial story of the recent years, namely the scandal unleashed by the Skripal poisoning. Their analysis of RT journalists demonstrated that modern authoritarian states struggle to micromanage their journalists, which forces them to increase the agency to allocate to them. Entrusted with this difficult

task, these journalists had to balance doing justice and not neglecting their outlets' commercial and political interests by losing credibility among their audience. The combination of such factors led to the car crash interview of the RT boss Margarita Simonyan with the Novichok suspects Petrov and Bashirov, which made waves around the world ([Higgins, 2018](#))

Following Western research shifts from organisational structures to journalistic agency (see [Belair-Gagnon and Revers, 2018](#)), the youngest generation of scholars on Russian journalism pursued a similar interest. Most important here is the work by [Roudakova \(2008, 2009, 2017\)](#). With her 2017 award-winning book *Losing Pravda*, she brought Russian newsroom ethnography onto a new level. Her work marks the start of yet a new generation of young scholars investigating post-Soviet journalism. Examples are [Zeveleva \(2018, 2020\)](#), [Malyutina \(2019\)](#) and [Fedirko \(2020\)](#), who illustrate on the cases of Ukraine, Russia and Crimea how journalists adapt to changing regimes and new restrictions in their freedom of speech.

Self-censorship and commercialisation

Self-censorship in Russia and the commercialisation of the media market are closely connected. Unlike widely assumed, we claim that marketisation and aggressive state interference are no opposites and that censorship is not generated either through state repression or through commercial demands. In fact, both these demands have long merged ([Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2020](#)). According to the biggest ever study on self-censorship in Russian journalism carried out by Svetlana Bodrunova, Anna Litvinenko and Kamilla Nigmatullina, commercial pressures and editorial interests are, however, negligible if compared to political factors. This is the same for offline and online journalism, as their survey of 95 journalists from 51 Russian regions suggests. In this study, they asked what makes journalists censor themselves in their daily work. The study shows the paradox ways of how journalists justify for themselves why self-censorship is something positive: it protects their sources, helps avoiding conflicts and minimises personal risks. Important here is that Bodrunova et al locate the burden and pressure of such self-limitation acts primarily on the personal level. These important observations of the 'censor' in the daily journalistic work is very much in line with our concept of *adekvatnost*, a term we coined back in 2013.

Adekvatnost implies a set of strategies – almost a sixth sense – that helps journalist navigate the newsroom and find a way around the constraining side-effects of censorship and self-censorship ([Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2020](#)). *Adekvatnost* is essential for efficient news production; what topic to prioritise, how to approach them, what guests to invite and so on. It relieves journalists from constant doubts about whether they are in line with what is expected from them. It also allows them to be creative and innovative. This is key to give programmes and news the entertaining and engaging elements they require. Media managers follow similar strategies when implementing Kremlin policies: we have noted that in our qualitative interviews with Russia's leading editors-in-chief ([Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017a](#)), which complements big data collected by Rolf Freidheim (2016) of the influence of editors-in-chief on the news agenda of Russia's major news websites.

We argue that informal practices of this kind emerge in contexts of oligarch-dominated ownership structures paired with rising authoritarianism ([Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2020](#); for a similar phenomenon outside Russia, see [Lee and Chan, 2009](#): 124; and [Tapsell 2012](#): 229, 240). Bodrunova et al.'s study explain that these circumstances – that journalists are forced taking simple ethical decisions individually on a daily basis – are down to the fact that professional standards are still only in the making. To be fair, Russian journalists did make efforts to introduce a code of ethics, as we demonstrate elsewhere (2017a), first in 1994. They

traded ethical principles for financial benefits, which set the standards for subsequent generations. In his contribution to this special issue, Alexei Kovalev offers numerous witness testimonies of how both senior management and political authorities exert pressure.

News aggregators and digitalisation

Amidst the growing role of the state in the Russian media market, digital space has been one of the safe havens for independent journalists and quality news media platforms ([Zavadski and Toepfl, 2018](#)). Seemingly based on pure technical algorithms, news aggregator services have started to partake in processes that result in the drowning of non-government-sympathetic coverage. This has now even hit Yandex, Russia's leading search engine which beats Google on the Russian market. For long, Yandex was adamant to keep its algorithm shielded from human invasion. This ensured many Russians a relatively wide range of information sources thanks to the top news aggregated by Yandex.

There are both commercial and legal reasons for why Yandex eventually got caught up. First, as Kovalev argues in this issue, journalists are under constant pressure to sustain high traffic on their website, for which they are forced to produce a large number of clickbait pieces to trick the algorithm and push certain topics into the top of the news. Second, as Marielle Mijermars explores in her article, a recent law which holds news aggregators liable for spreading fake news forced Yandex to amend its algorithm in a way that favoured Kremlin-loyal news headlines. Both pieces tackle an important change in the operations of Russia's newsrooms: Russian internet governance fundamentally changed journalists' approach to news production. They had to adapt their titles, approaches to news stories and distribution methods on social media according to the new Yandex algorithms.

As documented by Kovalev, when recording Yandex news during a recent anti-government protest in Moscow, the capital is catching up with the rest of Russia when it comes to tight media control. Regional governors and mayors have for years exerted a far higher level of pressure and control on their local media. They have put most of the local media under their legal or financial control that created comfortable yet creatively limited zones for journalists. Olga Dovbysh' contribution shows that traditional local media (e.g. print newspapers and television channels) highly dependent on the funding provided by city council and regional administrations which is an obstacle for their modernisation and, inadvertently, creates a niche for alternative voices provided by new media.

Almost in a way confirming widespread stereotypes about how Russia works, its newsmaking ticks indeed very specifically and not like anywhere in the West. One reason for this is that it developed under strictest control from above – and in constant attempts to circumvent the straightjacket the state imposed on it. It was exactly this mixture that generated alternative forms of literary expression. When in the late twentieth century, during Perestroika of the 1980s, newsmaking was finally freed from constraints, it started thriving with a fervour and in forms that were, yet again, distinct. That period was short-lived. It was not authoritarian control mechanisms that kicked in first. Prior to that, market logics and oligarchic interests took hold. This chain of development is crucial: rather than the state of newsmaking in Russia being predominantly a remnant of the Soviet rule, it is just as much a product of the 1990s oligarch capture and the economic crisis of 1998, followed by new forms of twenty-first-century digital authoritarianism and post-truth populism. This is why we argue that journalism studies in the West are well advised not to prematurely dismiss Russia, but pay closest attention. Russian newsmaking might well provide clues to the turbulences in the profession caused by misinformation, fake news and economic pressure.

Note

1. In the 1950s, the former journalist Warren Breed pointed to the impact a culture of individual aspirations had on the erosion of a sense of group allegiance. In the 1970s studies by scholars and journalists such as Herbert Gans, Philip Schlesinger, Peter Golding and Jeremy Tunstall, examined how routines and daily newsroom requirements influenced journalists' more general norms and values.

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