Lessons from Russia

A Neo-Authoritarian Media System

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ABSTRACT

▮ This article seeks to answer two interrelated questions: where does press freedom stand in Russia more than 15 years after Mikhail Gorbachev's policy *glasnost* began? and, what does Russia's media transformation tell us about our understanding of mass political media systems? It is argued that while the Russian media are suffering under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, circumstances are in no way as dire as in the pre-Gorbachev Soviet period, nor even as bad as some journalists' rights organizations would have it. By using comparative analysis, and incorporating political science literature that offers typologies of non-democratic systems of governance, the article demonstrates that contemporary Russian media find much in common with authoritarian regimes across the world and are not *sui generis* as some have argued. In the process, the author attempts to resurrect some of the important distinctions made in Siebert et al.'s much maligned *Four Theories of the Press*, particularly the role of the state as the leading threat to media freedom. The author also argues for the need to distinguish more clearly between different types of non-democratic mass political media systems. ▮

Key Words *Four Theories*, media, neo-authoritarian, Putin, Russia

The Putin era has not been a good one for the Russian media. Russia is one of five countries on the International Press Institute's Watch List of countries 'endangered with becoming repressive' (International Press

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Institute, 2003). President Putin made the Committee to Protect Journalists' 'Ten Worst Enemies of the Press' list for 2001, joining an ignominious group including Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Liberian president Charles Taylor, Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe and Cuban leader Fidel Castro (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002). In its 2001 annual report, the media rights organization Reporters sans Frontières described Putin's anti-media actions as 'too grotesque to be true', and they named him one of the world's 'predators of press freedom' (Reporters sans Frontières, 2002). The same organization's Worldwide Press Freedom Index ranks Russia 121st out of the 139 countries evaluated, placing it behind such freedom-challenged countries as Sudan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and only marginally ahead of the notorious media wastelands of Belarus and Iraq (Reporters sans Frontières, 2003a). In its annual report on press freedom in 2003, Freedom House lowered its rating of Russia from 'partly free' to 'not free' (Freedom House, 2003).

Does this mean that the Russian media are no better off than during the Soviet period? This article seeks to answer two interrelated questions: where does press freedom stand in Russia more than 15 years after Mikhail Gorbachev's policy *glasnost* began? and, what does Russia's media transformation tell us about our understanding of mass media systems? In answering these questions, I argue that while the Russian media are suffering under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, circumstances are in no way as dire as in the pre-Gorbachev Soviet period, and perhaps in a better state than the 'predators' lists and rankings might suggest. At the same time, it is argued that the press system under Putin has regressed and that Russia has failed to consolidate the nascent democratic media system that began to emerge under former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin. To clarify where the Russian media system stands under Putin I attempt to resurrect some of the key distinctions made in Siebert et al.'s seminal, but much maligned, *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), refining some of the authors' arguments by incorporating more recent political science literature that examines political regimes. In doing so I attempt to reintroduce the state as the primary actor in mass political media systems.[1]

Media systems: Russian lessons looking back and looking forward

There are three primary, but overlapping, approaches to analysis of the Russian media. One approach seeks to focus on events in Russia itself since the advent of *glasnost*, describing and evaluating changes and

analyzing their implications for Russia's political and social development. These studies cover a wider range of issues, including the legal structure of Russian media, the continued role of the state, the impact of the market on journalism, practices of Russian journalists and news habits of the Russian public (Belin, 2001; McNair, 2000; Richter, 2001; Vartanova, 2001; I. Zassoursky, 2001; Y. Zassoursky, 2001). Some focus on narrower issues, like television and local media (Mickiewicz, 1999; Pietilainen, 2002). Some, although I would argue not enough, employ various forms of content analysis to draw conclusions (see Becker, 2002; Mickiewicz, 1999; European Institute of Media, 2000c; Oates, 2000; White et al., 2002).

The second, but related, approach attempts to use the experiences of other countries to help ground the analysis of Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, in the early 1990s, Splichal, writing primarily about East Central Europe, discussed the 'Italianization' of the media. However, in this context he was referring more to the politicization of media and the integration of media and political elites, as opposed to the dominance of the media by one person or political coalition. Thus, the comparison with Russia is not as salient (Splichal, 1994: 145–6; Sparks, 1998: 178; Reporters sans Frontières, 2003b). Smaele, on the other hand, compares the situation in Russia to that in the US and Western Europe and argues that there appears to be emerging an 'indigenous Russian (Eurasian?) media system' which will be distinct in fitting with Russia's unique heritage. While Smaele's comparative approach is useful, I would argue that Russia has more in common with other countries (not in Western Europe or North America) than Smaele suggests (Smaele, 1999: 178).

The third approach, which will be the primary focus of this article, is to use the Russian experience to re-evaluate or reframe arguments concerning media in advanced industrial democracies. The Russian experience, it is argued, helps to 'internationalize' and 'de-westernize' media theory. In real terms, this means acknowledging, in Nerone's words, that 'the possibility of authoritarianism in communications is present wherever the authority of power exists and is exercised to limit or suppress or define people's thoughts or expressions' (Nerone, 1995: 38). Specifically, authors like Sparks, Reading, Downing and Nordenstreng look to the Russian and East European experience to confirm the malevolent influence of commercial/private capital on the media. In this view, the power of the state and the power of private capital have an equivalent (and negative) effect on the health of Habermas's public sphere (Downing, 1996; Sparks, 1998, 2000; Nordenstreng, 2001). This view

sees 'systemic continuity' between new and old (Nordenstreng, 2001: 221). The commodification of journalistic outputs and the ensuing tabloidization of content and shoddy journalism practices have left the East only marginally better than when under Communism. To the extent that there has been change, it has been modest and incremental (Nordenstreng, 2001: 220–1). As Sparks argues,

> The media before the fall of communism were large-scale, hierarchically organized, bureaucratic establishments in which there were elaborate procedures for ensuring acquiescence to the will of the directorate. The media after the fall of communism are large-scale, hierarchically organized, bureaucratic establishments in which there are elaborate procedures for ensuring acquiescence to the will of the directorate. (Sparks, 2000: 45)

A corollary to this understanding of change, and implicit in Sparks's and Nordenstreng's arguments, is a re-evaluation of the Communist past. Looking backward, it is asserted that there was only a marginal difference between media in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and that in Western Europe and North America. As Downing argues in his book focusing on Hungary, Poland and Russia: 'the difference between the media–power structure relation in authoritarian regimes and contemporary liberal democratic regimes is not of the order of night and day, as per the classical *Four Theories of the Press* approach, but rather night and twilight' (Downing, 1996: xiii). The Soviet media system in the late Brezhnev era was even closer to that in liberal democracies, a form of 'late twilight' distinct from the Stalin totalitarian past (Downing, 1996: xvii, note 11).

This predominant analysis, as the passage from Downing demonstrates, is often accompanied by a pillorying of *Four Theories*. The work offers four normative theories of the press: 'authoritarian', 'libertarian', 'social responsibility' and 'Soviet Communist', which are distinguished by differences in purpose, control and ownership (Siebert et al., 1956: 2). There are certainly some significant flaws in Siebert et al.'s analysis, particularly the focus on underlying 'philosophic and political rationales' ('theories') and normative consequences instead of on operational distinctions (Siebert et al., 1956: 1–2). But writers have so sought to discredit *Four Theories* that they have thrown out the baby with the bath water. It should be expected that a book written in 1956 will have flaws, but critics seem to go too far. Indeed, authors seem to compete to trash the book with the most resounding rhetorical flourishes. Sparks wins the contest, declaring that the book 'provides no insights whatsoever into the past, present or future of the media systems of post-communism.

. . . It was plain wrong . . . and should be relegated forthwith to the gloomiest recesses of the Museum of the Cold War' (Sparks, 1998: 179). More humbly, Nordenstreng laments the fact that book has been translated into Russian (Nordenstreng, 1999: 146).

What these authors and others seem to miss is that within the theoretical and normative descriptions offered by Siebert et al. are important distinctions among structures of mass political media systems, particularly the method and scope of state control over the media, that remain relevant today. These distinctions are useful in determining different forms of non-democratic media systems throughout the world and, importantly for our concern, differences between the Soviet press and the Russian press today. In this article, I attempt to build on *Four Theories* with reference to the many single-state studies of Russia and by using comparisons with the experience of other countries.[2]

Toward a view of mass political media systems

Before proceeding to address the Russian and Soviet press, we must ask why we need to draw systemic distinctions between mass political media systems. There are three primary reasons. First, the analytic utility of single-state studies is limited. As Juan Linz argues about political systems, 'we cannot be satisfied with even the best descriptive studies of political life in a particular society at a particular time . . . we feel the need to reduce the complexity to a limited number of types sufficiently different to take into account the variety in real life but also able to describe those elements that a certain number of politics share' (Linz, 1975: 176). I would argue, for example, that what is emerging in Russia is not uniquely Russian, as Smaele argues. It may be true that the Russian mass political media system is different from media systems in contemporary Western Europe and North America, but that does not mean that Russia is *sui generis*. Moreover, by using comparative analysis we can move beyond vague metaphors: if we were to embrace Downing's metaphor of 'twilight', 'late twilight' and 'night', one wonders where the Putin-era press belongs: mid-twilight?

A second reason to revisit types of media systems is that the distinctions among non-democratic systems are probably the least developed area of thought for those who study media and politics. This view that there is an insufficient understanding of non-democratic media systems is even shared by those who criticize *Four Theories* (Nordenstreng, 1999: 150). The problem extends beyond those who study Russia and Eastern Europe. I would disagree, for example, with Gunther and

Mughan who, following Juan Linz, assert that 'the institutional relationship between the media and the state does not vary substantially from one non-democratic regime to another' (Gunther and Mughan, 2000a: 3–5; Linz, 1970: 266).[3] As is argued in this article, there are important distinctions between totalitarian and authoritarian press systems, particularly with regard to the degree of relative autonomy vis-a-vis the state, the breadth of negative and positive control, the degree of pluralism and the mechanisms of control, not to mention ideological context. To suggest that the two are one and the same would lead to the erroneous conclusion that there is no substantive systemic difference between the press in the Soviet Union and present-day Russia. The need for such distinctions is, ironically, confirmed by the very interesting contributions that Downing and Sparks make about the *differences* between countries of the Warsaw Pact prior to the fall of Communism (Downing, 1996; Sparks, 1998: 38.). However, instead of attempting to use their insights into *samizdat* and the penetration of foreign radio and television signals to contribute to new understandings of non-democratic systems and the liberalization process, they use them primarily to discredit *Four Theories*.

The need for distinctions between media systems, particularly non-democratic media systems, is further underscored by a number of wide-ranging empirical studies. Freedom House's 2003 survey of press freedom ranks 78 countries 'free' but 115 'partly free' or 'not free' (Freedom House, 2003). Reporters sans Frontières sees nearly half the countries in the world in 'serious' or 'very serious' trouble vis-a-vis freedom of the press (Reporters sans Frontières, 2002). Those who study political mass media systems are in the same position as were political scientists studying regimes a number of years ago: the divisions of media systems into two (for Gunther and Mughan, authoritarian and democratic) or even four (in *Four Theories*) is not sufficient to capture important distinctions which are analytically significant (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

A final reason to revisit distinctions between media systems is that they may have implications for the 'transition' process that has occurred in the post-Communist region. According to the most recent Freedom House survey, the only three countries of the former Soviet Union to be classified as 'free' are Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. These three were the last to be incorporated into the Soviet Union, more than two decades after its creation. They also have a useable democratic past. Only two of the remaining 12 'new' post-Soviet countries are considered 'partly free' and 10, including Russia, are 'not free'. On the other hand, six of the 12 countries of Central and Southeastern Europe are classified as 'free', with

the rest considered as 'partly free'. The numbers look better if we factor out the former Yugoslavia, which lost considerable time because of the wars. Given the difference in outcomes, it behooves us to find out if there is some link between the pre-transition circumstances of the press systems and outcomes.

Typologies of media systems

This article is not the place to develop a full typology of media systems. However, through the prism of mass political media systems we refine our views about developments in Russia over the past 20 years. The primary focus will be on Russia as a neo-authoritarian system. However, since one of the main pillars of our argument is that the contemporary Russian system is not democratic, and that there are substantial differences between the Soviet system, the current Russian system and the systems which exist in Europe and North America, it will prove analytically useful to define what we mean by democratic mass political media systems. In our analysis of democratic and non-democratic media systems we regularly refer to a number of characteristics that are defining features of media systems, including access to media, ownership structures, appointment of personnel, relative autonomy from the state, negative and positive control of press content, pluralism, the role of ideology and legal protections.

Democratic media systems

The concept of a democratic mass political media system examined here relies, like the work of Gunther and Mughan, on more procedural notions of democracy (Gunther and Mughan, 2000b: 422). The 'procedural' or minimalist approach focuses on the relationship between citizens and elected officials and is based on the work of democratic theorists, such as Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl, and experts in political transitions, like Juan Linz, Philippe Schmitter and Alfred Stepan. From this perspective 'Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives' (Schmitter and Karl, 1991: 76).

In translating this view of democracy into a democratic mass political media system, we can argue that it is the responsibility of a mass political media system to provide information to citizens to participate in processes of governance. As Gunther and Mughan have argued,

> It is [the media's] responsibility . . . to maximize the opportunities for citizens to make political decisions and cast ballots on the basis of informed choice – retrospectively about the extent to which the government has kept its promises in office, and prospectively, about how rival candidates will act if (re) elected. (Gunther and Mughan, 2000b: 422)

In such a system, the population must have access to the media; there must be a significant degree of pluralism in all media, either internal or external; the press should reflect different views and ideologies; and the press must not be under the control of the state or under the control of such a limited number of private owners that pluralism is limited.

In light of recent research on mass communications systems, a few comments on this are in order. First, the fact that a system can be considered democratic does not mean that it is devoid of problems. A number of recent studies have demonstrated difficulties with mass political media systems in the West, particularly the US. Problems that have been identified include increasing 'soft news' and infotainment, stultifying notions of objectivity, overreliance on 'official sources' and excessive cynicism. Many of these phenomena are linked to the growing media concentration in corporate hands and cumulatively, they are hypothesized to have a negative impact on civic engagement (Bagdikian, 1997; Bennett, 2002; Capella and Jamieson, 1997). This author shares these concerns, particularly as they relate to the media in the US. However, many of the problems identified are not essential to a democratic mass political media system. They implicitly and explicitly are linked with 'maximalist' notions of democracy that celebrate civil society and direct citizen involvement. I would argue that these concerns generally reflect the *quality* of democracy, or the democratic mass political media system, not its existence (Gunther and Mughan, 2000b: 422). It is possible that one day corporate concentration will lead us to a new paradigm of undemocratic media, but I do not believe we are there yet.

Second, the preceding arguments focus largely, but not exclusively, on the potential malevolent role of the state. There are good reasons to consider the state, as opposed to other forms of power, as the primary threat to media. For one, the state has historically been the primary actor in limiting press freedom. The great writers of the Enlightenment, such as Milton, Mill and Erskine, who formed the primary arguments that serve to justify freedom of speech and the press, all highlighted the need for freedom from the state. Moreover, as I argue in my recent review of the annual reports of Freedom House and three journalists' rights organizations, the state continues to serve as the primary agent limiting

press freedom and promoting violence toward the media: 'in the overwhelming number of cases where perpetrators can be identified, it is the state that has committed or facilitated acts of violence and repression against journalists' (Becker, 2003: 110). What becomes clear is that freedom from the state, or, more specifically, the press's relative autonomy from the state, is a necessary precondition for press freedom. The state can be the owner of the press, as is the case in public broadcast systems, but there must be institutions which preserve a reasonable degree of autonomy to fulfill the information criteria articulated by Gunther and Mughan.

Third, the obsession of critics with the market as the other form of negative 'power' may be overstated, even when there is commercial concentration. As Gunther and Mughan argue, 'Concentration of ownership . . . need not necessarily impair the impartiality achieved through media pluralism since it is not incompatible with the articulation of divergent, sometimes conflicting, political views both within and between media empires' (Gunther and Mughan, 2000b: 422). Indeed, Mickiewicz has asserted that in pre-Putin Russia media concentration strengthened the capacity of commercial stations to 'compete with, and challenge governmentally managed news'. It was the commercial stations 'large enough and strong enough' that maintained 'a comprehensive newsgathering and broadcast capacity that best fulfills the medium's public service obligations' (Mickiewicz, 2000: 118–20). In a similar vein, Sukosd notes that in Hungary foreign ownership has made private publications 'independent of political interference' (Sukosd, 2000: 152).

Russia as a neo-authoritarian media system

In the Putin era, the Russian state has increasingly interfered with media autonomy. One would not want to romanticize the Yeltsin presidency, for Yeltsin was not averse to using levers of government power to threaten opposition media. However, either by conviction or because his credentials as a reformer were so fundamentally intertwined with media freedom, Yeltsin was ultimately a supporter of a free press. As Masha Gessen, a journalist for the *Itogi* magazine and a victim of Putin's attack on the Media-Most empire, argued,

> . . . the editors-in-chief of Russia's various national media took comfort in the fact that, to Yeltsin, media freedom was a baseline value. . . . Yeltsin replaced Communist ideology with a supremely simplified version of democracy that boiled down to two tenets: He could not abide Communists, and he supported freedom of the press. (Gessen, 2000: 17)

The press under Gorbachev and Yeltsin made substantial gains compared with the pre-*glasnost* era. During the period prior to Putin's ascendancy there was pluralism in print and on television, criticism of the government, particularly on issues such as corruption and Chechnya, and relatively little government control over the press, including media in which the state maintained a controlling financial interest. On the eve of Putin's rise to the leadership of Russia, McNair wrote of the media:

> There is in Russia today a real *public sphere* through which ordinary people can learn about and participate in political debate. The current generation of Russian politicians may be largely incompetent and hugely corrupt, but their activities are frequently exposed to critical scrutiny in the public domain where citizens can make their judgments. (McNair, 2000: 93)

Russia appears to have had a nascent, albeit unconsolidated, democratic mass political media system. However, there were always warnings. Mickiewicz, writing at roughly the same time, lauded the autonomy of the press, particularly television, but warned that the autonomy was 'fragile because it is neither institutionalized nor supported by a strong, independent, and impartial judiciary' (Mickiewicz, 2000: 118).

As the testimony of the journalists' rights organizations cited at the beginning of this article indicates, her warning proved prescient. Although Putin has spoken of media freedom as 'one of the cornerstones of democracy' and asserted that 'if we don't have a free mass media, we shall very soon slide back into the past' (*Communication Law in Transition*, 1999), other statements suggest that his support of media autonomy is shallow. In his state of the nation address in June 2000, he divided the media into state (*gossudarstveniye*) and anti-state (*anti-gossudarstveniye)* and attacked private owners for turning media into 'mass misinformation outlets' and 'into a means of struggle against the state' (Coalson, 2000; Albats, 2001). Putin's views are reminiscent of Gorbachev's, who spoke frequently of the importance of press freedom but who, at the same time, believed fervently that the press should support him and his reform programme. Putin appears to believe that the press should support his efforts to bring 'order' back to Russia by strengthening central institutions. In this vein, his spokesperson Sergei Yasterzhembsky told journalists from the daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*: 'The media should take into account the challenges the nation is facing now. When the nation mobilizes its strength to achieve a goal, this imposes obligations on everybody, including the media' (quoted in Whitmore, 2000). Ironically, it appears that Putin might ultimately have a greater opportunity to curtail the press than did Gorbachev, who often harangued the media but

who, particularly from 1989 onwards, found it increasingly difficult, due to divisions in the leadership and decay in the party apparatus, to rein in the media that he had played such an important role in liberating. One must be careful not to overly personalize politics in any political system. However, in a country where there is a tremendous concentration of power within the executive branch, and where legal institutions are weak and often incapable of serving as an effective check on government, the views of the president and his associates in the executive are of the utmost importance (Shevtsova, 2001). Moreover, what has taken place has not simply been idle chatter. The Putin administration has taken, or consented to, a series of steps that have either directly challenged independent media or contributed to an environment of instability.

The Russian press under Putin can best be understood as a neo-authoritarian media system. Neo-authoritarian media systems fall into a broad rubric of authoritarian (as opposed to totalitarian) systems that have predominated historically and still are the most prevalent world-wide. As in traditional authoritarian systems, such as Salazar's Portugal, pluralism in the media is tolerated, but there are limits, particularly on issues that are of central importance to the regime, such as national security and elections (Seaton and Pimlot, 1980). As was the case in Franco's Spain, in many Latin American dictatorships and in most of the countries of the former Soviet Union, the media is also used by the center of political power as a weapon to attack political enemies (Belin, 2001: 331–2; Freedom House, 2003). Under a neo-authoritarian system, state-owned media have limited autonomy, and appointments to key positions are linked to political loyalty. Access to the media may be open and private ownership may be tolerated, but other mechanisms are used to control messages. Subsidies, targeted tax advantages, government advertising and other forms of assistance are used to promote support. To silence critics, the state does not resort to pre-publication censorship so much as economic pressure through selectively applied legal and quasi-legal actions against owners, as well as broadly worded laws which prescribe criminal and civil penalties for journalists concerning such issues as libel, state interests, national security and the image of the head of state (Becker, 2002: 168–70; Price and Krug, 2000). The neo-authoritarian media system also has a weak judiciary that may be pliant to the interests of the political leadership, or which may have difficulty in ensuring that its mandates are enforced. At its worst, the regime uses, condones or tolerates violence against opposition journalists and editors. One of the goals is to create uncertainty among journalists and,

through that, self-censorship, the most common and important limit on journalistic activity.

Where neo-authoritarianism is somewhat different from more traditional authoritarian systems is the context of the spread of democracy and the strategic use of the communicative power of television. While some of the elements of a democratic mass political media system are tolerated, giving the appearance of democratization, there are fundamental limits to media autonomy. What particularly distinguishes the neo-authoritarian system is the bifurcation between broadcast and print media. In neo-authoritarian systems, the state asserts the capacity to control broadcast media, particularly television, because it is perceived to be the most important medium through which to communicate with the population. Because television *is* often the most important means of communication, particularly in countries like Russia, where there have been significant economic difficulties and the population's purchasing power significantly curtailed, the government's capacity to exert negative and positive control over televised coverage of important issues limits meaningful pluralism and undermines the capacity of citizens to 'make political decisions and cast ballots on the basis of informed choice' (Gunther and Mughan, 2000b: 421). The unique feature of the neo-authoritarian media system is that while there are tight reins placed on television, there may exist, in spite of periodic harassment, violence and closures, a vibrant print media that is independently owned (by individuals, parties, or foreign corporations), relatively autonomous, accessible to the population and highly critical of the regime. Perhaps the best example of neo-authoritarianism is in Zimbabwe, where the state monopoly over broadcast media and harassment of independent print media are standard but where, prior to the extreme crackdown of the past year, the print media still functioned as a significant check on government (Article XIX, 1998, 2002).

Putin's Russia

As far as Putin's Russia is concerned, the neo-authoritarian media system is to democratic political communication what Putin's 'managed democracy' is to democracy: formal democratic institutions may appear to exist but they are rotten at their core. As Lipman and McFaul have argued, the state's effort to control all major television stations is the most obvious manifestation of the shift from democracy to managed democracy (Lipman and McFaul, 2001: 116). The main ways in which the Putin era's neo-authoritarian press differs from a democratic media system are in

the areas of autonomy, legal protections, control of content and pluralism.

The Russian state under Putin has made regular encroachments on the autonomy of private media, particularly broadcast media. The most significant action under Putin was the attack on the Media-Most empire of Vladimir Gusinsky. Through the selective application of tax and criminal law, including the invasion of Media-Most premises by hooded and heavily armed tax police, the direct pressure of the Ministry of Press, Radio and Television and boardroom intrigue, Media-Most collapsed. The impact was devastating: NTV, the leading source of non-state broadcast news and the only station with a national reach that was not state-owned, fell into the hands of the government-controlled energy giant Gazprom. The circumstances surrounding Media-Most are complex, but it would be difficult to argue that what took place was not an assault on press freedom (Lipman, 2001: 20). The attack on Gusinsky reeked of revenge for the editorial views expressed by Media-Most entities. Few would argue that the government would have taken such an uncompromising approach had Media-Most supported Putin in the 2000 presidential elections and taken a less critical view of Russian military actions in Chechnya. Even fewer would accept Putin's steadfast disavowals of prior knowledge of the anti-Gusinsky activities (Belin, 2002: 149). The timing, form and tenacity of the government actions sent a chill through non-state media, contributing to uncertainty and, no doubt, self-censorship. Such sentiments were only heightened by the subsequent attack and closure of TV-6, the independent station with the largest national reach after NTV (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2002). To ensure a clean sweep, Putin also took steps to reassert state control over the content of state-owned ORT, taking it away from one-time ally but potential Putin rival Boris Berezovsky (European Institute of Media, 2000b).

The attacks did not end there. While in keeping with the neo-authoritarian approach, television was the main target, newspapers that have criticized the government have been regularly harassed by tax inspectors and property officials and, in the case of the Media-Most owned *Segodnya*, closed (Belin, 2002: 153). Individual journalists who have reported stories critical of the government have been detained, arrested and sent to psychiatric institutions (Whitmore, 2000; Bivens, 2000). There is a clear sense among journalists and journalism experts that conditions for journalists in Russia are deteriorating, particularly as they seek to cover highly sensitive issues. According to Emma Gray of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, members of the independent press 'are being harassed and persecuted far more than any

time since the Soviet era' (quoted in Ricchiardi, 2001). An investigative journalist for the publication *Novaya Gazeta*, who was slashed in the face with a razor the same day he appeared on NTV to denounce government corruption, put the situation in perspective when he said, 'every journalist who is writing the truth about Russia is at risk' (quoted in Ricchiardi, 2001).

The capacity of the state to limit media autonomy is enhanced by three intertwined factors. First, the state continues to retain ownership of a tremendous amount of the media. In terms of television, it owns the two leading national broadcast channels, RTR and ORT. Moreover, it is clear that state ownership means state (as opposed to public) media – there is neither a tradition of public service broadcasting nor a mechanism to ensure the relative autonomy of broadcast media from the state, as is the case in the many older public broadcasting systems most often associated with Europe (Mandel, 1999). The state also has extensive media holdings, although, as per the neo-authoritarian model, the impact in terms of diversity is much less significant (Coalson, 2000).

A second important point about the capacity of the state to limit media autonomy is the degree to which the state is interlocked with Russian business. Sparks was right to talk of the 'interpenetration' of politics and economics in Eastern Europe (Sparks, 2000: 43). However, he uses this argument to point to the malevolent effects of business on the media and thus to underline the similarities with the West. In Russia, there may be interpenetration but the state clearly rests on top of the food chain. In a state where all business, particularly media business, was developed in illegal circumstances, the state holds primacy and it is the state's perceived opponents, like Gusinsky and Berezovsky, who must be afraid. Nothing illustrates this more than the secret 'protocol number six' in which Media Minister Lesin promised Gusinsky that criminal charges would be dropped if he sold a controlling stake in his media properties to government-dominated Gazprom (Belin, 2003).

The final factor contributing to the state's capacity to limit media autonomy is Russia's weak legal system. Legal protections for the media in Russia are minimal. In fact, ever-flexible laws and a pliant judiciary permit the government to take *selective* actions against media organizations. As political commentator Evgenia Albats has argued, the Kremlin has many means to 'manage disloyal media' because 'the "legal grounds" for such management are always available'. Actions taken by federal agencies and federal officials include wide-ranging tax audits (which were popular under Yeltsin and have become more common under Putin), investigations of privatizations, the denial of press credentials and

access to media pools, limited access to sensitive areas (like Chechnya or the area near the sunken submarine Kursk), libel suits and criminal complaints against reporters for violating anti-terrorism laws (Glasnost Defence Foundation, 2000; Albats, 2001; Ricchiardi, 2001).

The most important manifestation of Russia's neo-authoritarian system is the way in which state control has limited pluralism, particularly on television. Under Putin there has been a steady decline in coverage of dissent. As Belin has argued,

> After Putin's first year in office, alternative viewpoints could still be found in the Russian media. But in media that reached a large audience, reports criticizing the president were mild, few and far between compared with news reporting during most of Yeltsin's presidency. State-owned media stayed resolutely 'on message', and self-censorship was a growing phenomenon at privately owned media outlets. (Belin, 2002: 154)

Leading opposition politicians regularly complain that they do not have access to television networks that reach the largest audiences (Belin, 2003). This is particularly important in Russia, where 90 percent of the population report that their main source of political news is television (Lipman and McFaul, 2001: 124).

If there is one place that the deficiencies in the Putin era press most negatively impact on the democratic process it is in the coverage of elections. Even before Putin came to power there were serious problems with election coverage in Russia. All major broadcast media, and most major media outlets and journalists in the country, conspicuously sided with Yeltsin in his 1996 election struggle with Communist Gennady Zyuganov. Journalists argued that they had to give up any sense of neutrality to ensure that freedoms, including freedom of expression, would be maintained. The 1999 parliamentary and 2000 presidential elections posed their own problems. The European Institute of Media's election monitors found coverage of the 1999 parliamentary elections by the two state channels, ORT and RTR, to be 'heavily biased against the Fatherland-All Russia alliance and biased in favor of the pro-government Unity' (European Institute of Media, 2000a). The International Foundation for Election Systems singled out how an 'unremitting stream of scurrilous and undocumented information' appeared on current affairs and news programmes on state television to a degree 'unprecedented in post-Soviet general elections' (quoted in White et al., 2002: 30). White et al. take their analysis a step further. Using regression analysis, they conclude that the heavily biased coverage of state television (abetted by the Central Election Commission's failure to enforce its own rules) was

the most important reason for the newly created Unity Party's victory (White et al., 2002: 30). They conclude that the election provides a 'striking illustration of the extent to which a determined regime can resist a challenge to its authority by using its control of the media, particularly state television' (White et al., 2002: 30). The 2000 presidential election may have been marginally better, because the most competitive opponents of Putin (then prime minister) had been killed off in mud-slinging in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Still, the European Institute of Media concluded that 'Vladimir Putin overwhelmingly dominated the media coverage during the presidential election', both in terms of the coverage of the campaign and in news and current affairs programmes (European Institute of Media, 2000c; Belin, 1999).

What is striking is that all of this occurred before Putin became president. With the takeovers of NTV and TV-6 and the standing threats against opposition media, one should not expect better in the next round. Indeed, should a television station stray from acceptable coverage, it will likely find itself pulled from the airwaves. A new law currently under consideration in the Duma gives the politicized Central Elections Commission, as opposed to a court, the right to determine whether media outlets have violated electoral regulations and the right to demand that the Press Ministry suspend the outlet if it commits two such violations during the election campaign (Sokolovskaya and Rostova, 2003).

Looking back: neo-authoritarian vs post-totalitarian press

Before concluding, we need to address a final issue: is the Russian press today, which we have termed neo-authoritarian, different from that which existed prior to *glasnost*? The answer is, even after the Putin onslaught, an unequivocal yes. It would be erroneous to suggest that Russia has reverted to a totalitarian or post-totalitarian media system as existed in Soviet times. The most obvious differences are in terms of autonomy, control of content, pluralism and ideology/language.

In terms of autonomy, control of content and pluralism, the differences are immense. In the pre-Gorbachev period the party/state controlled all access to the mass media, owned all print and broadcast facilities and exerted positive and negative control over the content of the entire legal press through an elaborate system of management which involved, among other things, power over appointment of personnel, and pre- and post-publication censorship. As this author and others have argued in more detail elsewhere, it also forced the press to conform to a

specific discourse which corresponded to the transformative ideology of Marxism-Leninism, a discourse which Orwell termed 'Newspeak'. All public communication had to conform to this discourse, whether or not people believed in it. The shell of Newspeak protected the core ideology, and thus the party's justification for its rule, because words became so loaded with evaluative connotations that it was difficult for journalists to express ideas beyond the accepted, official beliefs (Becker, 2002: 13–14; Goldfarb, 1991; Schöopflin, 1983: 5).

As far as pluralism in pre-Gorbachev Russia is concerned, there were two types of diversity. The first is what can be called *manufactured diversity*, or small differences in press coverage encouraged by the state in order to appeal to audiences of different regions, education levels and occupations. This was a tool to make media messages more effective. The second was *sanctioned diversity*, which suggests the appearance of non-uniform press content that, although not explicitly endorsed by the leadership, was tolerated by it. This, together with the declining belief in ideology, was part of a shift from what can be called a totalitarian to a post-totalitarian press. The press was allowed a relatively greater degree of autonomy than in totalitarian press systems, even to the degree of expressing what Spechler calls 'permitted dissent' (Spechler, 1982). However, the relaxation of controls was both narrow and selective. Sanctioned diversity and permitted dissent were most likely to be found in publications with limited, elite audiences, such as cultural and literary journals, or in specialty academic journals (Spechler, 1982; Goldfarb, 1991: 57; Becker, 2002: 25). What is important is that whatever diversity existed, the party/state retained the prerogative to exercise both positive and negative control over the entire media system and forced whatever communications that occurred to be couched in the language of the official ideology of the one legal political party. The situation was different than that in authoritarian mass political media systems like Franco's Spain, where private ownership continued and where 'an absence of a clearly defined regime ideology' was felt most prominently in an 'opened and balanced approach to international news', an area of particularly tight control in the Soviet Union (Gunther et al., 2000: 33–6; Becker, 2002: 25).

Post-Communist Russia shares even less in common with the totalitarian and post-totalitarian Soviet system. The Putin regime does not, as was the case with the Communist Party in the Soviet period, exert positive and negative control over the content of the entire legal press. There are publications produced by individuals and rival political parties and corporations, both Russian and foreign. A quick glance at a

newspaper kiosk in a major Russian city reveals a vibrant press that displays a wide array of foci (politics, business, sports, erotica), formats (glossy magazines, tabloids, broadsheets), and editorial perspectives (unreconstructed Stalinist to hedonist to market capitalist). The diminished degree of state control is also reflected in media content. Television may have been reigned in, but on issues where power is not at stake it offers a wide range of perspectives. The print media is extremely diverse, exceeding that of many liberal democracies. My recent study of Russian print media's coverage of the US in the period just before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11 reveals that the press offered a wider array of external diversity and even some degree of internal diversity. The leadership, even in the form of President Vladimir Putin, was criticized in elite and popular publications: Putin was depicted as being outfoxed by US President George W. Bush in diplomatic negotiations and was even shown to be physically and mentally the weaker (certainly something at odds with the well-honed Putin-as-judo-star image) (Becker, 2002: 180). The diversity of views to which citizens are exposed on a daily basis, at least in the print media, vastly exceeds that of the Soviet period. Journalists, whose reputations have been sullied in the post-Soviet period, deserve more credit for continuing to challenge the state even when they may face retaliatory measures for their views.

Conclusions

The changes that transformed the Russian media in the Gorbachev and the early Yeltsin period created a false optimism about the future of the Russian media (Jakubowicz, 1998/9: 2). Particularly at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s,.there was great enthusiasm for the media and for journalists. An avid public, which had time to watch television and the time and money to read the press, gobbled up information that had previously been banned. The enthusiasm that greeted *glasnost* should be sufficient to set aside any doubts about the significance of the changes. Of course, there were continued limits, but these were minor compared to the totalitarian and post-totalitarian heyday. The media enjoyed a fairly unique position: it had government financial support and relatively little party interference. McNair (2000) is right: a genuine public sphere emerged where there had previously been none. It appeared as if Russia was making a transition to a democratic mass political media system. However, these hopes have been largely dashed. The emergence of a healthy public sphere was predicated on a unique set of circumstances that were not sustainable in the long run.

Press freedom was not based on institutions but on decay of the party apparatus and divisions within the regime. 'Institutional incapacity', as Mickiewicz calls it, is not the basis of the consolidation of a democratic media system (Mickiewicz, 2000: 188).

I began this article by asking where press freedom in Russia stands more than 15 years after the start of *glasnost*. If we follow the criteria for mass political media systems that we have been using throughout the article, the answer is mixed. Clearly things are better than in the totalitarian or post-totalitarian periods. Media personnel are no longer appointed by a monistic center of political power. Access, at least for print media, is no longer strictly controlled, and ownership varies. There is significant pluralism in the print media and real diversity, as opposed to a narrow range of 'manufactured' and 'sanctioned' diversity. The diversity that now exists in the print media is no longer mediated by the regime, and the regime does not maintain the capacity to assert positive and negative control over the entire legal press. Moreover, the press is not constrained within the linguistic straightjacket of a transformative ideology, a straightjacket that remained even after belief had waned. A significant transition has indisputably occurred.

One gets the sense that the near despondency which media rights organizations express about Russia is not simply about where Russia stands but more about failed promises and concerns about the future. Here the news is not good. It is clear that Russia did not manage to consolidate a democratic system and the trend under Putin is pronouncedly in the wrong direction. The regime, however, is more sophisticated than in the past, following a trend which Reporters sans Frontières describes as the creation of 'cardboard imitations' of press freedom (Reporters sans Frontières, 2002). It permits a relatively free print media while controlling the most important means of communication, television. It does not exert its influence on all issues, as did the government in the Soviet Union, but only on issues that are of central importance to its survival, such as elections and Chechnya. It takes advantage of a rocky economic transition and weak legal protections to impose its will at important points. This is something different from Brezhnev's post-totalitarian Soviet Union; from the more aggressive authoritarian regimes, like Franco's Spain and contemporary Burma (Gunther et al., 2000: 30; Neumann, 2002); and even from the more traditional, defensive regimes like Salazar's Portugal (Seaton and Pimlott, 1980: 175). Putin embraces the tremendous communicative power of television, but it is a cold embrace. When issues of importance to the regime are at stake, it limits access to television and asserts its control in order to

promote its own goals and to attack its enemies. It also continues to harass critical journalists and those print media outlets that prove overly meddlesome. It should be acknowledged that this bifurcation entails certain risks. Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe learned those risks when, in spite of his control of the airwaves, he lost a constitutional referendum in 1999 and, if not for mass violations of the electoral process, he would have lost the presidential election in 2001. A neo-authoritarian media system limits the risk of electoral loss, it does not eliminate it.

What, then, are the lessons of the Russian transition?

- The state remains the most important threat to the emergence of democratic media systems. There may be a variety of sources of power, but the state, particularly the executive, retains the greatest potential to encroach upon media autonomy and limit pluralism. It may do so unilaterally or in concert with business, but it is the state that is vested with the most power. Authors like Sparks, Downing and Nordenstreng, who attempt to use Russian experience, specifically the emergence of corporate power, to demonstrate the ills of the West fail to identify the most important factor in Russia's failed transition.
- Media concentration can help foster pluralism. As far as 'corporate media' is concerned, the pre-Putin Russian press demonstrates that private, and even concentrated, media can make positive contributions to the creation of a public sphere. These conclusions are consistent with a recent World Bank study of 97 countries which found that 'countries with more prevalent state ownership of the media have less free press, fewer political rights for citizens, inferior governance, less developed markets and strikingly inferior outcomes in the areas of education and health' (Djankov et al., 2001).
- The media should fear not only a strong state but also a weak state. In most of our discussion, our examination of the role of the state has referred primarily to the executive branch of government. However, the Russian case shows how important other state institutions, particularly the judiciary, are to the protection of journalists and media outlets. As Waisbord has pointed out in his recent work on Latin America, minimal institutional conditions are particularly necessary to protect the press from violence (Waisbord, 2002: 107).

- There are substantial differences between different non-democratic mass political media systems. As argued above, there has been a tremendous change in the Russian press since the pre-Gorbachev Soviet period. At the same time, it would be difficult to argue that the Putin media is democratic. Both are non-democratic. As our discussion of post-totalitarian and neo-authoritarian media systems suggests, Gunther and Mughan are wrong when they assert that there is little difference in the institutional relationship between the media and the state in various non-democratic regimes (Gunther and Mughan, 2000a: 3–5). Scholars need to continue to investigate these differences. Moreover, those who assert that there were close similarities between the pre-*glasnost* Soviet Union and present-day Russia or, more importantly, western media systems, grossly understate what existed in the Soviet Union and overstate the limits of current media systems in Europe and North America.
- The past matters. The countries of the former Soviet Union in which the totalitarian and post-totalitarian media system existed for the briefest time tend to have had the most successful transitions in the post-Soviet space. The fact that none of the former Soviet republics outside of the Baltics have a Freedom House ranking of 'free' suggests that there are significant and lasting consequences of the Soviet past. The same holds for most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.
- Russia is not unique. Many of the developments we see in Russia are similar to those which take place in other countries. It is true that no other country has the exact same circumstances, but that is not what comparativists look for. Contemporary Russia shares much with authoritarian regimes past and present.

Notes

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1. The term mass political media system is used for two primary reasons. First, this article focuses on the mass media as opposed to interpersonal communication. Second, since we are approaching the subject from the perspective of politics, we are interested in communication that most directly affects political decisions, which is to say authoritative public decisions in a geographically bounded area. As such, we are particularly interested in the

role of, and characteristics that distinguish, mass media in areas that are central to democratic processes, including elections.

2. For an excellent summary of normative approaches to media as they concern Central and Eastern Europe, see Jakubowicz (1998/9).
3. Gunther and Mughan's statement seems to go beyond that of Linz, who asserted: 'Similarities between authoritarian regimes and totalitarians can perhaps go furthest in the control of mass media, particularly in countries in the process of modernization where the technological and capital requirements for setting up the media make such control very easy' (Linz, 1970: 266).

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