

# The Rise of the Provincial Press

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The initial mission of the Russian-American Press and Information Center was to concentrate on developing a fact-and-information culture in the Russian media as a way to aid the democratization process. We have now expanded our role and are active in a number of areas, concentrating particularly on the provincial media, both broadcast and print. This is where the greatest action, the greatest disengagement from the past is taking place. It is here that most of the problems exist.

Decentralization of the mass media in Russia has been actively occurring in the last two or three years. The actual number of newspapers today varies depending on who you ask. The central newspapers are down tremendously. *Izvestiya*, which used to have a circulation of 10 to 12 million, is down now to 812,000. Reportedly, it is doing very well but it had to recently close its edition of *We/Mbi*, a joint Russian-American edition. A member of the staff told this author they were bleeding money: losing five million rubles (\$4,000) a day. *Pravda* is down from its previous circulation of 10 million to just 173,000. This is particularly disturbing because *Pravda* is about the only opposition voice on the national level.

There are many problems in the regional press as well. The press in Nizhny Novgorod is relatively strong and independent, probably because its citizens have elected a good governor and mayor. The mayor, Dmitry Bednyakov, is now in trouble and may no longer be in office at the end of March 1995 when there are new elections. These are good men whose goals and commitment to a free and independent press are certainly admirable. However, what is lacking are the institutional structures which would make press independence possible all across the nation.

Every region in Russia still depends on its own laws, its own interpretation of the laws, and the people who happen to be in power at the moment. And it is this give, this flexibility, this lack of institutional structures that allows some of the weaknesses to surface and proliferate. The collapse of the central press is basically an economic phenomenon because the national newspapers cannot afford to distribute across all 11 time zones. The roads do not work; long-distance printing does not work.

Political power in the regions lies with the administrators, who are usually appointed as opposed to the few oblast governors and mayors who are elected. The soviets (councils) were dissolved after the October 1993 uprising and subsequent events. Power vacuums then developed. Control of the newspapers published by the soviets was up for grabs and a lot of power shifting began to take place. The regional press is more dependent upon

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local authority than the Moscow press is dependent on central authority. There is more freedom and diversity in the central press. But the central press does not go anywhere. It stops right at the outskirts of Moscow.

Another consequence of all this is that Russia has lost its previous coveted position as the second largest newspaper-per-capita rate in the world, after Japan. It is true that the central press has declined and the

readership of the local papers has increased in proportion. But there is another element: the printed press is having less influence than it used to. People are depending on television for a lot of their news and information. And television is increasingly controlled, depending on whose opinion you

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read, by the central government. This is where the real battles are taking place. This is why struggles are going on to control the federal station in each oblast, and there are 89 of these.

The private television sector is also developing. There are about a dozen private TV towers and transmitters. But the private TV people are obliged to rent their time from the federal transmitters. Money may not be the currency used because money is scarce right now. In that respect, the breakdown of the central media does give more influence to the local media than previously but that does not mean it is completely free of authority. Simply put: journalists must now cope with local authority as opposed to central authority. And as is known, local authority has tended to be more conservative than Moscow.

Boris Nemtsov’s administration in Nizhny Novgorod is considered to be a model of local reform. But the printing house is still owned by the authorities. Every city with the exception of Moscow has one central typesetting and printing house, where one must wait his turn. Who decides the turn? Who decides how often you print? Who decides the size of your circulation? Who decides how much the newsprint is going to cost? How much newsprint are you going to get? The answers to these questions rest with the local administrators.

Editors and publishers were threatening a nationwide strike in January 1994, just before President Clinton’s visit. To avoid embarrassment, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin negotiated a deal to cancel the decision to raise publication prices (newsprint and printing prices) six-fold. Now these prices are going to be up for renegotiation. The newspapers are supposed to be surviving on their own: most are not getting money from the central government any more, but they are getting it locally. The newspapers are still struggling to become financially independent but it is difficult when the government can control prices arbitrarily.

There have also been cases of the authorities controlling the media during campaigns and elections. Our Center monitored eight Moscow

newspapers, the television channels Ostankino, Rossiya, and St. Petersburg (which are federal channels), and private and state radio channels during the March election coverage. What we discovered was that there was a great deal of control in the form of election laws pertaining to the media. One of the requirements was that there not be commentary on the part of the reporters. Additionally, every party of the 13 or so out there got a free hour of coverage. In addition, they could place as many ads as their money could buy.

The results were interesting. By forcing reporters not to ask embarrassing questions in the December 1993 elections, by totally staying out and by

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letting the political figures speak for themselves, viewers received messages that were equivalent to what we had in the United States during the McCarthy era. The parties were free to create the kind of coverage they wanted and the timid press—timid because of electoral regulation—did not do its job in exposing the weaknesses of

these candidates. This is the flip side to negative campaigning and negative media coverage: the political parties choreograph their own scripts for the public while the media just sits there.

Other irregularities happened in the wake of the elections and the October 1993 events. The administrator of the Kaliningrad Oblast took over *Kaliningradskaya Pravda*. This was a violation of the Law on the Press because the editorial staff should have had the right to become the founder of the paper when the soviet was dissolved. But this disturbing fact was far from being the exception—it happened in one city after another. Battles occurred when the regional bosses came in before, during, and after the election period and took over supposedly independent newspapers and radio stations to control the kind of coverage the election was getting. And of course this practice has continued.

The crackdown that happened after the October 1993 events, the brief closing down of *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, *Rabochaya Tribuna*, *Den*, and eight or nine other newspapers, has apparently stopped. However, there are examples of other newspapers of less stature being manipulated by central and regional officials. The crackdown was a real watershed. It has started a momentum that may not be good. The most effective form of censorship is always self-censorship, and more of it is occurring. Political control is being established because of the unstable political and economic situation. Thus, editors and journalists have no choice but to relinquish their independence. In the Leningrad Oblast, which surrounds St. Petersburg, editors and journalists begged the oblast officials to take them over so that they could get subsidies and survive.

In addition, there is the problem of Russian laws. The state of law in Russia today is in flux. It is not uniform throughout the country, and

nobody knows quite what the law is. Tax laws are considered to be very unfair because they tax newspaper profits at the same rate as they tax sales of whisky, cars, etc. There is no concession on postal rates. High postal rates is one of the largest problems with distribution. It costs three to seven times as much to distribute newspapers by mail as it does to produce them. Cheap, second-class postal rates for the press is a privilege which is provided in the United States, but not in Russia.

Newspaper distribution is mainly a government monopoly controlled through Rospechat. However, there are some gains being made in private distribution. In Yekaterinburg, Yeltsin's home town, a private group is delivering newspapers in bulk to work sites. This reduces the cost of distribution to homes. Yet, they are able to make money doing it. So they are effectively competing against the government's distribution monopoly. In some cities, the authorities give a break to pensioners so as to increase the number of subscriptions. In the Vologda Oblast, they reduced pensioner subscriptions to half price, subsidizing this move through the pensioners' fund. But when one of the newspapers criticized the administration for this in a very mild manner, the officials rescinded the discount. The moral of the story is that whenever one depends on the government for favors, the favors tend to be taken away eventually.

One of the largest problems in Russia, although it is solvable, is the flow of news. The flow still tends to be vertical. The subsidized press agencies, ITAR-TASS, RIA, Novosti, carry news from Moscow down to the regions, but not everyone can afford to

take these news services. News tends to be rather local because there is simply not enough money to afford the wire reports from the subsidized agencies. But there are some private agencies developing and providing great hope for the country. It is very important politically

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and economically that there be more horizontal communication in Russia. If someone lives in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, for example, and wants to know what is going on in the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, he has to hope that TASS or another agency passes the news down from Moscow, and that it gets there. Chains of communication need to be set up so that regions can talk to one another. This may be solved by a technical solution like computer e-mail. This is skipping a generation, but the fax really is not viable. It works one time out of a hundred. There are other means such as satellite transmission of information, that may be solutions as well.

The United States receives more news about the governor of the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast than Russia does. How can there be “favorite sons” developing politically when nobody knows what is going on? There is a lot of stale blood in Moscow right now. One reason is that the Party mechanism for bringing new blood into the political system, which worked with

Mikhail Gorbachev and Nikita Khrushchev, is dead. The Communist Party mechanism is also dead. Today, Russia needs the press to bring good leaders in from the provinces.

Despite the negative trends on information flow, there *are* some positive signs. For example, multi-oblast newspapers do exist. In fact, when Mikhail

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Fedotov was minister of Press and Information, he subsidized a few of them, and that was a good sign. There still are some in Primorsky Krai, in Siberia, and in Novosibirsk. There are also groups of editors and journalists forming

associations. Furthermore, multi-oblast groups in the Volga and north Caucasus are trying to act as lobbying groups to support the interests of the press in the State Duma. This is also a very encouraging sign.

One very discouraging development is that the old professional unions like The Union of Journalists have had to become commercially independent. This means that all of the facilities they used to offer journalists are now commercial ventures that do not serve the needs of journalists at all. Instead, they exist to make money. Foreign visitors, who can afford the cover charges, come in and use the restaurants and the services. It is another story for cash-strapped Russian journalists, however.

New organizations are springing up and are functioning in some of the provincial towns. In Nizhny Novgorod, their Union of Journalists is a very good, positive group, working to support press rights and freedoms. But in cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, the unions have sold out. Not one journalist is to be seen there; only 21-year-old girls in mink coats and broad shouldered guys who never talk.

What needs to be done? This could be discussed for a long time. One thing is further contacts. The Russian-American Press and Information Center brings a lot of journalistic teams over from the United States. The Center also works with Russian specialists to organize seminars and to organize activities that focus on the business side and the management side. However, it is questionable whether it is realistic to expect advertising revenues to make these newspapers viable. Look what it took for the United States to develop a commercial press: it took a strong middle class of consumers, national brands, communications, and technology. These are not present in Russia today.

The penny press in the United States dates back to 1833 but it really had a pretty political press up to about 1900—political press meaning a press that was subsidized by various political groups that put out their own papers. This may be a solution. However, it is very unrealistic to expect isolated, highly rural towns in such a huge country to survive on advertising, or survive at all. One of the problems is the low economic level in Russia right now—nothing is being produced, hence, there are more services than goods. Why would Delta Airlines, for example, want to advertise in Magadan? One must look into other ways that the media can be financed.

Europe, Japan, and much of the rest of the world subsidize their media—television more than the newspapers. Britain does this in the form of TV set licenses. Thus, calls to subsidize the media should not be dismissed by saying, “Go out and sell more ads. You can do it!”

People must keep their minds open to the many models—other than the contemporary American model—that may be followed. The laws in Russia are in a state of paralysis. The development of professional groups and lobbies will help journalists have an input into new laws. Consumers need to know more about the media. There is no data base and no one knows who is a journalist and who is not. Because of the dire economic situation, most journalists hold three or four jobs. They work for two or three newspapers; they may also drive a cab, or take bribes. How else can they survive?

Despite all of these problems, the Russians have a very strong literary press tradition of their own. Although it is probably more European than American in style, they are beginning to get more facts and more information. The interest in the media is growing thanks to dedicated people like Alexander Meltsaev, who is working to get the information out in the provinces.

All in all, it is the regional press in Russia which will be the conduit of the future. At the moment this may not be the case, but despite the alarming trends, some flickers of hope do exist.