Two Generations of Contemporary Russian Journalists

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the professional roles of Russian journalists, from the perspective of 30 practitioners working in St Petersburg at the end of the 1990s. The aim is to describe how journalism has developed, what attitudes and work values professionals hold and what the prospects for the future of journalism are. A central finding is that there are two types of professional roles within contemporary journalism, representing two types of professional subculture: the old generation (practitioners of the Soviet era) and the new generation (who have joined the profession since 1990). Whereas the old generation continues to hold a cultivated view of journalism as an important societal task in natural collaboration with those in authority, the new generation is orientated towards the contemporary role of providing entertainment and perceives journalism rather as a PR role for the benefit of influential groups and people in politics and business. Despite their polarities, both generations of journalism accept the political function of journalism as a propaganda machine for the power elite during elections and other important events.

Key Words journalism, post-Soviet era generation, professionalism, Russia, Soviet era generation

Introduction

Two decades ago, Russia entered onto the road of radically liberal reforms and achieved an unprecedented change of fortune. Since then, it has been
the subject of much analysis, assessment and prognosis. As Kaarle Nordenstreng (2001: 218) remarks, Russia has opened up to the West a unique historical laboratory’, in spite of increasing criticism apropos recent developments in terms of democracy, civil society and media (Clarke, 1996; Simon, 1999; Becker, 2004). Studies of Russian journalism in transition have scrutinized the change from the old forms of journalistic practice and mentality to the new ones, with their emerging signs of professionalization: depolitization, relative autonomy, new content, a new approach to the audience and increased corporate activity (Gaunt, 1987; Zhou, 1988; Haddix, 1990; Jones, 1991, 1992; Tolz, 1992). The theoreticians revised their own paradigms, testing their applicability (or universality) to the new conditions of democratizing countries (Downing, 1996; Nordenstreng, 1997; Sparks, 2000; Sparks and Reading, 1998).

With regard to Russia, both researchers and practitioners recognize that in perestroika the media were the main propagandists of democratic values, taking a decisive role in the liberalization of society. A decade later, the appraisals of media activity became rather critical, first of all because of media engagement in political conflicts (Media in the CIS, 1999; Public Expertise, 20001). The present state power regards the media as ‘suitable tools for inter-clan fighting’ (Putin, 2000: 12; Pulya, 2003).2

The fact is that the post-Soviet media have not become economic enterprises deriving profit from consumption and private investment: ‘The development of the market economy in the sphere of the mass media is still not very successful. Anti-monopoly laws do not work: there is no fair competition’ (Zassoursky, 2001: 178). In order to survive, the media have had to implement the rather PR-like function of promoting the political and economic interests of their sponsors. Such media activity casts doubt on the democratic character of the media: one of the important facets of democracy, it has been argued, is ‘the fact that information and ideas cannot acceptably be monopolized by private individuals’ (McQuail, 1994: 156). The functioning of the media vis-à-vis private interests gives rise to a contradiction between the natural right of the public to know what is going on in society and the inability of media to ensure this right.

Aims of the study

This study explores the professional roles of journalists, taking an inside view from the perspective of 30 practitioners working in the St
Petersburg media at the end of the 1990s. An open approach to the professionalism of Russian journalists was adopted in order to acquire more empirical evidence about how professionalism develops and what its features are. During the last decade, both Russian and western research diagnosing the transitional state of journalism discovered the persistence of old (subjective and propagandist) and the emergence of new (more factual and open) practices (Kolesnik et al., 1995; Wu et al., 1996; Davis et al., 1998; Voltmer, 2000).

Within the theoretical discussion of professionalism, a conceptual clash persists between the Russian and western approaches. Russian sociology determines a profession in the frame of the division of labour and its functional content; journalism, like medicine and jurisprudence, is placed on the second level of the social differentiation of specialities according to such criteria as education, intellectual complexity and responsibility. The first level belongs to representatives of science, the arts and government, while specialists who do not necessarily have a university education occupy the third level (Filippov, 1998a: 529). This reflects the Soviet system of values and cultural standards, which determined the prestige of professions on a graduation from (party) government work, including science and the arts, towards journalism as (party) literary work in the mass media. In spite of that, the emerging post-Soviet society differs from Soviet society with respect to political and economic freedoms (established by the government from above), and also the system of values (social, moral, cultural, professional, etc.) which has not been controlled from above. We can see, for instance, that the present interpretations of profession and professional journalism do not exceed the limits of the Soviet tradition, which reduced them to a question of the division of labour and high-quality production. In other words, there has been continuity of the socialist ideology, with no detailed system position regarding the problem of professionalization (Kivenen, 2001: 122–3). A profession is ‘institutionalized and exists within the framework of the needs of society and its economy as one form of labour activity’ (Kravchenko, 1999: 220); ‘the borders of a profession, the number and kinds of those entering specialities are variable and volatile’ (Filippov, 1998b: 425). The professionalization of a journalist is the mastering of the professional experience by adapting to the professional community and developing the process of individualization wherein a journalist turns into the creative personality (Dzyaloshinsky, 1996: 30).

Within the framework of the western sociological theory of professionalism, the terms profession, professional, professionalization are defined as ‘[in] a trivial sense . . . referring to the division of labour in
society and to the degree of socialization of different kinds of activity’ (Splichal and Sparks, 1994: 34–5). In contrast to the Soviet tradition, western sociology accepts at least three kinds of labour as professions: medicine, law and science. Other kinds of specialized activities including journalism are interpreted as occupations moving towards becoming professions. Professionalization is seen as an extended self-assertive process of constant practice (finding one’s own employment), narrow specialization (technical expertise) and standards of conduct (code of ethics). This increases the requirement not so much for specialized skills but for certain kinds of conduct, the social cohesion of the professional community itself and ‘its status relative to other groups’ (Splichal and Sparks, 1994: 36). Denis McQuail (2003: 273) draws our attention to the core value of media professionalism as ‘meeting public needs for information (or right to know)’. He continues: ‘Professionalism also supports the idea that responsibility, accountability, and freedom are interrelated, rather than in conflict’ (McQuail, 2003: 282). According to Corner (1995), the professionalism of journalists lies in impartial, fair and accurate reporting. The international principles of journalists’ organizations define professional journalism as ‘supported by the idea of a free and responsible press’ and call for professional autonomy of journalists as well as a measure of public accountability’ (Nordenstreng, 1998: 132).

The analysis of professional roles by David Weaver establishes three basic journalistic roles: disseminator, interpreter and adversary (Weaver, 1986, 1998). More elaborately, they emanate from the American history of journalism based on Milton’s assertion of the ‘self-righting principle’ and a conception of the ‘free marketplace of ideas’ (Altschull, 1984: 40). This system of beliefs for media roles and journalists incorporates the ‘western’ understanding of professionalism as objective reporting and journalistic ‘detachment’. In other words, the western discourse on professional journalism focuses on the demands of certain occupational standards and conduct with the idea of establishing independent informational expertise. This is accompanied by the promotion of equal access and participation of citizens in public debate. The professional is required to have a sense of responsibility towards the public and at the same time to be an opponent to those in power.

The Russian case, as already stated, has been in a state of transformation. Formerly playing the role of state propagandists and organizers of the socialist construction, journalists have now found themselves faced with relative autonomy. Journalism formed in the bosom of Marxist–Leninist ideas, where professionalism was measured by political maturity, advocacy and publicist speech, would, one assumes,
be relegated to the annals of history since the arrival of political and economic freedoms and journalists’ depoliticization. However, it is not enough for systemic and cultural structures to change, ‘the social system is far from a software that can be changed overnight’ (Nordenstreng, 2001: 221). In particular, the idea that journalism should function as an extension of the government is still alive. Svetlana Vinogradova (2000: 17–18) describes it as a dilemma of worldwide importance: either a journalist acts to support the status quo and assists in maintaining the stability of the social system, or he acts as a critic, an adversary promoting not only change of the state of affairs but also destroying this system. It is from this that different understandings of professionalism proceed.

The task of this article is to describe the attitudes and values of contemporary Russian journalists with regard to their work and their perceptions of journalistic professionalism. One very pertinent question is whether, as the old school of Soviet journalism has been abolished and a new school established, standards and values have changed completely. There is still uncertainty regarding professional standards in the occupation. What objectives does journalism have in society and what is the role of a journalist? The article examines the status of professional roles within journalism through journalists’ attitudes to their work. The content of professional roles and the premises for their performance are examined through journalists’ perceptions of professionalism and ethics.

Qualitative methodology, using in-depth and expert interviews based on representative sampling of different media in St Petersburg, has been applied. The analysis also applies procedures of grounded theory to ascertain how professionalism develops and what it is based on.

The sample

In the post-Soviet reality there is a huge contrast between centre and periphery in terms of political power and economic development. St Petersburg is attractive as a field of research, however, because at the end of the 1990s, the city was seen as a symbiosis of centre and periphery inasmuch as it combined elements of both poles and to some extent reflected the complicated and contradictory character of ongoing changes in Russian society. With regard to journalism, St Petersburg has acquired a developed media structure representing all kinds of contemporary Russian media institutions, and where the two types of journalism, old and new, have been identified. The study had three phases: it began in 1998 with pilot interviews with 11 media experts; in 1999, in-depth
interviews were conducted with 30 journalists from eight media outlets; the study was completed in 2001 with a follow-up enquiry with the 11 experts. The experts had a broad knowledge and solid experience of St Petersburg media and society (between 11 and 45 years). They included the head of the city administration's committee on mass media; head of the Northwestern State Committee of the Russian Federation on the Mass Media; head of the St Petersburg Union of Journalists; head of Citizens' Control, the city's public human rights organization; executives from the leading news media as well as scholars from St Petersburg State University and St Petersburg European University. Sampling of the media represented the most important actors in the city's media marketplace – the traditional (former Soviet) and the new (established in the 1990s) forms of print and broadcast media, both private and state/private. Among these there were TV Channel 5 (the former federal channel), Radio Peterburg, FM radio station Baltika, all three local dailies: Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti, Smena and Vechernii Peterburg, the regional edition of the national daily Komsomolskaya Pravda and the tabloid Peterburg Express. All respondents included in the study had given their informed consent. Among the 30 respondents interviewed, there was an equal number of males and females, ages ranged from 20 to 60 years, and time spent working as journalists ranged from 36 to three years. The majority of the respondents specialized in current affairs, others in culture, crime and sports news. The interviews were conducted in privacy in the respondents' offices over a one-month period (10 October to 10 November 1999), and transcribed verbatim. The basic semi-structured interview included 72 open-ended questions about the social characteristics of the respondent, gender role, job and ethics. By asking a variety of questions, the study aimed at gaining as complete and open reflections as possible on the issues being analysed.

Journalistic practices

To get down to the nitty-gritty of professional journalistic practice, respondents were asked to describe how he/she practised the job, what methods were normally used and what methods were not, and why. The respondents gave varying descriptions of their work. The data analysis used the procedure of open coding of grounded theory to conceptualize and categorize data. All responses were compared with each other and the analysis identified five key themes in journalists' attitudes to their work: namely, personal decision-making, ethics, creativity, hack-work (*khaltura*) and intellectual. Each attitude can be used as a theoretical category and
the specific characteristics outlined as a kind of dimensional scale. The results of the analysis of the open interviews appear in Table 1.

The personal decision-making attitude was identified in the majority of the respondents and includes the selection of news for publishing alongside the dimensions of importance, interest, sensation, drama and exclusiveness. The journalist also selects news by taking into account the political line or style of the medium, decides what interviewees and topics should be chosen, manages the topic and the interviewee according to the journalist's own personal interests and likes. As one interviewee said:

My first method is sincerity. For a long time I professed such a principle – to work only with people who are interesting and sympathetic, because if a person is not sympathetic I can hurt him/her by my material. I may refuse to create material if I do not like the person. (R.24)

The journalist actively chooses a strategy for obtaining information, this may perhaps be by means of feminine charms or aggression in order to muddle the interviewee. The journalist decides how much pressure to apply to a situation, via his or her reporting, in order to influence the outcome, for instance to help a reader with a legitimate complaint. Also, within the category of personal decision-making the journalist tries to make the text interesting in order to attract readers/viewers.

The ethics attitude to the job was evident in about half of the respondents and included disapproval of illegal methods and violence, observing moral principles and responsibility to an interviewee. The attitudes creativity and hack-work are evident in almost one-third of the respondents: some try to practise journalism exclusively as a form of creativity, others combine creativity and hack-work. Creativity is based on a love of journalism, the journalist's talent, their interest in the topic and their skill in obtaining exclusive stories. Hack-work has two meanings: the first refers to poor quality work caused by the daily grind of the newsroom, the urgency to get material ready, poor pay and being obliged to cover certain topics to fulfil the media agenda. Journalists often have no interest in these tasks but they have to submit to the demands of the editor. Subsequently, they may be less conscientious and resort to plagiarism to get the job done faster. Hack-work has a second meaning: taking on extra work where articles are written to order, to supplement their salary: pay is very low in journalism. In this case, journalists often have very little interest in the topic, are cynical about it and use any methods at hand. The attitude intellectual is evident in some of the respondents and refers to a constant acquisition of knowledge, such
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<td>Personal decision-making ‘I myself’</td>
<td>1. selecting news</td>
<td>importance, interest, exclusivity, sensation, drama, concept of media</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. selecting sources of information and topics</td>
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<td>3. selecting strategies to obtain news</td>
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<td>Ethics</td>
<td>1. refusal to accept violence in the job</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. refusal to accept illegal methods</td>
<td>hidden advertising, ordered article</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. concern for an interviewee</td>
<td>respect for man and privacy, not to harm an interviewee</td>
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<td>4. common moral principles</td>
<td>refusal to lie</td>
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<td>Creativity</td>
<td>1. feelings</td>
<td>love of journalism, vocation, the journalist’s interest</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. resourcefulness</td>
<td>talent, skill for exclusive work</td>
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<td>Hack-work (khaltura)</td>
<td>1. editorial routine</td>
<td>poor quality, urgency, ‘obligatory’ news, plagiarism, unpaid salary</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. extra work (second job)</td>
<td>interests of a client, self-interest, any methods are acceptable</td>
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<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>1. acquiring knowledge</td>
<td>self-education, experience, competence, the journalist’s archives</td>
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as reading literature on the topic, following the media agenda, keeping journalist archives, being up to date with current affairs.

In identifying these five basic journalistic attitudes, personal decision-making emerged as the most powerful attitude to the job and it can accordingly be hypothesized that professionalism for journalists means making independent decisions in their professional activities, which can be equated with job autonomy. To test this hypothesis, I explored the working practices of journalists to discover more precisely what constitutes autonomy for these workers. The aim was to verify the attitudes revealed in the survey and the apparent overriding importance of personal decision-making. The respondents were presented with a list of 13 methods employed in practice in journalism: (1) making facts or stories up; (2) suppressing facts; (3) publishing unverified information; (4) using hidden microphones or cameras; (5) using dubious sources; (6) producing material to order; (7) hidden advertisements; (8) using confidential business or government information without reference; (9) using personal documents without permission; (10) paying a source for information; (11) using a false identity; (12) disclosing names of rape victims before the court had made a judgement; and (13) disclosing criminals’ names before the court had made a judgement. Although it is obvious that all methods are ethically questionable, the idea was to discover which of these methods were deemed acceptable, which were not and by whom and why (Juskevits, 2002: 98).

In analysing the data, it became apparent that the respondents use all these methods. However, they did have different perceptions about these methods. For instance, who are ‘dubious sources’? One-half of the respondents consider everybody except officials to be dubious sources, the other half only considers criminals, untrustworthy people and gossip-mongers as dubious sources, but practically everyone is unanimous in their trust of officials. From this we can see that the notion ‘dubious source’ varies in its meaning for journalists, while the notion ‘reliable source’ is generally agreed to refer to officials. A journalist’s decision to accept or reject various methods is based on individual morality and context. Thus, whereas one group of respondents approves of unethical methods, e.g. suppressing facts in order not to harm an interviewee, another group rejects such methods not only because of ethical considerations, but also because of the difficulty of using them (e.g. hidden advertising) or because they are not required in a job (e.g. using hidden microphones or cameras). By rating which of the questionable methods are acceptable to the majority allows us to establish professional norms. Six of the 13 methods were considered overall as acceptable:
namely suppressing facts – this by practically all the respondents – publishing unverified information, writing copy to order, using confidential business and government information without reference, disclosing the names of rape victims and disclosing criminals’ names. The analysis shows that these methods are required mainly because journalists and media collaborate closely with political, commercial and administrative sectors. The relationship is two-way: journalists attend to the interests of the political, commercial and administrative elite in their news coverage and rely on them as sources of information. Two methods in particular, suppressing facts and using unverified information, are the result of journalists’ fear for their own security (fear of prosecution, of criminal retaliation, or being sacked) and of the practical difficulties encountered in verifying information quickly enough.

The next phase in the analysis attempted to verify the five attitude types identified. To do this, I returned to the primary data. The analysis confirmed that both generations, old and new, produce journalism employing, to a greater or less degree, the five basic attitudes. To some extent, this predicts that the character of contemporary journalism is strongly personalized, ethical to a point, literary, routine and a little intellectual.

The personal decision-making attitude is inherent in the majority of journalists and is the basis for most working methods. Journalists select news, sources of information and topics; they choose strategies for how to work with their sources of information, how to obtain news and how to present it; they select their working methods, genres, means of influencing their audience and ways of earning. This indicates that journalists have a significant degree of autonomy in the job and within the labour market. However, among the most dominant criteria underlying personal decision-making are the editorial line (representing the interests of owners, sponsors and advertisers) and self-censorship (fear of court, criminals and dismissal). So, personal decision-making is a compromise between a journalist as a producer of material and the editorial policy of the media and the circumstances in society that do not guarantee a journalist protection under present legislation, i.e. against criminals and pressure from employers. Thus, the autonomy of journalists at the personal level turns into restricted autonomy on the level of media organization. However, journalists do act autonomously beyond their full-time job by earning money in their own time for other media and commercial organizations as well as writing pre-ordered copy and incorporating hidden advertising for their private clients. In their full-time job most journalists still perceive themselves as state workers,
relying on official sources for information. Journalists still prefer to keep relationships ‘friendly’ with officials to gain access to political circles, and are happy with a media agenda formed to a great extent in favour of the existing power elites.

On the other hand, when journalists produce work outside their full-time job, they act as free reporters, producing products to order and earning extra money. This is the labour they refer to as hack-work, which they do not consider to be real journalism. Such autonomy from the main employer on the part of contemporary journalists can be seen as a transitional stage in the development of their professional identity from state towards market mentality. In practice, it serves as a self-protective strategy: combining staff work with hack-work allows them to hold onto the old role while gradually slipping into the new.

Old roles and new roles

The journalists’ perceptions of roles were explored in their working methods, their perceptions of work tasks and their attitudes to their audience. Among the old roles are included the propagandist role (both generations) and the organizer role (those who had practised in the Soviet era). The need for these roles stems from the close alliance of the media with local government and economic groups striving for political power. The journalists observe the editorial line and interests of their private clients by exerting self-censorship. They thus create propaganda through their own political leanings, or simply for financial benefit.

However, post-Soviet journalism exists in conditions different to those of Soviet journalism: it earns its living in a growing competitive market, and therefore is increasingly directed towards the interests and preferences of consumers and advertisers. The higher the audience ratings the easier it is to sell media products and to earn advertising revenue, and so make a profit. Journalism is adopting a new function: entertaining its audience to promote goods and services in a consumer-driven marketplace. The media sector has turned into a battlefield for audiences and advertisers and is proposing a new role for its workers – as organizers of leisure for the masses. Young journalists willingly take on the role of entertainer and in search of unusual and sensational news, adopt new practices such as use of hidden microphones and cameras, assuming a false identity, making payment to sources and using personal documents without permission.

Obviously, the emergence of such roles reveals the complete irrelevance of the framework derived from western journalism: that of
disseminator, interpreter and adversary (Weaver, 1986: 112–15). Moreover, Russian journalists’ perception of the disseminator role means getting any information out to the public (be it misinformation, incomplete or unverified). As to their attitudes towards the roles of interpreter, who investigates claims made by officials, or adversary, who takes a critical stance towards those in power, Russian journalists take no view at all. Thus, the roles of propagandist, organizer and entertainer reveal both continuities (the old state roles) and discontinuities (the new market role), indicating there is some change in the functioning of Russian journalism from total politicization towards partial depoliticization. However, the weight of journalists’ roles in society depends on the balance of forces between state and market. At the end of the 1990s, the state held power over political and economic processes and used the leading media for propagandist coverage of elections and privatization campaigns. Journalism, which was shaped for the needs of the state, remained in the old frames biased in favour of the government.

Realization of roles

The main task adopted by Soviet era practitioners has not changed: the education of the people and the provision of a service to the public. Post-Soviet practitioners, on the other hand, pursue the goal of rapid dissemination of information. Nevertheless, the activities of both generations are based on engagement: the degree to which they are involved or retain some degree of neutrality. The perception of neutrality is vague, very varied and somewhat subjective: some described it as a form of self-protection (incomplete or biased reporting to keep out of trouble), and one respondent saw neutrality as divorcing himself from reality to immerse himself in his creative task. Engagement is caused by the need to promote the interests of political and commercial groups, by market clientelism approved in the media environment (a tolerant attitude towards producing copy to order, for instance) and journalists’ personal desire to influence their audience.

Both generations work by the same basic news criteria in selecting information, namely the importance and interesting nature of information, a journalist’s personal interests, the editorial line and self-censorship. However, they perceive the need for certain facts differently. Soviet practitioners try to suppress exciting facts as unhealthy or sensationalist (social organizers), whereas post-Soviet practitioners actively pursue sensationalism to attract a bigger audience and raise their media ratings (entertainers). The old generation of journalists formerly
tended to look down at their audience as at an immature mass, whereas the young journalists of current times look at the audience as consumers of a media product.

Regarding sources of information, Soviet practitioners prefer other media or experts or picking up stories in the city streets, whereas post-Soviet practitioners rely instead on the official structures with whom their media collaborate, personal informants and the internet. Working styles in news gathering are also different. The old journalists are in the habit of organizing work according to a long-term plan, agreements with the editorship and working meetings. They have a widespread network of voluntary correspondents in various organizations and they are confident in their ability to unearth stories ‘on the street’. They aim at supporting the social order, focusing on positive stories about everyday heroes (geroi budnei). Post-Soviet practitioners prefer to work individually, pursuing exclusive or sensationalist news and using payment to sources, or even blackmail.

Publishing unverified information is a ‘norm’ for both generations. Journalists tend to trust officials and their informants, but even if they do not trust the information coming from official structures, they publish it anyway because it must be published. Journalists have no incentive for verification; as we stated earlier, they do not perceive their roles to include that of investigator or adversary. On the contrary, they perceive as natural their role as collaborator with those in power. Moreover, they are not under the threat of any serious sanctions if they do publish unverified information.

Although the majority is disposed towards factual reporting, the old generation would combine fact and comment in their efforts to produce publicist material (see note 3). In contrast, the young generation advocates separating fact and comment, referring to the model of western journalism. But the journalists’ perception of how to present material also depends on the type of media concerned. In the traditional media, under the patronage of local government, journalists of both generations strive for a publicist role. In the new private media, sponsored by western investors, journalists learn how to separate fact from comment.

Nevertheless, it is hard to argue for the existence of any real objectivity in their journalism because both generations try to convey their personal opinions on the event in question, thereby personifying and destroying factual informing. This reveals the continuing dominance of the publicist role, where journalism is the writer’s own exclusive preserve, not a technical product. The journalistic authorship (avtorskaya zhurnalista) is an integral part of the professional culture of Russian journalism.
rooted in the classics of Russian literature and *publitsistika*, inherited from the Soviet school of journalistic genres and turning all genres into *publitsistika* genres without rigid distinctions within them (Bogdanov and Vyazemsky, 1971: 259, 677–8; Voroshilov, 1999: 65, 75). Meanwhile, contemporary publicist reporting does not necessarily represent a plurality of opinions. Although pluralism was the professional value established by Soviet practitioners in their struggle for freedom of speech under glasnost, successfully legitimized in the new laws on the mass media, the Soviet practitioners realize pluralism in the same old ways, subordinating themselves to the editorial line, which casts doubt on the level and nature of pluralism provided by the old generation. In contrast, post-Soviet practitioners associate pluralism rather with exercising their own power as an informational resource, such as giving or not giving citizens access to certain information. They came to journalism when pluralistic writing was entering into current practice and they took the opportunity to present different opinions for granted. Therefore they perceive pluralism rather as a norm, which can be ignored, or not, as can any norm in the Russian tradition of legal nihilism (*pravovoi nigilism*).

So, both generations provide censored and personal rather than free and pluralistic information. The potential for journalists to control information and to regulate to some extent their audience’s access to information has come about, ironically, through the democratization of society. In the Soviet era, information management belonged to the party structures. However, democratization has not turned journalists into absolute democrats, who regard the interests of the people as paramount. On the contrary, journalists, as before, want to influence the people: the old generation of Soviet practitioners strive to patronize their audience, perceiving it rather as the passive object of their social initiatives, whereas the new, post-Soviet practitioners strive to inform and to entertain their audience, perceiving it rather as an active subject of consumerism.

But the media, especially the traditional media, are incompetent when it comes to really addressing their audience. How they categorize their audience is based rather on journalists’ subjective perceptions proceeding from stereotypes (the print media and radio are for the intelligentsia, the television and popular press are for the masses), personal experience, specialization and age (young journalists are inclined to address a young audience, while the older journalists address themselves to older people and pensioners). The traditional media (established in the Soviet time) still possess insufficient information about their audience although some of them have their own sociological data services and commissioned surveys. Moreover, the survey information
about their audience has not been used to form any real marketing policy. Therefore, the argument about the low professionalism of the traditional media, in the sense that they are still very ignorant about their audience, is justified. In contrast, the new post-Soviet media, invested in by western capital, establishes its strategies on the basis of sociological survey data directed towards the interests and tastes mainly of the successful business class and the masses.

Professionalism

Journalists do not share one approach to journalism. When they were asked the open-ended question ‘who is professional in journalism?’ it turned out that their perceptions varied from that of the idealist as a hypothetical image of an independent journalist to the propagandist, the real agent of political corruption in society. Between these extremes, the journalists used three additional categories to describe themselves: specialist (basic quality is competence), humanist (altruism and honesty) and artist (talent, inherent qualities).

These five types of professionalism indicated by the journalists correspond to the five types of attitudes described earlier with which they approach their work: personal decision-making ‘I myself’ (idealist), hackwork (propagandist), intellectual (specialist), ethics (humanist) and creativity (artist). Interestingly, the majority employ the attitude of personal decision-making in their work. However, their perceptions of professionalism do not include such values as independence, autonomy and self-regulation; in other words, personal decision-making and independence are not correlated in the journalists’ consciousness. That is, both generations reveal the traditional concept of journalism as a derivative of power. However, such a perception is a consequence of everyday practices. In their full-time job, a journalist makes a personal decision within the framework of the editorial policy and self-censorship; outside that job the journalist acts more as a PR worker, tied to commercial interests in the promotion of goods, services, clients and the organization itself. Both generations share an aspiration to satisfy the employer. Their perception of professionalism equates with quality workmanship, which has its roots in the Soviet concept of craftsmanship (masterstvo) based on specific skills. This demonstrates that Russian journalism has still not been influenced to any great extent by western ideas. Professionalization is happening within a framework of domestic not universal dimensions, and retains traditional concepts of technical skills with no reference to independence or autonomy. Accordingly, the
criteria of professionalism are different to those perceived in western journalism.

In contrast to the western inclination towards neutral, detached, disinterested reporting, the Russian media and their workers have developed a participatory journalism. This originated in the Soviet school of journalism with the accompanying roles of propagandist and organizer that imply the active participation of journalists in political and social processes. It cultivated creative, politically mature, non-standardized reporting known as publicistika. Nowadays, publicistika remains ‘one of the highest levels of the journalist’s creativity, and corresponds to the brilliant literary talent of the journalist and his or her social standing’ (Vinogradova, 2000: 45). Journalists have been stimulated by the dramatic events in their country: the collapse of the Soviet state, the struggles for political and economic power and the Chechen wars. Consequently, involvement is a central element of professionalism based on attitudes of creativity and personal decision-making. By participating in important political events – primarily, election campaigns – the media try to become the fourth estate in society in their alliance with the first three estates. Journalists are retaining the conception of the professional as an influential player in the political life of society, and are developing a professionalism more in line with the ideas of statism than democracy.

The perception of professional responsibility among Russian journalists, on the one hand, coincides with the perceptions of western journalists, i.e. getting information to the public, but on the other hand, there is a sharp divergence when it comes to understanding the main roles of the media. Whereas western journalists feel a great responsibility towards the public for investigating what a government claims (Weaver, 1998: 407), Russian journalists see their responsibility as being to the media owners and an observance of the rules of the game. As one interviewee commented:

. . . to play by their rules. I have to pile praise on persons who are distasteful to me. But they pay money to the paper and the paper orders me to write this material. (R.18)

The presence of such incompatible ideas rather proves that journalists are guilty of double standards, as their main responsibility is to the employer (the interests of the media owners, the sponsors and advertisers) and only a residual obligation is felt towards the people.

Membership of a union is not a sign of professionalism. Both generations perceive professionalism as an individual rather than a
collective business. Such a perception is ingrained. When questioned on their perceptions of ‘professional’, they did not refer to anything to do with a journalistic community or group norms. This indicates that there is too little consensus or mutual understanding in their professional activities. Primarily, the Soviet practitioners try to maintain a corporate solidarity and continue to believe that in spite of all the recent changes for the worse in journalism, corporate solidarity exists. The professional union reflects such beliefs. Post-Soviet practitioners, by contrast, perceive journalism as ‘dog-eat-dog’ and do not look for solidarity with colleagues. Only a very small minority abide by unwritten rules based on general loyalties and ethical norms for all parties in the communication: the sources of information, the audience and the journalists themselves. This means that if self-regulation exists it is spontaneous, narrow and localized. It occasionally appears when journalists share the same loyalties and ethical norms; but it is more prevalent when journalists are required to comply with the media’s internal rules. The low level of self-regulation overall makes journalists vulnerable to external and internal pressures, keeps them in the position of employed workers and weakens the status of the profession as a whole in society.

Ethics

Having different expectations of journalism, the two generations identify different values in the occupation. Soviet practitioners value journalism for the advantages which it has over other occupations: an opportunity to achieve a higher standing in society, to possess information, to communicate with persons of any rank, to render assistance to people, to shape and mould public opinion and to be autonomous in working hours. Perceiving these values as advantages, these journalists display an orientation to public service, an aspiration to having power over clients and to autonomy. Such pragmatic orientations make them similar to members of other professions. However, what is also evident is that the Soviet conception of journalism as an instrument of power, which strives to affect the public consciousness and current practice, persists among the older generation.

The majority of post-Soviet practitioners value objectivity and honesty towards their audience, their colleagues and themselves, and high quality work. However, in practice journalists have to act according to media policy conducted not in the interests of the public but in the interests of power holders and other influential groups. That is, current practice imposes a further duty to serve the elite, which is taken on by
journalists without resistance. The new generation is responsible to the employer to produce material which yields the expected results. These younger journalists identified professional responsibility as observing the rules of the game; others consider that journalism has no values at all and that the notion of morality is difficult to apply to it.

The perceptions of what is a ‘sin’ in journalism also vary. Soviet practitioners are more worried about journalistic methods that lead to violation of human rights: invasion of privacy, defamation, no respect for a person’s honour or dignity, doing harm to the health, life or property of a citizen. Post-Soviet practitioners, on the other hand, are more worried about the quality of the information, in particular the misinformation that underlies the reporting. Hence, post-Soviet practitioners place more value on providing people with true information, whereas Soviet practitioners value ethical conduct. Nevertheless, both generations display a reliance on lies. Lies are a product of circumstances and relatively constant in journalistic work; journalists justify lies in election campaigns and any other context where a lie is required. Lying is a tool of the trade, justified by the creative nature of journalism.

Friendship is something journalists consider sacred; they would never write negative material about friends. On the contrary, they use friends as sources of information and publish material in their interest. The contemporary media and journalists have developed a form of ‘cronyism’ for their political and economic ‘friends’ and those from their private life. This has become a widespread practice since the beginning of the 1990s, when the media were granted freedom from state censorship and could define their agenda independently. Later, in the period of shock reforms, in order to survive without state support, the media had to seek political and economic sponsors. In the 1990s, cronyism became a part of the informal networks of Russian journalists; on the one hand, it represents a pragmatic survival strategy by the media and journalists. On the other hand, it reflects the spiritual life of a people whose culture remains traditionally based on close multilateral kinships of family, relatives, friends and colleagues.

Almost unanimously, the journalists justify corruption in professional practice and society. The majority consider venality and professionalism to be of the same order. They argue that as everything around them is corrupt and dependent, there is no other way to escape poverty. Journalism and journalists are a commodity. Nobody buys an unprofessional journalist. Old (pro-state) values have been displaced by new (pro-market) values. As the saying goes in Russia, journalism remains the second oldest profession, next to prostitution. Both genera-
tions identify professionalism as technical skill, not including ethical norms; the venality of a journalist means an appraisal of his or her professionalism on the labour market.

Both generations have different hopes for the future. The Soviet practitioners view the immediate future of Russian journalism pessimistically because they do not believe that political and economic conditions will improve in the next decade. Post-Soviet practitioners have a rather optimistic view of the future, however, because they believe in a new order in the country and they aspire to establishing the western model of journalism.

Main finding

The main finding of the study is that contemporary journalism has been formed by two types of professional subculture: that of the old generation (Soviet practitioners who entered the profession in the Soviet era) and that of the new generation (post-Soviet practitioners who have entered the profession since 1990). The old generation is strikingly homogeneous and conservative, represented by ‘standardized’ professionals recruited (mainly after school and the army) and trained (mainly in university) according to the state policy towards developed socialism. Practitioners would have been carefully selected, mainly from those with a working-class background, literary talent and from the majority ethnic group. They would have been educated in Soviet theory and journalistic practice and typically socialized through party membership. The Soviet era practitioners continue nowadays to hold a view of journalism as a natural collaboration with power. As before, they take responsibility for supporting the social order and rendering practical guidance to citizens. Soviet practitioners perform the role of social organizer with the accompanying functions of cultivation, education and punishment. They continue to work in the leading informational media organs established in the Soviet era and to participate in the traditional professional association, the Union of Journalists. They uphold corporate solidarity, supporting each other in the occupation and life and observing the ethics of Soviet journalism (avoiding plagiarism, illiterate language, sharing a dedication to the profession, etc.).

The new generation of the 1990s is crucially different from the older generation in background, its expectations of journalism and the ability to combine different professional activities. It represents a heterogeneous subculture consisting of different individuals in terms of age (20–45), ethnicity, origin, education, experience and social class (from worker to
Post-Soviet practitioners obviously came into the profession later than Soviet practitioners (in the study sample the difference is 20 years) and had more a self-interest in journalism than a romantic image of (state) public service. The rapid development of the media market (in St Petersburg from 118 media in 1991 to 4000 media in 2001) required new workers, and journalism became accessible to amateurs. Among them, there were some who would not have been able to enter the profession before due to social and ethnic background. There were also those who had not been satisfied with the income, career prospects or creative opportunities in their former jobs. In total contrast to the Soviet era practitioners, those of the 1990s have no need for a professional association; they prefer to act alone, competing against each other, pursuing profit, creative ambitions and prospects of new life. Moreover, the new generation is orientated to the role of entertainer, aiming at a sensationalist media agenda. They perceive journalism as a type of PR, working for the interests of influential groups and persons in politics and business. They work both in the traditional media and the new media which have emerged over the last decade. They are more likely than their older colleagues to combine full-time and freelance jobs, performing services not only in journalism but also in the commercial sector of the economy. In other words, the old generation represents more the Soviet concept of journalism as a state institution patronizing the people, while the new generation represents the market conception of journalism as a service agency for the elite and the masses. Regardless of this difference in perspective, both generations perceive journalism as closely linked to capital – state and private – and therefore both promote propaganda during elections and other important events.

Concluding remarks

The findings of this study suggest that Russian journalists act according to the logic of survival by adapting norms which prevail in the occupation and society. Their conduct is determined within the frame of contemporary media roles and opportunities of the contemporary marketplace. Corruption, blat (pulling strings), lies, self-interest, loyalty to the employer and to private clients all contribute to the economic and professional success of media practitioners preferring to act alone in society without rules. Journalists keep close to the government and business, being the main sponsors of their existence, but maintain a
distance from their audience, who are not seen as important or
influential.

Nataliya Rimashevskaya (2001: 2) has commented how one can now
speak of ‘two Russias’, which are moving increasingly away from one
another and understand each other less and less; they have different
lifestyles, different shops, different schools, different priorities. Like
ordinary people, journalists must manage through common sense and
effort to find a niche in the new, prosperous Russia. Therefore, they serve
the interests of those who possess political and economic capital, i.e. the
state and business elite. Consequently, they tend not to reflect a citizen’s
position by promoting a democratic society or stressing what are the
priorities for the public. State and capital perform in such indivisible
tandem that no space is allowed for a true civil society. The professional
roles of journalists – propagandist, organizer and entertainer – are the
roles they are required to play by the government and economic elite.

The crucial difference between the new generation and the old is the
idea of journalism as a marketplace, competition, race and battlefield
where there are no ethical norms and corporate loyalties. Journalism is no
longer a mission of humanism en route to a radiant future, but a means
to earn money and forge a career. There are no values: only the interests
of the political and economic groups striving for power. The contempo-
rary concept of journalism as PR in the interests of these groups leads to
new approaches to the selection of news (sensationalism), to new methods
of working (invasion of private life, defamation), new attitudes to the
audience (as consumers of news, entertainment and advertisements). The
media aggressively implants hedonistic morals, paying huge attention to
the entertainment genre and avoiding vital issues of humanity and
society. Young journalists willingly accept the role of entertainer.

Nevertheless, both generations share certain commonalities caused
by the features of the job, the present state of the media and the cultural
conventions of the profession. Their common ground is the political
function of journalism, when both act as propagandists of power in
elections. Their perceptions of their role do not include any notion of an
opposition to or critique of power. In their job, they are personally
autonomous, combining full-time and outside work and making pro-
fessional decisions framed by the editorial line (the interests of the
founders, sponsors and advertisers) and self-censorship (fear of the courts,
criminals and dismissal). Their main responsibility is to their employers
and private clients. Suppressing facts or using unverified information is a
‘norm’ for the majority. Neither group exercises any objectivity, because
they have developed a rather subjective, personalized style in order to influence people’s perceptions. Their own ideas about professionalism are reduced to skills in specific genres and do not include any interest in journalism as a professional body. They recognize polarized types of professionals, ranging from the idealist (the independent journalist, an impossibility in practice) to the propagandist (the colleague who lobbies for the interests of those who pay the most).

The close alliance between the media and government during the 1990s became a solid basis for the professional collaboration of journalism and power at the beginning of the 2000s. Andrei Richter (2002: 165–6) indicates that the essential differences between the present time and the Yeltsin era include less political dependence by Russia on the West owing to the growth in oil prices; less dependence by the Kremlin on oligarchs; a greater role for government in governing processes in the media sphere; and the return of the Kremlin to a doctrine where national (state) interests should be at the heart of informational policy. Yassen Zassoursky (2002: 195) writes about Russian media in the 21st century as moving ‘up the stairs leading down’.

Indeed, the forces of continuity seem to dominate over the drive for change. This has become more and more obvious during the last few years, and in this respect the optimistic perspectives of the younger generation journalists in this study may have been somewhat premature. The new era of freedom is not necessarily leading to a higher level of professionalism and democracy. In the transitional time of the 1990s, Russian media and society were, metaphorically speaking, injected with the vaccine of democracy, which led to a period of inoculation. After that, the vaccine destroyed the naivete about capitalism. At this stage, enter Putin’s government, mobilizing society and the media to recover, drawing on forces from Russia’s cultural past, the present political predictability and the economic juncture (high oil prices).

The study predicts the exit of the romanticists and their ideals of social service and the advent of the pragmatists, taking a utilitarian approach to the profession. However, it is not the case that all that is past has been cancelled out, but rather the former political agitators have been ‘modernized’ into contemporary PR workers. ‘Professionalism’ stays within the old matrix of propaganda dressed up as the fashionable genre of PR, borrowed from the West, but executed in its own way. If state and capital can be amalgamated in the present Russia, then cannot journalism and PR be blended together: journalism aspiring to the goals of PR and PR drawing on journalistic skills?
Notes

Thanks go to Professor Shishkina, Dean of the Faculty of Journalism, St Petersburg State University, who rendered invaluable assistance with the fieldwork in St Petersburg. The author is also indebted to Professor Nordenstreng and Dr Pietiläinen at the University of Tampere and Professor Gavra of the St Petersburg State University for their comments on drafts of this article. Invaluable support in checking the language was provided by Ms Mattila in the University of Tampere.

The article is based on the study presented as a licentiate thesis in 2002 to the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Tampere (Juskevits, 2002). In 2003, the author adopted her mother’s surname, Pasti, and this article is published under the author’s new surname.

1. This report refers to a project carried out under the direction of the Union of Journalists of Russia, and developed by a number of public organizations, including the Glasnost Defence Fund, the Media Law and Policy Centre of the School of Journalism of the Moscow State University, and Internews Europe in Russia.

2. All translations from Russian studies are the author’s own.

3. Publicist (publitsistika) refers to ‘literature on public-political issues. Publicist materials operate not only on facts from which a reader him/herself draws the conclusion, but they also include various judgements, comments and generalizations, and suggest conclusions’ (Bogdanov and Vyazemsky, 1971: 677–8). The post-Soviet publitsistika is rather informal in thought and style and highly personalized; news is not presented in a straightforward way but is packed into the text like a kind of commodity. The text takes on a rather literary format, and the syntax and style is more expressive, emotional, ironic and witty (Kroichik, 2000: 126–9).

4. Journalism is a ‘specific mass informational activity concerned with the search for and transmission of real social information in regular form for a mass anonymous audience’ (Svitich, 2000: 4). The Russian law on the mass media defines a journalist as someone who ‘edits, creates, collects or prepares messages and materials for the editor’s office of a mass medium and is connected with it by their labour and other contractual relations or engaged in such activity, being authorized by it’ (Law of the Russian Federation on the Mass Media, 2002: 219).

5. Yury Kazakov (1999: 3) writes, ‘Russian journalism still hardly knows itself and its nearest and farthest professional kinsfolk. Strictly speaking it still does not know precisely the address of its own house in the informational world’. Wu et al. (1996: 535) noted that ‘it is unclear in Russia and other East European countries what professionalism will mean and what the role of the journalist will be’; although recent changes had given these authors hope to think that ‘journalism is one of the few occupations that have moved toward professionalization since the reforms started’.

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6. This uniqueness has mainly been determined historically. St Petersburg was the capital of Russia twice: from 1712 to 1728 and from 1728 to 1918 (www.hkkk.fi/ecomon). The city was the cradle of Russian journalism, the first printed newspaper was produced there (Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti 1728), the first evening paper (Vechernyaya gazeta 1866) and the first free paper (Kopeika 1907) (Bogdanov and Vyazemsky, 1971: 66; Voroshilov, 1999: 50). In the Soviet era, the city courted fame as the cultural capital; in post-Soviet times it has gained fame, or infamy, as the criminal capital. At the start of the 1990s, the city was a stronghold of new thinking in Russia. After the defeat of Anatoly Sobchak in the elections of 1996 and the coming to power of Vladimir Yakovlev, St Petersburg ‘started to lose its grip on the overall development in Russia and became one of the largest but provincial centres’ (St Petersburg in the 1990s, 2000: 7). Since 2000, when Vladimir Putin, a native of Leningrad, became president of Russia, the nature of the city has gradually changed again, as some government departments are being relocated to St Petersburg.

References


