

# The New Provincial Journalism

## *Leaving the Forlorn Beauty of Words Behind*

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As policy-making devolves from Moscow to the regions of Russia, the influence of the regional media continues to grow. This is especially true in the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast with its strong press traditions. Only a couple of years ago the regions of Russia differed from one another mainly in the degree of secrecy which surrounded them. Secrecy shrouded these jurisdictions from the eyes of outsiders—from the Americans, the English, the French—but also from the Russian people. Nizhny Novgorod—which was the closed city of Gorky during the Soviet era—was no exception. Until very recently our town was among the great unknowns. As a native of Nizhny Novgorod and with solid background in print and television media there, this author will concentrate this brief essay on the print aspect because it is longer and stronger.

The decentralization of policy-making in Russia has given new life to the regional press and has endowed it with more political influence than ever before. Readers are losing interest in subscribing to national newspapers; they have made a clear choice for the regional press. Local subscriptions are up, in good part, because of the tremendous rise in prices of national newspapers.

Today there are approximately 70-80 newspapers in the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast. The average circulation this year is about 30,000 to 40,000 copies for well-established newspapers. These papers are now highly diversified. They are targeted at audiences that were previously unimaginable. Some of the newspapers are succeeding in copying Western publishing methods, including weekly supplements aimed at different audiences, like women or car owners.

It took only two or three years for the newspapers which are aimed at entrepreneurs and managers to become loaded with information and analytical articles. Often they are driven by advertising. Among a dozen weeklies of this kind, the best is the one named *Birzha* (Stock Exchange). *Kapital* and *Kurs* are also becoming well recognized. These newspapers are trying to give readers a chance to be informed and act reasonably in a market economy. They provide a lot of news one can use for profit.

There is also another category of newspapers which may be called traditional—in terms of their audience and their influence. They have loyal readers, permanent writers and their own professional traditions. These traditional newspapers are highly engaged politically. One traditional city paper is quite open to reporting the activities of the official reformers but

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also publishes alternative points of view. This newspaper is proud of its well-balanced position. The regional *Pravda* newspaper, on the other hand, is more hardline and rigid.

One other trend to be mentioned is the absence of monopoly in the local press today. Sources of information are much more diversified than they used to be. There are a dozen music and information radio stations, three or four TV channels and so on. There are two city newspapers and three regional newspapers trying to catch the eye of the readers. The regional press that is growing in influence makes journalists gravitate from one office to another in search of more money and a friendlier ambience. And the process cannot but shape the face of the newspaper. So the face of the regional press is quite varied today.

The post-Soviet years have been hard, not only on beginners in journalism but also on professionals. Many journalists have had to relearn journalism. This is not easy. It means you must forget all the old romantic ways of storytelling that had been the distinguishing trademark of high journalism during the Soviet

period. Today you have got to be objective, deal with the plain, hard facts more than with the forlorn beauty of words. There are many journalists who have not even begun to under-

stand what hard work is. There are still many who have not taken a personal position and are very quick to write anything you want them to. So professionalism in journalism is hard to come by.

Our American colleagues are right in saying that the first step for the modern Russian newspaper is to reject flowery phrases and propaganda. Up to now it has been very hard to publish a point of view that was not shared by the editors, even if it was reasonable. Chief editors sometimes refuse to publish the plain facts. Refusing to publish the obvious does not encourage tolerance of views, an author's right to free expression, or just reporting the plain truth. An example is the following anecdote. In the ten days leading up to the 12 December 1993 elections, this author expressed his opinion on how people could handle themselves during the voting when they were not sure how to deal with a dozen parties. This author suggested they act as if they were judges of artistic skating. They should reject the extremes and see who is left in the golden middle. Thus, they should have voted for Grigory Yavlinsky. This proposal did not please the editors, even for an opinion column. One may generalize that in controversial issues, newspapers prefer not to take any risk at all. Reflective stands are not welcome any more. You must be categorical and that is all.

The press significantly influences policy-making in the region. Let TV and radio be more popular than the print media. The print media is the big social integrator, if one can use that expression. And when some important document is openly discussed (for example, the city status) a better mediator than the press would be hard to find. Dissent, openly and

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peacefully expressed, regarding very important social documents promotes the elaboration of a compromise version which goes before the population for a vote. So the regional press often takes the chance to be an opponent of officially expressed points of view.

But that is not the only quality the press can boast of. It can be proud of its achievements as teacher of the democratic way of life when it serves its educational purposes. The press must not only show what real democracy is like, but also must find ways to strengthen free expression among the people. Do the people have problems choosing among 13 parties? Let newspapers prepare us for the difficulties of choice by telling us about all of the parties and giving their comparative characteristics. Then let the people go and vote.

The post-Soviet press is described as "partially free" by the experts of UNESCO. This is a sound judgement: from time to time we still hear demands "from above" to limit press freedom to a certain degree. One must decisively say "no!" to that. How soon will there be a really free press in a Russian democracy? That time will come when our economy becomes stronger and better.

In conclusion we may ask a question: What should be done to bolster the free press and free expression in Russia's regions today? It would be very good to study carefully the press: to monitor the regional press and to accumulate a reliable data base. The results of this analysis may uncover the newspapers' influence on a social group and the recurring themes of interest for different groups. It would be very helpful to organize a center for such research. In the long run, this will result in more stability for the regions.