

Can the West Help a Russian Free Press?

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Can the West help bolster a free press in Russia? The quick—and probably right—answer is: yes and no.

First, a note about this author. I am a life-long, ink-stained, ex-newspaper editor turned global press messiah. I am the chairman of the Center for Foreign Journalists in Washington which has been running for about eight or nine years. Over those years, we have held hands-on workshops, seminars, internships involving some 4,000-5,000 journalists from some 150 countries. We are supported entirely by private funding, mostly from newspaper foundations. In this training business, we have tried every trick in the book. Some of our efforts have been successful; some, useless.

There are ways the Western press can help the Russian press. We can offer some ideas that have been nurtured, massaged and refined in this country for a couple of centuries. Most notably, there has been some success in sharing ideas in business management; revenue analysis; personnel management; marketing newspapers; bolstering advertising revenues; training journalists, editors and sales people; press laws; establishing press associations; professional ethics and standards; etc. Practices in most of these areas are woefully weak in Russia. But it must be noted that most of our ideas do not travel very well. Any of the preaching that you get from the American press must be regarded as a pliant commodity, not a rigid set of rules. The West cannot eliminate subsidies, cannot create marketplaces for advertising, cannot pay for newsprint or provide a printing press. We cannot replace government distribution and printing monopolies; we cannot rewrite or, preferably, obliterate Russian press laws; and we cannot pay journalists decent salaries or tell them what to publish or what not to publish.

Our Center has had many Russians participating in programs over here. And we have had several programs over there and we will probably have a lot more. Surely, if we owned or invested in the Russian press as the Germans have done in east-central Europe, and the wise Dutch have done in Moscow, we could pretty much do what we wanted. But, that is not the solution. The Russian press is a particularly attractive investment these days. But our press lords are struggling to keep their own house in order and are terribly threatened by the so-called information highway.

There are some practical training techniques that can be employed. The establishment of press associations—both regional and national ones—offer the very best and most lasting benefits. Working through press associations

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is probably the best way we can collaborate with our friends abroad. Establishing press associations is probably the most inexpensive training device around. They are beginning to crop up in Russia. And these are not the old trade-union, Communist-dominated press unions that we saw all over Eastern Europe and the USSR in the past. These are highly professional groups of journalists getting together to improve themselves, not just their paycheck.

Press associations always have been a great support system. They are the richest sort of bazaar for acquiring new ideas for your newspaper or

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television station. I always thought that petty larceny of ideas is what good journalism is all about. Also, strong press associations are the most effective lobby any of us can think of

against government intrusion. In another generalization, too many training programs everywhere devote too much attention to free press rhetoric and too little time on staff management. To be blunt, not enough time is spent worrying and talking about the work ethic. Training efforts everywhere, including in the United States, should concentrate on the media’s work habits, on developing clear job descriptions, on performance evaluations, on staff accountability, and, yes—on how to deal with overstaffing. Press freedoms are not going to last very long if we do not learn to get to work on time.

We also need longer-term training programs. Ten or fifteen years ago most American efforts concentrated on bringing journalists to the United States for internships or for one- or two-week workshops. Both these techniques are extremely expensive; some have been curtailed and others discontinued. A lot of us took up sending journeymen abroad to run short training sessions. We are still doing it. They still are a very effective and useful technique and a lot less expensive than flying a dozen news people to the United States or Europe. And to answer complaints about hit-and-run training efforts, our Center has now launched a new program of long-term consultancies in countries where assistance is sought and where we think it might be useful. These consultancies are run from one to nine months, and are known as the Knight International Press Fellowships. They will be administered by our Center. They are sponsored by the Knight Foundation in Miami.

All of us in this training business should feel extremely lucky to have two giant foundations, the Freedom Forum and the Knight Foundation, devoting so much of their resources to helping improve the press all over the world. The first group of our Knight fellows, who are all print, TV, and academic experts, have been picked and are about to leave. One of them is going to South Africa, another to Moscow, another to Miensk, another to Warsaw, another to Bogotá. We expect to send out each year about 25 of these press fellows. The idea behind this is to provide a reasonably long-term consultancy, where both sides come to understand each other, develop confidence

in each other, and just be available to schmooze.

Let me suggest another idea. It is a tough one. We all should endeavor to lure more editors and publishers into our training programs. Most editors need their minds opened up to new ideas much more than reporters do. As a life-long editor, I know how passive editors can be. Editors are bosses who can make things happen if you

can wake them up. The Russian press is too vibrant and spirited to be cowed. I was in Moscow a couple of months ago and I couldn't get over the feeling of energy and front page excitement in that big city with ten or

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a dozen newspapers of anywhere from 200,000 to 500,000 circulation. We have only a couple of cities in America with more than two newspapers. Most of our cities are one-paper towns. So, there are all kinds of reasons for optimism in Russia. It is a highly educated country with even more potential than ours for supporting a strong print media over the long haul. Any country where poets are national heroes and chess is a national sport clearly has an awful lot going for it.