

# THE PRACTICE OF POLITICAL JOURNALISM: COMPARING RUSSIA, FRANCE, AND GERMANY

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For both Russia and France long-standing assumptions and well-established clichés are sometimes put forward as analyses of journalistic practice. In Russia the stifling of press freedom is the dominant framework of these analyses, either employing old categories for describing the Soviet media (propaganda, censorship, and ideology) or denouncing violence against journalists (such as the tragic death of Anna Polikovskaya<sup>1</sup>). In France and Western democracies in general the history of the long conquest of press freedom in the service of human rights was long mythologized and then deconstructed by one strand of media criticism (Bourdieu 1996; Halimi 1997). These authors focus on revealing the domination of the media by economic and shareholding interests (admittedly a palpable reality) or intellectual conformity (Lancelin 2016) and a single worldview (*pensée unique*). They tend, in so doing, to suggest that these effects too mechanically overdetermine journalists' work. While this discourse does express part of the media reality in these countries, it is insufficient to exhaust the complexity and dynamics of journalistic practice in two quite different contexts. This issue of *Laboratorium* is intended to compare and jointly examine the most recent sociological studies based on surveys of journalists in select EU countries and Russia. It contains three articles on journalism in Russia and three on the media in France (one of which compares that country with Germany). Why should we bring together in a single issue case studies that would at first sight appear so dissimilar, indeed contrasting? What lessons and analytical elements may be drawn from these comparisons?

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<sup>1</sup> Journalist for the independent newspaper *Novaia gazeta*, shot dead on October 7, 2006.

## HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF JOURNALISM ALONGSIDE NATIONAL HISTORIES

Our challenge here is to reexamine the discourse of specific national media characteristics and provide some transnational foundation for analysis. In the USSR ideological control and censorship did indeed weigh heavily on journalistic reality.<sup>2</sup> But a timeline of media developments shows that, as early as the 1960s, changes in the press and media were contemporaneous with media practice in Western Europe. Developments in communication practice (Roth-Ey and Zakharova 2015) and television schedules, with more time given to entertainment and leisure, could be observed both in the Soviet Union and the West (Roth-Ey 2011). The USSR was not immune to the changes occurring at that time. The technical advances made in extending first radio and then television transmissions used ideas and know-how that were international. Although the Soviet experience has its own peculiarities, there is no reason it should not be placed in the context of global media changes.

From the early 1990s the Russian media world saw brutal changes that accelerated its convergence with Western television and media. The Russian media became considerably more complex and plural. The development of the market economy, privatization of media, and new cooperation with international investment companies fed into this greater similarity between Russia and the West. Since the early 2000s two opposing developments have occurred at the same time in Russia. Both are well documented by researchers into the Russian media (Beumers, Hutchings, and Rulyova 2009; Naoumova et al. 2012; Pasti, Chernysh, and Svitich 2012; Vartanova 2009; Zassoursky 2004). First, the media were rapidly altered by new information and communication technologies. The digital revolution (perhaps here more than elsewhere) radically changed the world of the press, as pure players emerged in general news provision as a result of new trends in the country's journalism. Second, Vladimir Putin's government, with its "power vertical" and "dictatorship of law" slogans, applied heavy pressure on the media, once again subject to state apparatus control. These specific developments led some authors to dust off the paradigms of Soviet authoritarianism (Becker 2004; Oates 2007) to analyze the current situation, considering the Russian media to be a world subject to constraints and alien to the free market thinking of the contemporary Western world.

Our challenge in this issue of the journal is in fact to discuss this ascription of authoritarian influence to the Russian media in the light of the global changes affecting the modern media in both Russia and Europe. This justifies using the all-purpose tools of the social sciences to analyze these changes and better understand what is happening in Russia. Although Russia is indisputably heir to a quite specific history, it also belongs to a transnational history, which it has been shaped by and helped shape. The most recent developments in the Russian media belong to trends seen elsewhere, which also justifies the use of general analyses of journalism practice. Deprovincializing Russia makes it possible to return to comparative thinking: not comparing item by item practices that are the same in Russia and Europe but

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<sup>2</sup> Note that censorship goes back to the tsarist period.

retracing shared family histories and references. The intention is also to help actively de-Westernize communication studies (Waisbord and Mellado 2014) and political science.

The aim is to enrich existing work on the comparative sociology of journalism. In *Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World* Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) present a model based on observing 18 countries. They distinguish three models of media and politics: a Mediterranean “polarized pluralistic” model including France, a Northern European “democratic corporatist” model including for our purposes Germany, and a free market liberal model embodied by the United Kingdom and United States. They claimed that, as the press became more commercial and professional along Anglosphere lines, some European countries might move towards the liberal model. Russia was only included in their model from 2012.<sup>3</sup> It exemplifies a hybrid model with strong state intervention, poor professionalization, and fairly strong market influence. This justifies the term “statist commercialized” used by Elena Vartanova (2012), who wrote the chapter on Russia in a more recent book edited by Hallin and Mancini (2012).

Our focus on France, Russia, and Germany is intended to enrich and discuss this type of comparative approach but without its modelling dimension, using qualitative surveys to examine how similarities and differences interact. In addition to comparative studies of media, our aim is to advance along the research path of changes in contemporary politics while not seeking any normative classification (Dabène, Geisser, and Massardier 2008). Press freedom, along with election structures and the existence of civil society, is one of the major indicators in political regime theory that distinguishes between democracy and authoritarianism. While avoiding the risk of taxonomy (Raviot 2008) or adding to the vast collection of “democracies with adjectives” (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Dufy and Thiriote 2013), it is still possible to interrogate the reconfigurations often described as “hybrid” regimes.<sup>4</sup>

However, the core purpose of this issue is not to focus on national models but rather on the actors involved (Lemieux 2010). By adopting an approach based on in-depth empirical investigation, we examine how the interactions between the worlds of media and politics have developed, using the day-to-day practices of the men and women who are journalists, and also of politicians, businesspeople, and even web bots. At that level it is possible to analyze changes that are not connected to a given national model but can be compared with other contexts. The papers in this issue describe changes in journalism practice that are partly to do with specific national patterns and at the same time belong to wider developments and thus interrogate the profession’s practices as a whole in the modern world. In comparison with re-

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<sup>3</sup> The new edition includes Russia, Israel, Poland, the Baltic states, Brazil, South Africa, China, and the Arab world (Hallin and Mancini 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Here we differ slightly from Caroline Dufy and Céline Thiriote, who appear to reject entirely the concept of “hybrid regimes.” This issue’s articles do indeed use a highly empirical “bottom up” approach that dwells on the fabrication of political regulation and its legitimization by the media. For that purpose, we find the concept or idea of a “hybrid regime” a useful one that can also be used to deconstruct regimes in a way Dufy and Thiriote would wish.

search into European media, a sociology of the Russian media via its actors opens up a comparative dialogue that is often impossible within a framework of “models.”

## **NEW FORMS OF POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN FRANCE AND RUSSIA**

Political sociology enables us first to observe the changes occurring in political journalism. At a time of economic, social, and cultural upheaval, political journalism as an activity is changing shape. Erik Neveu, known for his many studies of political journalism (Neveu 2013), gives us an overview of the changes that have occurred in France from the late 1980s to 2017. He shows first how political journalism has lost status since the days when it was a highly respected part of political broadcasts for broad audiences, leading some observers to conclude that political journalism is dead—but also how new ways of talking politics are emerging in the media, in new forms and formats. These changes cast some doubt on the supposed “depoliticization” of the media. Neveu notes that, behind an apparent loss of status for political journalism,<sup>5</sup> there are types of repoliticization occurring as ways of talking about politics evolve. He shows how new formats based on new technologies are extending the possibilities for political journalism in France.

In Russia there has been since the late 1990s a boom in political journalism in new online media. Unlike in France, however, where these new media are now an established part of the landscape, the political control over them of various sorts (advertising revenue, control of cable operators, more recent control of media content since the Ukraine crisis, with increased legal weapons, etc.) is placing a tight brake on these new forms of political journalism. The average lifespan of what are now seen as editorial “projects”<sup>6</sup> is measured more in months than years. Since 2014, moreover, the space available for political journalism in Russia has tended to shrink. Here, Neveu’s article should be read alongside the one devoted to dismissals in the Russian media. Although institutionalized Soviet censorship has disappeared, the management of criticism and control is evolving over time. Rather than any systemic or national model of media management, the sociology of professional practice in the media reveals varied means of regulation, often similar to those seen elsewhere. Ivan Chupin and Françoise Daucé’s study examines the dismissal of political journalists after they had published criticism of the government. They analyze the practical ways journalists and their editors part company after political conflict. They reveal the euphemisms used to conceal the political motives behind the conflict by advancing economic or moral arguments and the search for acceptable compromises to ensure an agreed separation. These compromises enable the journalists in most cases to find work in other media (Chupin and Daucé 2016), but a few of the journalists in such conflicts are driven into exile.

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<sup>5</sup> On this development, see also Kaciaf (2013) and Saitta (2006).

<sup>6</sup> This is seen as part of a long-term trend in the development of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999).

## **MEDIA INTERACTIONS, FORMAL AND INFORMAL**

A second strand of comparison concerns the question of how far journalists' skills are codified and how far they are informal (Legavre 2014; Wouters 2003). This comparison is central to Nicolas Hubé's analysis (2008) of developments in political journalism in Germany and France, examining the interdependent relationship between the worlds of politics and journalism in those countries. He reveals similarities and largely institutional differences in the regulation of the relations between politicians and journalists, these "rival-associates." In Germany the government's interference in media regulation is more limited, a specific feature of the German media scene inherited from that country's history after the Second World War. Using a number of studies of "off-the-record" and informality in the media, Hubé shows that there is a strict codification of press-politics relations in Germany. Unlike in France, where informality is prevalent in these relations, the striking feature of Germany is the great formalism that regulates them and the fact that journalists oblige themselves never to disobey the rules for fear of sanction from their own group.

For Russia, Alexander Lutsenko, in his study of economic elites' participation in an independent television program (*Hard Day's Night* on Dozhd' [TV Rain]), reveals the existence of highly formalized codes for the interviews where they answer journalists' questions. He shows how these interviews are ways of maintaining symbolic order and the close relations that have existed between the business and political elites in Russia since the early 1990s. Although Russian oligarchs' interviews on Russian television may appear to be a formal exercise, they are an opportunity to reveal the dominance relationships at play on these occasions. The questions the journalists ask and the answers the oligarchs give sketch out their degree of submission to government power. These television exercises are not so much censored as rather they suspend all criticism of the state, and so the oligarchs themselves tacitly recognize its domination.

## **WAYS OF SUBVERTING THE ESTABLISHED ORDER**

A third common strand of research involves the emergence of actors who transform media practice and relations with politics. Sandrine Lévêque gives us an examination of the question of gender and the place of women in French media since the late nineteenth century. She relates the struggles of those women in the press who shifted the values of their professional group by using their "femininity" or "feminism" to challenge the practices of a professional environment dominated by maleness and so left a mark on the French press that has lasted to the present day. Lévêque's study raises once more the question of political commitment in the media, because most of the women's publications she describes position themselves both with respect to a given market niche and within a militant framework.

Her article, showing how women commit themselves to subverting the established order, may be seen as echoing Françoise Daucé's in a quite different area about the upheavals caused by the arrival of new internet technologies, which subvert established media codes. The latter analyzes the conflict between Russian journalists

and administrative authorities over the political objectivity of the news aggregator Yandex.Novosti. Among Western sociologists, the domination achieved by technical tools (particularly search engine algorithms) arouses concern among internet observers, who call for increased public regulation. In Russia the Yandex.Novosti controversy shows how Russian web bots and algorithms are perceived as instruments of political pluralism in the face of oppressive regulation. At the conclusion of this controversy between unequal actors (the state versus journalists and engineers), the subversion embodied in the web bot is reduced by the Russian legislator taking control of the machine.

This collection of articles resulted from a one-day conference in Moscow in June 2014 on the transformation of media and journalism practice in the contemporary world. That conference was made possible by support from the Tepsis (EHESS) Center for Research Excellence and the French-Russian Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences in Moscow, which we are glad to acknowledge here. It was one of a series of French-Russian research initiatives in the field of the sociology of journalism and media in Russia. Next came a conference entitled "Publishing Differently: Independent Journalists, Minor Publishers, and Bloggers in Russia" in Paris in October 2015. A further one-day conference, "Publishing Differently Online," was held at the Moscow Higher School of Economics in October 2016. We hope that these initiatives will be extended so as to enrich the sociology of journalism and media by future dialogue among scholars. The Russian and English translations of the French articles in this collection have benefited from the financial support of the University Institute of France. We also thank Olessia Kirtchik for her invaluable help in preparing this issue.

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