Elisabeth Schimpfössl

Power Lost and Freedom Relinquished: Russian Journalists Assessing the First Post-Soviet Decade

This article seeks a nuanced understanding of the troubled state that Russian journalism finds itself in today. As much as the Kremlin may be blamed as the source of these woes, it cannot be responsible for low ethical standards and lack of solidarity among journalists. This article explores what has hindered the journalistic community from developing stronger ethical standards over the past twenty-five years. Three significant events in the first post-Soviet decade serve as case studies: first, an early ethical code of conduct, the Moscow Charter of Journalists, produced in 1994; second, the 1996 presidential election campaign, which led to president Yeltsin’s victory over the Communist Gennadii Zuiganov; and third, the so called “information wars” between oligarchs, culminating in the 2001 demise of the television channel NTV. In unique interviews, conducted by the authors, thirty-five Russian elite journalists and media managers assessed the role they played in major political events and how these events impacted the freedom of media in Russia today.

Co-author: Ilya Yablokov

The Russian Review 76/2, 2017, 526–41

By the mid-2010s, journalism in Russia was in such a state that observers of the industry viewed it in the gloomiest light.1 So much so that in 2015 Russia scored 83 out of 100 negative points in terms of press freedom, which put it on par with Saudi Arabia and worse than Tadzhikistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.2 A consequence of this has been that many journalists have changed or left the profession, and the rest work in an ethical vacuum, where propaganda supercedes professional standards. The little independent journalism that is left is struggling to survive.3 To put the blame for this exclusively on the Putin regime would be too simplistic. In this article, we set out to explore why the journalist community failed to establish any ethical standards and has never become a Fourth Estate, despite the considerable power many of them exerted during perestroika and the early 1990s. We also ask how journalists assess this experience today.

The 1990s era and its impact on Russia’s further development provide the backdrop to our discussion. We choose this decade not because we rate it as more important than the Soviet legacy or the developments in the new millennium, but because of its relative distance and proximity to the present day. For the youngest generation, some of whom have just recently entered the journalistic profession, it lies too far back to have any personal memories, while many older journalists remember the 1990s as the most bustling and enthralling times.

For many, however, these years were traumatizing—so traumatizing that, for example, Konstantin Ernst, the head of Channel One, decided not to include the decade when illustrating Russia's contemporary history in his direction of the Sochi Winter Olympics opening ceremony: "I tried to think of a metaphor for the 1990s, but any honest metaphor would have been distressing."4 Referring to the brutality and violence which ruled throughout the decade as well as job loss, impoverishment, and dropping living standards, he concludes that the time is not yet ripe for dealing with those negative emotions.

Given the multiple experiences of the 1990s, it is hardly surprising that the contenious lines of discussion have run both along the differing memories and views, as well as along the different generations when, in the mid-2010s, a lively debate about the first post-Soviet decade was unleashed.5 We asked journalists representing a range of political views and two generations, first, how they assess their role back then and the role of their predeccessors and, second, what impact they think this has on journalism today. Analyzing the replies to these questions, we try to find out which practices and events in the 1990s might have contributed to the loss of free journalism, and what contributed to journalists' mutation from national icons in the perestroika period into professional PR people, the work of whom periodically crosses the fine line between journalism and propaganda.6

In order to explore how journalists assess the impact of the 1990s on journalism today, we conducted interviews with thirty-five journalists and media managers (who are all former journalists). We split these interviews in two groups: the older generation who were the active members of the political-social-journalist life in the 1990s, most of whom had gained prominence in the last years of the Soviet Union. The second group consists of the young generation who began their career either in the late 1990s or in the 2000s. Drawing such a dividing line is nothing new. Svetlana Pasti, Elina Erzikova, and Wilson Lowrey split the journalistic community into the old generation, who started their careers in journalism in the 1980s, and the young generation, who came to the profession under Yeltsin and Putin.7

More than half of the journalists and media managers we interviewed work for regime-loyal media outlets, while the other half work for independent media or freelance: 21 respondents work in television, 11 in print media, and 3 in online media. Media of all genres are represented; from tabloid and infotainment to news agencies and economic journalism. Ten respondents are female. The thirty-five interviews were conducted between March 2013 and March 2016: 30 were conducted face-to-face, 4 on Skype, and 1 via Facebook messenger. Except for two interviews, which took place in London and New York, we met the respondents in Moscow, usually in their offices and in a few cases in their homes or in restaurants. The interviews lasted from half an hour to two-and-a-half hours. Four interviewees preferred to remain anonymous. The journalists' voices are our empirical data; that is, these individuals acted as research subjects. In other words, despite their expertise and knowledge, we did not treat them as experts, but as agents, participants, and witnesses of contemporary post-Soviet history. We scrutinized their narratives using content analysis.8

Over the last two decades, our interviewees have undergone several reassessments of their own actions and of what they have experienced. Academic research to some extent concurs with the assessments they made, but in parts also diverges significantly. Dealing with the major issues that the journalistic community faced in the 1990s, Ellen Mickiewicz's *Changing Channels* and Ivan Zassoursky's *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia* list the reasons why the media—the chief source of democratization in the perestroika period—turned into a major political tool of the Kremlin in the 2000s.9 They showed how fragile the equilibrium was in the 1990s between balanced and biased reporting. Natalya Roudakova further elucidates the sharp demise of ethics during the turbulent socioeconomic changes in the 1990s and the dramatic alienation within the community.10 Pasti, Erzikova, and Lowrey complain that journalists in general, independent of the journalistic generation they belong to, are happy to cooperate with the authorities and perceive themselves as PR specialists, a professional identity which is partly influenced by the memory of the Soviet and first post-Soviet years.11

Recent expert contributions to the field have given voice to people with first-hand experience in journalism, an important one among which was by Arkady Ostrovsky, who worked in the post-Soviet era as the *Financial Times*' Russia correspondent.12 Many of these accounts give a sense of the big split within the media community, and of how events in the recent past have further widened it.13 Olessia Koltsova's, as well as our own works, provide insight into how newsrooms operate and what ethical ideas guide journalists in their work.14 Rolf Freidheim studied how the appointment of editors who are loyal to the Kremlin affects the content of online journalism.15 In general, however, academics have focused on the peculiarities of media control by the state, rather than the role of journalists.16

How journalists assess the impact of the 1990s on today, at a time when new restrictions on Russian media have been imposed, allows us to get a better understanding of the state the journalist community is presently in. To this end, we frame our media studies topic with a concept borrowed from political science when analyzing the three case studies. We refer to Vladimir Gel'man, who in his analysis of contemporary Russia uses a framework that understands politics as a struggle between different actors who pursue the goal of gaining, wielding, and maximizing power.17 Gel'man clarifies that in this power game actors (whether members of the ruling group or the opposition) use various resources and strategies to gain the upper hand in this struggle. The rest of society is involved on an occasional basis at best.

The actors in our research are journalists and media managers. We pay particular attention to their endeavor to maximize power in the sense of increasing their personal influence, status, and success.18 An important aspect of this approach is that it relieves the actors from being judged from a moral perspective, which can be very tempting when it comes to questions of ethics and solidarity. Instead, we see them as rational actors whose decisions and actions were logical responses to being in certain professional positions and roles under the specific circumstances of the 1990s. As Gel'man notes, Russian political actors in the post-Soviet period almost always took decisions which made the country move further away from democracy and closer to authoritarianism. From a perspective of building democracy, all the major junctures in political history of post-Soviet Russia were failures. However, it is wrong to assume that this chain of failures was in any way predestined. The actors in these processes could have as well made different decisions, which would have led to a very different scenario.19

Our first case study has as yet never received any attention in Russian media studies; the Moscow Charter of Journalists compiled and set out in 1994. In the early 1990s the power of prominent journalists, who were mainly based in Moscow, went far beyond the status journalists usually enjoy. Having gained a reputation as national opinion-makers in the 1980s era of perestroika and glasnost, they knew they could set the tone.20 Thus, they also felt they had the responsibility to write down and eternalize the rules for their profession. In 1994 a group of twenty-six prominent journalists signed a charter aiming to introduce ethical norms and set standards based on a written code of conduct, thereby guiding journalists' daily work throughout Russia. At the same time the ethical code of the Russian Union of Journalists emerged with similar content.21 We opted for the Moscow Charter of Journalists because it was the first attempt by Russian journalists to organize themselves, and it demonstrates the scale of symbolic power they were holding at that time.

The 1994 attempt to spread their principles among the majority of professionals failed, and nothing was ever established that resembled a commonly accepted set of ethical principles. Some of those who had designed the 1994 ethical code went on to violate their own principles by participating in the massive propaganda machine that was set up to support Boris Yeltsin's 1996 presidential election campaign, thereby consciously and deliberately sacrificing their independence and previously held power. This forms the second and central case study within this research. The journalists' role in Yeltsin's 1996 election campaign is now considered a major blow to the media as an institution of civil society in Russia. It is of considerable significance for today's journalists when thinking about the moment when things started going wrong.22

The third case study, which grew out of the previous one, deals with the so-called information wars—the media battles in the second half of the 1990s between rival oligarchs, culminating in the demise of the private television channel NTV in 2001. This marks the beginning of the end of a period of relative press freedom and independent journalism in Putin's Russia. Journalists of all levels and ranks had by now become subordinate to their respective owner, completely losing their power status. They readily carried out the tasks set by the authorities and regime-loyal media owners. The authorities understood that they could dismantle independent and critical journalism without facing systematic and organised protest. These years laid the basis for what we have seen most glaringly since the annexation of Crimea; an easy readiness among journalists to take part in propaganda wars.

THE 1994 CHARTER OF JOURNALISTS: DEFINING PROFESSIONAL PRINCIPLES

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russian journalists were by and large oblivious of the idea of professional ethics. People who streamed into journalism in the late 1980s were most diverse: they were biologists, chemists, historians, schoolteachers, theater critics, and so on. Their lack of journalistic training partly (but only partly) explains their relaxed attitude to questions of ethics.23 Another reason was the constant state of emergency that people (felt they) lived in during those years. A Western journalist working in Moscow at that time remembers her colleagues' confusion when she asked them why they were overtly taking sides when reporting news items, without respecting professional impartiality: "They perceived themselves as participants in a fight against the Communists. They saw their primary task as overcoming the old regime. Pondering the niceties of ethics was not on their minds."24

When those twenty-six journalists took the initiative to draft ethical guidelines, it came as a surprise. These journalists had been friends for a while and in 1992 they created an informal club to mingle with important politicians and exchange information with them. Now, in 1994, they undertook to design the Moscow Charter. Maria Slonim, who had just returned from more than a decade in London to work as the BBC correspondent in Moscow, hosted the group at her flat.

These journalists were part of the media elite created during the perestroika years. Most of them had at some point of their careers worked for foreign news agencies and were, therefore, familiar with foreign codes of practice.25 Employed by prominent media outlets in prime positions, they enjoyed prime relations with the political world and unfettered access to the highest echelons of power. The club thus became the epicenter of socializing between the most high-powered politicians and journalists of the time. Ministers and deputies were frequent guests at the events Slonim hosted.26 They enjoyed each other's company, exchanged ideas and information, and socialized as like-minded friends.

One of the most important points of these gatherings was that its members trusted each other: "We related to one another in confidence," Slonim recounts. "We knew for sure that nobody, even in their wildest dreams, would consider writing about what was said in my house off the record."27 Tellingly, other journalists were rarely admitted, except for some close friends, and the journalists refused to widen their circle when, after the release of the Charter, more and more people knocked on the door of this exclusive Moscow club, wanting to gain entry. The group's exclusivity was considered its major strength. "No question, we were an influential group, a closed group," Natalya Gevorkyan remembers: "Politicians came to us precisely because we were a tiny group. Had we been more open, they would have stopped coming. I think we had great influence."28

If we return to Gel'man's concept of power maximization, this behavior was very rational. It was not that those elitist people maliciously kept other people at bay, but the relations they had developed in the perestroika period and in the early post-Soviet years made them important power-brokers who could interact with other powerful actors almost on an equal footing. Socializing with powerful people became an aim in itself. Such type of interaction would have suffered badly had this group been enlarged.

Being involved in power games with the new political establishment, the journalists, however, neglected promoting the Charter. When fellow journalists, inspired and enthused by the Charter, approached club member Sergei Parkhomenko to ask how to implement it, he explained to them that they should respect it and internalize its value, nothing more.29 He believed that signing the Charter, spreading the word through the occasional conversation with junior colleagues, and relying on the enlighting power his word carried, would be sufficient for the country's journalists to make the principles their own and obey them. His fellow club members thought the same.

This approach to the world was characteristic of post-Soviet Russia. In a backlash against a Soviet-type state-imposed collectivism, people avoided any collective action and tried to find individual ways to assert their personal interests.30 That cooperation within a profession could in due course protect the interests of the individual did not appear convincing; consequently, creating a professional organization, particularly a trade union, was off the agenda.31 Moreover, nobody from the club would have volunteered to do any work for such a project. Not only were they fervently preoccupied with their personal careers, they did not really think it was their responsibility to take things further. Today Slonim thinks that this was probably a mistake: "We hadn't thought it through. We probably should have set up some kind of structure and seriously pursued it. … But nobody found time for such a thing."32

Thus, the publication of the Charter was followed by a period in which many fellow journalists welcomed and highly appreciated its content and ideas, but for a whole range of reasons hardly anybody actively applied them. Many journalists who were eager to embrace the Charter were at a loss. In the early 1990s the large majority of journalists in Russia could only dream of the independence the much more privileged club members enjoyed. These ordinary journalists worked for media outlets in which interference by business or politicians at all levels was an everyday occurrence. For very practical reasons, it was much more difficult for them to abide by the Charter and not succumb to the pressure they were exposed to from politicians, bureaucrats, and employers. Not to forget that they received meager remuneration for their work. It had become a norm for both individual journalists and editors to supplement their income by commercialising their journalism and accepting payment in exchange for publishing information (something called dzhinsa in Russian).33 There were no professional associations, independent from the state, which could have provided journalists with a platform to discuss the problems they faced on a daily basis as well as their role in the development of the country. As for the 1994 Moscow Charter, this lack of trust in, and commitment to, any professional institution meant that it had very little impact.

Many representatives of the young generation criticized the group's arrogance and elitism. They saw their older peers as privileged journalists who looked down on both the public and lower-rank journalists, while at the same time trying to teach and enlighten them.34 "I do respect them," a young journalist tells us, "but sadly they were barely more than a closed, elitist circle."35 "Why, for example, did they have to meet up at one person's flat instead of making things more open and transpartent?" another young journalist asked. "This closeness was very counterproductive."36 The club members' detachment is a main target of criticism: "They proudly wrote from their offices right next to the State Duma and tried to teach the masses—an attitude which didn't go down well with the masses."37 The overall assessment is very negative: "The Charter was not worth the paper it was written on."38

Barely two years after publishing their Charter, leading cohorts of the club showed that they could not adhere to their own ethical principles when they succumbed to attractions of being in close proximity to the political and economic elite and began to prioritize fostering their own personal power and influence in the country. The journalists' closeness to the political establishment made them overestimate the endurance and stability of their power, and as a result they missed an opportunity to become an independent force in society. Ensuing events degraded their status in Russian society even further.

THE 1996 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: PROFESSIONALIZED PROPAGANDA

Six months prior to the presidential elections in May 1996, Yeltsin's approval rating was as low as 2 percent.39 The economic collapse had extracted an unnerving toll on the populace, and the war in Chechnya was highly unpopular. Voters' discontent, combined with their yearning for stability and social security, played into the hands of the Communist party, with their leader Gennadii Ziuganov polling as the favorite for winning the presidency.

In this desperate situation, the Kremlin's political strategists turned to the principal tool at their disposal to reach the electorate—the media. A large number of journalists weighed into the election campaign, which subsequently became increasingly propagandist in nature. They embarked upon a large-scale media crusade that vilified Ziuganov and idealized Yeltsin. The combined effort of numerous journalists, oligarchs, and politicians to discredit Ziuganov eventually helped Yeltsin secure victory in the second round of the elections in June 1996.

The fiercest and most questionable exponent of this campaign was the newspaper *Ne dai bog! (God Forbid!)*. Its 10 million color copies proclaimed that, if Ziuganov won, the country would slip into a civil war; mass arrests, executions, and famine certainly would follow. Ziuganov was repeatedly compared to Hitler. The whole project was administered by *Kommersant* journalists, which is sadly ironic in light of the fact that less then a decade prior to this time, *Kommersant* and its cadre of journalists had been standard-bearers for the journalistic community, but now were engaged in a scandalous propaganda campaign.

“We clearly understood that if Ziuganov came to power everything would regress very quickly.” Thus did the founder of the television channel REN TV, Irena Lesnevskaia, explain why her generation willingly participated in the mass-media onslaught orchestrated by the Kremlin in the 1996 elections.40 Almost the whole media community believed that a victory by the Communist party would mean a return to Soviet censorship and repression. “We were all convinced that the Communists were about to return,” Channel One head Konstantin Ernst asserted.41

Fears of an anti-liberal political direction were strong, but individual private agendas were strong, too. Famous journalists and influential media managers were especially fearful that a return of Soviet censorship would mean a premature end to their careers, by killing off the media empires of which they were a part.42 Aleksei Malashenko, one of the founders of NTV, joined the presidential campaign to secure a separate, privileged frequency for his television channel.43 Even the authors of the Moscow Charter did not voice any public concern, so much so that many of them opted to actively support the Kremlin.

When we look at how journalists assess the 1996 campaign today, however, we get a sharply polarized picture. More than half of the older generation who took part in the campaign thinks that they played a vital and positive role in the country’s development. Parkhomenko sees himself as a defender of democracy: “We all moved in a single direction under the influence one inextricable force; namely, the distinct understanding that communism and the left wing endanger our main values, our professional values.”44

There are very few exceptions to this among the older generation. One is Olga Romanova, then deputy editor-in-chief of a leading daily, *Segodnia*. She is one of the few who deplore their own role in the campaign. Her assessment is self-deprecating. She says that the problems of journalism today go back to 1996, and, in hindsight, she considers her role in 1996 to be the biggest mistake in her life:

> *All liberal journalists, or those who thought they were liberal, closed their eyes for a whole year and worked exclusively for the victory of Yeltsin. … In fact, it was less about whether Yeltsin wins or not; it was more about whether we survive or not. We saw the manipulations; we saw the violations. We saw the dishonesty in the negotiations with Ziuganov. We saw what happened to Lebed' [a then very popular presidential candidate and military general], who was used and presented as a viable third candidate to dilute votes. We witnessed it all—and it suited us.45*

Some people did understand what was going on. “We followed an iron principle,” said Dmitrii Muratov, who in 1996 ran *Novaia gazeta*, a weekly that focused on investigative journalism. “While everybody around us said that one had to support the lesser evil, we understood where this would lead.”46 Muratov instead supported Iabloko, a small liberal party headed by Grigorii Iavlinskii. “We knew he'd lose, but at least we wouldn't have to be ashamed of our deeds.”47 Others stayed away from the 1996 campaign for political reasons, deploring the break-up of the Soviet Union. Aram Gabrelianov, who four years after the 1996 elections went about building Russia's biggest tabloid empire, says he hated Yeltsin from soon after 1991 for destroying the USSR and allowing its economy to be looted.48

Diametrically opposed to the older (mostly liberal) journalists in our sample are representatives of the younger generation of journalists. They are all very critical of the events in 1996, liberal ones no less than others, assessing their older colleagues participation in the election campaign as highly negative and detrimental to the further development of the journalist community. Leonid Bershidskii, the former editor-in-chief of the financial daily Vedomosti and founder of the news website *Slon*, now working for Bloomberg, supports Romanova's assessment; he calls the 1996 campaign “a disgrace” to the profession and regards “the state propaganda machine in Russia today” as “a direct consequence of the 1996 debacle.”49 The journalist and writer Oleg Kashin calls it an “absolute disaster, the beginning of the descent into all our present-day media problems.”50 Former NTV journalist Aleksandr Urzhanov is equally resentful: “1996 was a big betrayal of the profession, perpetrated by its most respected representatives. … Even in today's cynical era, propaganda in the run-up to elections wouldn't reach such a level of impudence.”51

The 1996 presidential election campaign caused and accelerated the politicization of the Russian media market and the commercialization of politics. The unclean methods used in the campaign destroyed any trust in professional ethics and professionalism in general. The fact that ethics were jettisoned by everyone meant that there was no longer any reason to be afraid of competition on the basis of ethics, which parts of the audience might have demanded. The owners of media outlets realized that running media during political campaigns was highly lucrative, both in terms of profit and political connections.52

For individual journalists who took part in the 1996 propaganda campaign to save Yeltsin this meant, at first, a prosperous time—relative independence in their day-to-day work, good pay, creative freedom. The eventual effect was, however, also very negative for them, inasmuch as the 1996 campaign radically changed the balance of power between journalists and political authorities, to the benefit of the latter. The journalists' enthusiastic support for the Kremlin, their willingness to collaborate as well as take and execute orders, signalled to the Kremlin that it could rely on the media in case of emergency. Having realized what an important resource journalists were, politicians learned how to manipulate them —and how to keep them under control. As Leonid Parfenov stated, in 1996 political journalism, which had never properly dissociated itself from power structures, completely merged with it.53

The Kremlin realized that the general public also was prepared to digest propagandastyle television and newspapers. Gleb Pavlovskii, a long-time adviser to the Kremlin, observed in 2002 that "once the power structures had understood the audience's apathy and readiness to accept propaganda, they started to systematically exploit media tools for their own interest."54 In the second half of the 1990s the Kremlin's interventions did not yet have a guaranteed, game-changing influence on public opinion. One reason for this was that there were still multiple voices heard in mass media, such as on NTV, TV6, *Novaia gazeta*, or *Itogi* .

This diversity of the media landscape was, for some time, secured by the fact that numerous owners, each of whom pursued their own goals, had control over Russia's media. This fragmentation of Russia's elites, as Gel'man suggests, was one of the reasons why a single power broker was not able to monopolize power in the country in the 1990s.55 These numerious owners were, however, consistently sidelined in the years to come, both by the Kremlin and by regional authorities. The information wars of the late 1990s accelerated this process, depriving journalists of their role as leaders of public opinion and as independent power actors.

THE INFORMATION WARS OF THE 1990S: A DEATHBLOW TO COMMUNITY SPIRIT

The information wars started with an auction. Sviazinvest, a holding company that had been set up to sell off shares in a large number of Russian telephone companies and telegraph centers, was up for sale, and Gusinskii, who was among those who secured Yeltin's reelection, had his eye on it. He had missed out on the previous wave of large-scale privatizations, and because he was the first oligarch who had turned his media outlets into a proper business, Sviazinvest was clearly up his alley. Boris Berezovskii, meanwhile, controlled a majority of shares in a number of media outlets (the television channels ORT and TV6, and the newspapers *Nezavisimaia gazeta* and *Kommersant*).56 The government urgently needed money to pay wages and pensions, and the two oligarchs, in alliance, were happy to pay a respectable sum in exchange for the holding.

Another oligarch, Vladimir Potanin, also showed interest in the asset. Potanin had managed to capitalize his 1996 commitment to Yeltsin's reelection by becoming a deputy prime minister. With financial backing from George Soros, Potanin's company, unexpectedly, won the auction.57 Feeling deceived, Gusinskii and Berezovskii launched a campaign to convince the Kremlin that the process had been corrupt, hoping thereby to get the auction result annulled. Using the tools and tricks they had deployed during the 1996 election campaign, when owners of media outlets used journalists to sling mud at their opponents, they started a concerted and full blown media attack on the government and Potanin, which culminated in the dismissal of several members of the government.

Their accusation that the government sold Potanin state assets for nothing marked the beginning of a destructive media war, which ended with the crackdown on Gusinskii's NTV in 2001.58 After the 1996 elections, Gusinskii had received a large low-interest loan from the state-owned natural gas conglomerate Gazprom as payback for his help in getting Yeltsin elected, money he used to develop his TV channels. By the time the next electoral campaign began, however, Gusinskii found himself in a camp hostile to the Kremlin, and he opposed the future president's Unity party. In the aftermath of Putin's victory, recriminations followed: the loan was recalled, Gusinskii was arrested and briefly jailed; he hurriedly sold his shares to Gazpromedia (which Gazprom owned); and he fled the country. This sequence of events, the result of which left Gusinskii's businesses in the hands of the state, symbolized the end of oligarchic media dominance. The Kremlin took over.

The information wars were highly destructive to the journalist community, splitting it into two hostile halves, with each group supporting its respective oligarchs and wasting its energy on internecine struggles.59 As one of the journalists we interviewed cynically commented, in the course of the information wars "journalists lost their face and have since been completely spineless."60 "The tragedy of the information wars is that Russian media only very briefly experienced freedom," lamented Pavel Gusev, owner of the daily *Moskovskii komsomolets*. "We had only just left the Communist past in order to end up in a capitalist present which was rough and brutal."61 In fact, Gusev himself was part of this process. In the early 1990s, Gusev transformed himself from a Soviet *apparatchik* into a successful media businessman. He acquired the skills and tricks prevalent at the time, and so his publishing house did not refrain from biased political campaigning.62

The attack on NTV revealed the fragility and fragmentation of the journalistic community. Fellow journalists did not experience any sense of solidarity, but mainly *Schadenfreude*. This was because NTV journalists were well paid and enjoyed prestige: "As an NTV journalist, you instantly got attention and you commanded great authority," a former NTV journalist recalls.63 Moreover, prior to the company's demise, NTV journalists had readily participated in the information wars in exchange for material benefits, which clearly contradicted the principles of free speech. Having said that, journalists in all the large media organizations did pretty much the same, creating a situation in which journalists judged their peers in competitive outlets by their own (low) standards, or, in other words, by their own unethical approach to journalism. Distrust and cynicism came to dominate the journalist world. As a consequence, when NTV journalists took to the streets to speak up for free journalism, few of their colleagues from other media outlets trusted them.

Journalists with very different political pursuasions agree on this point.64 For instance, the journalist Bershidskii disapproved of the oligarch Gusinskii's use of government funds to build his empire: "I, and *Vedomosti*, did not ally ourselves with Gusinskii. I still think Gusinskii deserved it. Gusinskii was clearly using his media to influence political decisions, vying for power."65 Bershidskii not only disassociated himself from Gusinskii but also denied the dismissed journalists any support:

> *Some of the journalists did not deserve it—but, then, others are now part of that propaganda machine, so that shows they never really had any professional backbone. In any case, back then journalists had no problem finding work in Moscow. It was up to you; you could choose to work for Gusinskii or do something more worthwhile.66*

The end of Gusinskii's NTV clearly demonstrated the extent to which any sense of solidarity and belief in professional ethics had been absent among journalists. The journalistic community was already morally weakened, if not severely damaged, and driven by material interests. The aggressive and brutal character of the takeover, and what it meant for media freedom in Russia in more general terms, exacerbated already hostile emotions. An unquestioning and unquestioned loyalty to the respective owner became a key characteristic of post-Soviet journalism. This played into the hands of the Kremlin's strategy for taming the media, thereby making it the central pillar for controlling society.67

The information wars ended the period of journalists as independent power actors. Oligarchic control over the media and the subordination of journalists to their owners turned them into employees whose success directly depended on whether they pleased their superiors, and eventually their owners. After the restructuring of the media in the 2000s, the state, and Kremlin-loyal oligarchs, took control, but the basic mechanism stayed the same. One of our interviewees, a *Rossiia* journalist, justifies this situation by referring back to the information wars: "Back then, Gusinskii dictated policy. And the channel followed it. If you didn't agree, you could just leave. Now the majority of media outlets belongs to the state, and the state does the same. If you don't agree, just leave."68

This subordination to one's employer (which in the 2000s was, for many, the state) was combined with another strategy: accuse the accusers (the West, the opposition) of being worse than you are in order to undermine their credibility, a strategy some journalists cheekily called "whataboutism."69 The famous

TV presenter Maksim Shevchenko, a representative of the young generation, notes that

> *[The Russian way of reporting] is not any different to what any reporter from the Frankfurter Allgemeine or the Kurier experiences. … If I put my money into a channel or a newspaper, why should I be forced to like everybody? This is why there is such a thing as editorial policy. If the state invests money in a media outlet, it has the right to demand that it follows the state's policy.70*

The era of information wars proved a formative time for journalists, for it was then that they acquired what many of them call *adekvatnost'* —the skills, sensitivity, and knowledge to navigate one's professional space.71 To a large degree this involves sensing, accepting, and anticipating the (often unspoken) political line while trying not to cross the line into self-censorship. Done too keenly, self-censorship can make journalism stiff, dull, and boring, which is not what the media industry needs if it is to attract and retain a large audience. To maintain the right balance between political obedience and creative media products, journalists learned how to constrain their originality and individuality within the overall political limits. Initially, they acquired this skill ("creative" conformity) while working for oligarch-led media outlets. There might have been a coercive element initially pushing the phenomenon, but as the new century unfolded it became the dominant idea of what it means to be professional.

CONCLUSION

This article has applied Vladimir Gel'man's framework of power maximization in post-Soviet Russia to the media community in order to trace journalists' attempts to establish ethical norms, and it has sought to explain why the media failed to become a Fourth Estate. The application of Gel'man's concept to Russian media is fruitful because it avoids moral judgments and refrains from seeing Russia's post-Soviet history as predetermined. As Gel'man notes, the road to Putin's authorianism in the 2010s passed multiple milestones and involved various powerful actors who had choices about which course to follow.

Many journalists were certainly well intentioned in their endeavors and were keen to maximize their personal power and influence, not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of their country's development. The majority of journalists who had gained prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, overestimated themselves and miscalculated their ability to partake in the highest echelons of power. One consequence of this collective self-deception was that they failed to realize the importance of creating a professional association or trade union, which could have staved off pressure from the Kremlin and counterbalanced it.

The attempt to formulate ethical principles of journalism in 1994 could have, in theory, provided the foundation of generally accepted guidelines, which in turn could have become a driving force for creating an independent and strong journalist community, able to resist the Kremlin. The small group of elitist Moscow journalists, however, preferred to succour high-ranked politicians and associate with the ruling elites, which heavily biased their perception of powerful individuals. In turn, having gained the trust of journalists, the authorities proceeded to abuse them by manipulating the power of the journalistic word for their own political aims.

The propaganda campaign of 1996 is the most poignant example of how malleable and complacent journalists had become. Yeltsin's highly controversial victory, aided by the journalists' readiness to openly endorse propagandist ideas, was a decisive turning point on the path to the de-democratization of Russia. It became a convenient justification for journalists to breach ethical principles. Today, in particular, the young generation resent the actions of their predecessors, blaming their senior colleagues for selling out basic journalistic principles.

In the aftermath of Yeltsin's reelection, the victorious ruling oligarchs gorged themselves on the spoils of state property, redistributing it among themselves in concert with media owners who routinely abused their influence and power. Journalists happily acquiesced, partaking in the information wars for the sake of remunerations and celebrity careers. The increasingly diverse and intricate weapons employed in the notorious information wars were honed in the media's internecine struggles, which further undermined any sense of solidarity within the profession. Loyalty to the owner became the sole, overriding mantra of everyday journalistic life.

Journalists quickly adapted to this new environment and its prevailing rules of engagement, defined as *adekvatnost'*, by which they converted their submission into a supposed virtue by perceiving it as professionalism. The sacrifice of Gusinskii's NTV showcased what could happen if you did not toe the most powerful actor's line. Once the Kremlin, directly and indirectly, became the main owner of the media, journalists seamlessly switched their loyalty, offering their services to the new master, the state.

In many respects, the 1990s shaped the nature of Russia's contemporary media environment. The decade's major milestones turned journalists from the powerful icons of the perestroika era into what they are today; an atomized group of workers in the media industry. The anti-Ukrainian media campaign which started in 2014 bore certain similarities with the 1996 campaign and the information wars of the late 1990s. The absence of ethical guidelines, lack of mutual support, and total loyalty to the owner turned journalists again into propagandists who had no scruples about presenting opponents of the Russian regime in the gloomiest light.

Having said that, their current state is a not necessarily an indicator of the further demise of journalism in

Russia. On the contrary, the passionate discussions about the 1990s and what went wrong in that decade are an important learning platform from which to potentially turn things around. Nobody is better equipped to do so than the contemporary generation of journalists, who are too young to have taken part in the 1990s battles. They are now heavily involved in reflecting upon the decade and its consequences, which allows them to use the 1990s as a repository of valuable lessons on how to regain their professionalism.

ENDNOTES

1Aleksandr Baklanov, "Pozner zaiavil o smerti zhurnalistiki v Rossii," *Snob*, May 25, 2015, http://snob.ru/ selected/entry/92939. Unless otherwise noted, all URLs cited in this article were last accessed February 12, 2017.

2Freedom of the Press – 2015, *Freedom House*, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/russia.

3See, for example, Leonid Parfenov, "Zhurnalistika nikomu ne nuzhna," *Meduza*, March 17, 2015, https:// meduza.io/feature/2015/03/17/zhurnalistika-nikomu-ne-nuzhna; Elizaveta Surganova, "U menia samaia neudachnaia professiia dlia etogo vremeni," *Lenta.ru*, February 4, 2013, http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/02/04/ krichevskaya/http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/02/04/krichevskaya/ (last accessed August 16, 2016).

4Konstantin Ernst in discussion with the authors, March 13, 2016.

5See, for instance, Grigorii Iavlinskii, *Periferiinyi avtoritarizm: Kak i kuda prishla Rossiia* (Moscow, 2015); and the project "Ostrov-90," *Colta.ru*, http://www.colta.ru/ostrov90.

6Ilya Yablokov, "Russian Journalism's Double White Lines," *Open Democracy Russia*, July 22, 2016, https:/ /www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ilya-yablokov/russian-media-s-double-white-lines.

7Svetlana Pasti, "Two Generations of Contemporary Russian Journalists," *European Journal of Communication* 20:1 (2005): 89–115; Elina Erzikova and Wilson Lowrey, "Managed Mediocrity? Experienced Journalists' Perspectives on the 'Pampers Generation' of Russian Reporters," *Journalism Practice* 6:2 (2012): 264–79.

8Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, 2012).

9Ellen Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (Durham, NC, 1999); Ivan Zassoursky, *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia* (New York, 2004).

10Natalia Roudakova "Journalism as 'Prostitution': Understanding Russia's Reactions to Anna Politkovskaya's Murder," *Political Communication* 26:4 (2009): 412–29.

11Pasti, "Two Generations of Contemporary Russian Journalists"; Erzikova and Lowrey, "Managed Mediocrity?"

12Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (London, 2015).

13Aleksandr Gorbachev and Il'ia Krasil'shchik, *Istoriia russkikh media 1989–2011: Versiia "Afishi"* (Moscow, 2011).

14Olessia Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia* (London, 2006), 118–60; Elisabeth Schimpfössl and Ilya Yablokov "Coercion or Conformism? Censorship and Self-censorship among Russian media personalities and Reporters in the 2010s," *Democratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratisation* 22:2 (2014):

295–312; Schimpfössl and Yablokov, "Media Elites in Post-Soviet Russia and Their Strategies of Success," *Russian Politics* 2:1 (forthcoming).

15Rolf Freidheim, "The Loyal Editor Effect: Russian online journalism after independence," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33:1 (2017), www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1200797.

16Masha Lipman and Michael McFaul "'Managed Democracy' in Russia: Putin and the Press," *Press/Politics* 6:3 (2001): 116–27; Sarah Oates, *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia* (London, 2006); Stephen Hutchings and Natalya Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control* (London, 2009); Scott Gehlbach, "Reflections on Putin and the Media," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26:1 (2010): 77–87, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.2747/1060-586X.26.1.77; Jonathan Becker, "Lessons from Russia: A Neo- Authoritarian Media System," *European Journal of Communication* 19:2 (2004): 139–163; Natalia Roudakova, "Media-Political Clientelism: Lessons from Anthropology," *Media, Culture & Society* 30:1 (2008): 41–59; Jesse-Owen Hearns-Branaman, *Journalism and the Philosophy of Truth: Beyond Objectivity and Balance* (London, 2016).

17Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh, 2015). 18Ibid., 9.

19Ibid., 13–14.

20A detailed description of that in Ostrovsky, *Invention of Russia*.

21“Kodeks professional’noi etiki rossiiskogo zhurnalista,” *Soiuz zhurnalistov Rossii*, June 23, 1994, accessed August 16, 2016, http://www.ruj.ru/_about/code_of_professional_ethics_of_the_russian_journalist.php (last accessed August 16, 2016)..

22Nataliya Rostova, “Pirrova pobeda,” *Radio Svoboda*, July 4, 2016, http://www.svoboda.org/a/27835484.html.

23Sergei Parkhomenko in discussion with the authors, June 13, 2014.

24Floriana Fossato in discussion with the authors, August 26, 2015.

25“Moskovskaia khartiia zhurnalistov. Deklaratsiia. 1994 god,” *Ekho Moskvy*, last modified November 5, 2011, http://echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/827401-echo/.

26Sergei Parkhomenko in discussion with the authors, June 13, 2014.

27Maria Slonim in discussion with the authors, December 25, 2014.

28Nataliia Gevorkyan in discussion with the authors, June 3, 2014.

29Ibid.

30Simon Pirani, *Change in Putin’s Russia: Power, Money and People* (New York, 2010).

31Paul Kubicek, “Civil Society, Trade Unions and Post-Soviet Democratisation: Evidence from Russia and Ukraine,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 54:4 (2002): 603–24.

32Maria Slonim in discussion with the authors, December 25, 2014.

33Svetlana Pasti, “A New Generation of Journalists,” in *Russian Mass Media and Changing Values*, ed. Arja Rosenolm et al. (London, 2010): 61.

34REN TV journalist in discussion with the authors, August 8, 2014; former TVC journalist in discussion with the authors, June 4, 2014.

35Aleksandr Urzhanov in discussion with the authors, June 26, 2014.

36Nataliya Rostova in discussion with the authors, June 16, 2014.

37REN TV journalist in discussion with the authors, August 8, 2014.

38Ibid.

39Daniel Treisman, “Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55:3 (2011): 592.

40Irena Lesnevskaia in discussion with the authors, June 12, 2014.

41Konstantin Ernst in discussion with the authors, March 13, 2016.

42Leonid Parfenov, “S tverdym znakom na kontse,” *Channel One*, last modified June 1, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMLdc89clvY.

43Mickiewicz, Changing Channels, 170–71.

44Sergei Parkhomenko in discussion with the authors, June 13, 2014.

45Olga Romanova in discussion with the authors, June 14, 2014.

46Dmitrii Muratov in discussion with the authors, February 16, 2016.

47Ibid.

48Aram Gabrelianov in discussion with the authors, February 16, 2016.

49Leonid Bershidskii in discussion with the authors, February 13, 2015.

50Oleg Kashin in discussion with the authors, July 31, 2014.

51Aleksandr Urzhanov in discussion with the authors, June 26, 2014.

52Anna G. Kachkaeva, “Istoriia televideniia v Rossii: Mezhdu vlast’iu, svobodoi i sobstvennostiu,” *Istoriia novoi Rossii*, http://www.ru-90.ru/node/1316.

53Leonid Parfenov in discussion with the authors, June 14, 2014.

54Gleb Pavlovskii in discussion with the authors, July 10, 2002.

55Gel’man, Authoritarian Russia, 68–70.

56Floriana Fossato, Anna Kachkaeva, “Rossiiskie informatsionnye imperii IV,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified October 20, 1998, http://archive.svoboda.org/archive/dossier/rumedia4/.

57Zassoursky, Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia, 85.

58Ibid., 84–85.

59Natalya Gevorkyan in discussion with the authors, June 3, 2014; Maria Slonim in discussion with the authors, December 25, 2014.

60REN TV journalist in discussion with the authors, August 14, 2014.

61Pavel Gusev in discussion with the authors, February 13, 2016.

62See Vasily Gatov, Elisabeth Schimfossl, and Ilya Yablokov, “From Soviet to Russian Media Managers,” *Russian Politics* (2017, forthcoming).

63Former NTV journalist in discussion with the authors, June 14, 2014.

64See, for example, Nataliya Rostova, “Nichego polozhitel’nogo, chto moglo proiskhodit’ v strane v efir ne popadalo,” *Slon*, last modified October 12, 2010, http://slon.ru/russia/nichego_polozhitelnogo_chto_moglo_proishodit_v_st-475571.xhtml; Nataliya Rostova, “A davaite luchshe vy umrete – za to, chtoby ia mog vyskazyvat’ svoi vzgliady,” *Slon*, last modified March 11, 2012 http://slon.ru/russia/a_davayte_luchshe_vy_umrete_za_to_chtoby_ya_mog_vyskazyvat_svoi_vzglyady-762674.xhtml.

65Leonid Bershidskii in discussion with the authors, February 13, 2015.

66Ibid.

67In December 2013 the chief executive of the state-owned news corporation Rossiia Segodnia, Dmitrii Kiselev, on his first day in the job pointed out that loyalty to his company should not be stretched to criticism of Russian politics. “If you are going to carry out subversive activities, it’s not going to coincide with my plans,” he made clear from the onset. “Dmitrii Kiselev ob”iasnil sotrudnikam RIA Novosti, chto Rossii nuzhna liubov’, a ne ob”ektivnost’,” *NEWS.RU.com*, last modified December 12, 2013, http://www.newsru.com/russia/12dec2013/kiselev.html.

68Aleksandr Khabarov in discussion with the authors, June 6, 2014.

69Max Seddon, “Lunch with FT: Kremlin Media Star Margarita Simonyan,” *Financial Times*, last modified July 29, 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/7987e5c2-54b0-11e6-9664-e0bdc13c3bef (last accessed January 15, 2017).

70Maksim Shevchenko in discussion with the authors, April 2, 2013.

71Schimpfössl and Yablokov, “Coercion or Conformism?” 308–9.

The Russian Review 76/2, 2017, 526–41

SHARE ME:

This entry was posted in Academic articles on 28/10/2017 [http://schimpfossl.com/academic-publications/academic-articles/power-lost-and-freedom-relinquished-russian-journalists-assessing-the-first-post-soviet-decade/] by Elisabeth Schimpfössl.

About Elisabeth Schimpfössl

Elisabeth Schimpfössl's research looks into questions around elites, power and social inequality. She has also conducted collaborative research on media and journalism, with a focus on self-censorship in post-communist Europe. Elisabeth Schimpfössl has a PhD from the University of Manchester and is currently Lecturer in Sociology and Policy at Aston University.