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Diffusion of the News Paradigm 1850-2000

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From Participating to Informing

The Transition of Journalism in the Russian Regional Press

Jukka Pietiläinen

Introduction

Soviet journalism was one of the vernacular forms of journalism according to Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) but in part it took over traits of the literary journalism from Tsarist Russia. Soviet journalism was introduced in the 1920s with the purpose of creating a new kind of journalism, which could serve the new Soviet society (cf. McReynolds 1991; Lenoe 1998; Brooks 1989); it received its final form in the 1970s and the 1980s.

In the 1920s Soviet journalism was still not far from contemporary Western journalism (McReynolds 1991, 284) but since then it remained largely outside the development, which took place in Western journalism, mainly because Soviet journalism was primarily based on political and administrative regulations, not on commercial considerations.

Soviet journalism collapsed with the disintegration of the Soviet system and new forms started to develop on the basis of Soviet and older traditions and foreign influence. Since 1991 Russian journalism has become closer to the Western news journalism in significant ways. The development has been most visible in the economic press of Moscow, but it has also happened at the regional level although a complete metamorphosis has yet to occur. This article is based on analysis of journalism in newspapers of Republic of Karelia in Russia (cf. Pietiläinen 2002). The empirical analysis focuses on the traditionally dominant newspaper of Petrozavodsk. This paper was called *Leninskaya pravda* (Leninist Truth) in the Soviet era, changed its name to *Severnyi Kurier* (Northern Courier) in 1991 and finally to *Kurier Karelii* (Karelian Courier) in 2001. In addition to newspapers in Russian the analysis included newspapers published in Finnish and Karelian. The Finnish language newspaper *Karjalan Sanomat* (News of Karelia) that was in the Soviet era *Neuvosto-Karjala* (Soviet Karelia) is of particular importance since having had regular co-operation with Finnish journalists the diffusion of the news paradigm can be easily traced.¹

Journalism in the Soviet Press

Soviet journalism functioned as a collective agitator, propagandist and organiser, presenting the experience of the best working practices, criticising those lagging behind and organising workers for better results. Various official texts had a lot more importance and visibility than their frequency would have indicated. First page topics of a regional paper covered themes like meetings of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU); campaigns to increase the efficiency of the agricultural-industrial complex; discussions between party leader and foreign delegates and preparations for the congresses of the CPSU.

Even more important was the large amount of text provided by the non-staff authors. The Soviet doctrine emphasised the participation of “the people” in the making of journalism. According to this view only those personally involved in production could report objectively on the real state of affairs in one or another field of economy (Inkeles 1950, 179-180). As a rule non-staff authors were required to write between 40% and 60% of the material.

Letters to the editor as such were relatively rare in the pages of Soviet newspapers. They were often used as material for journalistic stories, and were published with an answer to the problem indicated in the letter, or were reported in the journalistic review of the letters. Public discussion with conflicting opinions was rare in Soviet newspapers.

Among the basic elements were cyclical stories like the sowing season in the spring and the harvesting in the autumn and various campaign and plans. Reports of their fulfilment were published regularly, often pointing out the shortcomings in some factory or institution.

A News paradigm was not completely uncommon to Soviet journalism. Soviet textbooks mentioned *zametka* (notice) as one of the genres of the Soviet press. It was, however, applied only to short news stories which reported only the event and nothing else. Usually, the purpose of the story was to tell about success or shortcomings (Zhanry... 1972, 24).

According to Murray (1992, 1994), several typical genres of the Soviet press lost their *raison d'être* and became redundant. The short front-page news item, the *zametka*, appeared with much less frequency in 1987 and was usually published on the second page. A new type of article that was closer to the Western news story replaced the *zametka*. The new Russian definition of *zametka* is practically the same as the definition of a short Western news story, even a picture of an inverted pyramid is published in the textbook (Informatsionnye zhanry... 1995, 7).

During the last few years of the Soviet system, journalism widened the limits of public discussion and challenged the system. It was in many respects a period when the best features of the Soviet journalistic theory came in to reality as a place for discussions, conflicting opinions and problem stories. But few solutions were provided. Journalism was nevertheless discrediting the system and therefore prepared the way for its collapse in 1991.

Journalism after the Collapse of the Soviet System

After the collapse of the Soviet system, journalism and media have started to develop in a market economy. In the regional press the major changes started to happen at the beginning of the 1990s. The end of the 1980s had been a time of lively discussions, but by 1991 more emphasis was paid to news items. These were positioned on the first page where they took the place of ideological articles.

The orientation of journalists has also changed. Journalists of the *perestroika*-era were primarily interested in relations with the public and to some extent fulfilled the function of a civil society, while the post-*perestroika* journalists are primarily concerned with the commercial sphere (Sosnovskaya 2000, 194).

The government support for the press decreased and real costs started to be charged for newsprint, postage and other material and services. Newspapers suddenly lacked resources which led to the textual, non-graphic, advertising which was very visible in the pages. It was usual to praise products and to inform where they could be purchased. At the same time the number of newspapers oriented towards the general public increased significantly in most of the large and medium-size cities, while national newspapers lost their favoured position (Pietiläinen 2001; Pietiläinen 2002).

The Western model was the closest at hand following the discrediting of the Soviet model (Murray 1992, 111). The post-Soviet press, or at least part of it, was eager to adopt Western models and aspired to appear neutral and objective (Murray 1994, 144).

The subjective presentation of news, from a personal point of view, was the first bold step in the direction of unbiased coverage and a challenge to the state-dominated message (Mickiewicz 2000, 107). During the *glasnost* era, “journalists adopted an egocentric view of themselves as missionaries, for whom expressing whatever they had on their minds was by far more important than satisfying the information demands of the audience” (Pankin 2001) and even now “many journalists understand press freedom primarily as the freedom to express subjective convictions publicly” (Votmer 2000, 479).

The difficulty in adopting new practices was clearly indicated by the criticism of the *Kommersant* newspaper where the policy was that a newspaper should have a consistent editorial slant and a consistent style in each article and texts are often rewritten. Kagarlitsky (1998) pointed out that journalists who consider themselves creative quickly bail out of *Kommersant*.

Kommersant declares in its Web pages that its model has become a norm for the Russian press. At the beginning of the 1990s *Kommersant* was almost like a foreign paper. Stories were placed strictly in sections, they were constructed on the model of an inverted pyramid, headlines told the most important news and “only facts were presented, not any kind of evaluations, moral statements and especially not a personal, author’s or citizen’s position” (Webpage of *Kommersant*, 2002).

Western news agencies also played a role in spreading Western news values although Russian news agencies remained the most important (Rantanen 2000, 260-265). This was rather similar to the situation at the beginning of the 20th century (Palmer 1998). Also new private news agencies were forerunners in setting the standard of news writing (Rantanen 2000, 261). According to a recent study on Russian news agencies, over 97% of the stories of the ITAR-TASS news agency and 92%-96% of those of Interfax and RIA Novosti followed the principle of the inverted pyramid and over 80% of stories had direct citations (Lashchuk 2003, 16-17). The most common deviations from the pyramid structure were the presence of several equally important news items in a story although the alluring or intriguing headline mentioned only one of them (ibid.).

In Karelia, the Finnish-language newspaper *Karjalan Sanomat* approached the news paradigm more rapidly and more completely than *Severnõi Kurier*, mainly because of the more direct influence of Finnish journalistic culture. On the other hand, the new papers that started after the collapse of the Soviet system were not tied to Soviet practices but promoted an idea of subjective view to news.

At least when in contact with Western scholars and colleagues, Russian journalists have become more careful in describing their success in combining PR-campaign and advertisement selling with journalism. If at the beginning of the 1990s they were eager to relate these new aspects, by the end of the decade they regularly denied it. It is likely that the change has happened with the development of PR and advertisement as separate professions as well as a practical expedient. One example is that of a representative of a major Russian PR-agency who told Finnish businessmen in a seminar in 2001 not to give money to journalists in order to get the story published but to find other ways to attract their attention.

Old and New Journalism

The transformation of journalism was largely complete by the second half of the 1990s. The newspapers of 2003 differed little from newspapers of 1997, while both of them were quite different from newspapers of 1991 or even those of 1993. New Russian journalism is a mixture of Soviet practices, Western influence and Russian journalistic traditions. The market economy has become an important element in the development of the press and its role will certainly become more important as the commercialisation of the press progresses.

Contemporary Russian journalists link professionalism to themes like “the importance of providing accurate factual information, an openness to new (often western) ideas and practices and a growing recognition of the audience” (Davis, Hammond & Nizamova 1998, 84). Many journalists however

“see ‘educating’ the public as a legitimate, even vital part of their jobs” (Belin 2001, 338) and a similar view has been found among Finnish-language radio journalists in Russian Karelia (Remsu 2001). On the other hand, the position of journalists in their workplace has changed. At the end of the 1990s “journalists rarely formed and defended their own positions, but preferred to support the position of the owner of the publication”, in line with the Soviet spirit of corporatism (Zassoursky 2004, 93). The differences between publications are, however, great and there is not yet a professional culture based on shared standards of journalism and media roles (Gross 2004, 131).

Among the older journalists, the “commitment to a serving role in the public interest and restriction to mere facts are regarded as a devaluation of their professional status” (Voltmer 2000, 478) and “for many journalists giving up the traditional Russian forms means a restriction of their newly gained freedom” (Geisslinger 1997, 411). Not surprisingly, a Russian survey of regional journalists revealed that they considered their prestige to be highest during *glasnost* (42%) or even before *glasnost* (26.5%), compared with the few (14.5%) who thought that the profession had the most prestige in 1994 (Journalists and journalism... 1995, 39).

“Another distinction between traditional Russian and Western journalism is the importance of timeliness. For Western journalists actuality is one of the most prominent news values (...); for Russian journalists it is only of marginal relevance.” (Voltmer 2000, 478). The same was noticed in a Finnish study on the concept of news in Russia. Käyhkö states that while Russian news criteria are quantitatively close to Western ones the main difference is that qualitatively the press does not construct a unified picture of the world and that the important items and elements vary between quality newspapers in Moscow (1998, 99). One of the major news criteria is originality. The key aspect for Russian journalists wanting to cover something, that other journalists have not, is not the concept of a scoop, but to find their own unique point of view to the news event.

A recent text book emphasises this point declaring that journalists have moved from communicators to interpreters of information. The journalistic product is not a news story but a news event which has been packed in a publicist’s text. According to this view the publicist is not an observer of a described event but an equal participant of it. A personalised relationship to news has been augmented by the increased competition between media (Kroichik 2000, 127-130).

In another text book on journalistic genres, news criteria (what happened, where, when, why, how) is presented as one of the variants of a notice (*zametka*). However, the second variant of notice, allows commenting on the news e.g. telling about its meaning and connecting it to a wider context. Even if the author emphasise the importance of separating news and views, the argument remains that newspapers should have both facts and points of view (Tertychnyi 2000, 72-75). Moreover, this kind of short news has been defined only as one of the informational genres of the press (the others are

analytical and artistic-publicist genres) and although informational genres form the major part of media texts, the more popular are those of reportage or the informative report (*otchet*) (ibid. 52-84).

The role of information has caused divided opinions among Russian journalists and scholars. For example, a recent dissertation deplored that newspapers have started to give preference to facts instead of analysis and that journalists write the majority of the material (Akhmetzyanov 1999).

However, “domination of ideological conviction over informative reliability” (Michnik 1998) remains one of the characteristic features of Russian journalism. “Ideological conviction” is no longer communist partisanship, but support for some politician, political party or idea. This kind of system assigns to the audience mostly the roles of ‘pupils’, citizens, partisans and followers (Jakubowicz 1999, 26).

In Russian journalism ideological conviction is often easily visible and not hidden in the selection of topics, sources and frames, as is usually the case in northern European journalism. One of the examples of this has been the “authored news programmes” (Dunn 1998), where news is filtered through the personality of a commenting journalist. They were a tempting option for top-level Russian journalists. Recently their importance has, however, been decreasing because of the procedures which have been called the “silencing of last independent television channels”. “Independent” in a Russian context is applied to “media which are against the government and attack authorities” (Voltmer 2000, 479). According to Gross (2003, 82) this adversarial relationship is “not professional in nature but political, even personal.” The decrease of adversarial relationship has reduced the importance of the leading personalities of news broadcasts and therefore paved the way towards a more objective-style. This does not necessarily mean that the bias has disappeared but the role of the newscaster has been made much less important and the bias therefore more invisible.

During Vladimir Putin’s presidency, several media experts have expressed a fear of the return to totalitarianism but in newspapers this kind of fear may only be about the content and point of view, not the style or function of the press. There is no return to the Soviet model in which the official documents and texts by outside authors would have been published. There are news stories about Putin, not about his speeches.

The media is oriented towards entertainment and actually the most important question of a freedom of expression concerns which film or which concert to show². Soviet films are returning to Russian television but nationally produced foreign format programmes like “Who want to be a millionaire”, “Wheel of fortune” and survival games are extremely popular. In general it seems that popular forms of Russian media and journalism are closer to their Western counterparts while partisan practises have survived better in elite journalism (see Pietiläinen 2000a and 2000b).

Old and New Journalism in Practice

On the basis of a newspaper sample of the years 2001 and 2003 newspapers use a mixture of old and new practices and in one instance were combined in one news story. Open opinions and moral judgements have become rare, but many stories still end up with “conclusions”, even if they are no more as instructive as was the case in the Soviet era. Apparently, they are not constructed so that they could be cut in the middle.

The role of the journalist (or the newspaper) is often emphasised, by words like “as I was told...” or “a journalist of *Severnii Kurier* called...” and expressions like “as was told to the correspondent of ITAR-TASS in the press service of...” are also common. They indicate the source, but do not require the use of citations or the mention of named persons. It seems that Russian journalism does not need to indicate sources and use citations to the same extent as northern European journalism. For example, a sport news story tells what has happened and the results, but without a comment from either a sportsman or a coach.

All the stories have their own headlines, compared to 80% in the 1980s. The stories usually start with concrete facts, but it is still possible to start a story by describing the situation or source as in “As news agency ITAR-TASS informs...” It is also usual to refer to the headline in the first paragraph. Thus it would appear that headlines are not edited at the last moment without the author of the story. Even the stories of press services have started to resemble news stories.

It is clear that in short stories some kind of pyramid structure has become dominant:

Sick children

Only about 17 percent of children are absolutely healthy in Karelia. As the correspondent of “Rosbalt” reports, these data were published by the minister of health of Karelia Valery Voinich in the meeting of the government of the republic on the health centre system for children on Monday.

According to the words of Valery Voinich, about 64 percent of young citizens of the republic had some kind of deflection of health, 18 percent of them have some kind of chronic illness... (*Kurier Karelii* 11.4.2003, first page)

This story came from a news agency. A similar news structure is common in shorter stories (up to 150-200 words) by journalists as well. It is remarkable that while the meeting was held on the Monday, the article was not printed till the Friday, three days late according to some news standards. A sense of speed is not among news criteria of the Russian press, at least when it comes to the stories that do not have a strict timeline. In this story, the active role of journalist is also remarkable. Also the headline is not very informative but more like a label for it.

In longer stories pyramid structure does not have any major relevance, even if the content of the stories do have elements of the news paradigm. An interview is published entirely in question-answer format without interpretation or framing and reportage is a usual form of a longer story. A typical example of this is a first page story about the session of the local parliament:

To support - the countryside, to return - to the issue about the army

About 30 issues were discussed by the members of parliament of the republic in its session yesterday

By Nail Shabiev

Majority of them did not cause any discussion. The members of the parliament agreed, for example, about the changes in the law of RK "About the government support for the small enterprises in the Republic of Karelia"...

(*Kurier Karelii* 11.4.2003, first page)

The major headline has an idea of news although its major content remains unclear. The strapline and the beginning of the story, however, report only facts, which are by no means "news" although they might be important to know. Unanimous decisions, lack of political battle and number of issues discussed would hardly be recognised as news by a North European journalist.

The recognition of news does not develop as quickly as the simple practise of writing stories in news form. Models such as 'conflict' have not yet completely developed and been applied in the making of the stories. Also in news agency materials stories with different, conflicting opinions make only 1-9% of all stories (Lashchuk 2003, 17).

In some stories quotation marks are used and their role is often the same as in northern European journalism, to add suspicion or to discredit the cited words: "I was told that 'the problem is discussed' and that it will be solved, at the latest before the end of April" (*Kurier Karelii* 11.4.2001).

Increase of News Narrative

One way to analyse how newspaper texts have changed is to focus on the variety of voices present in the text and their relationships. The narrative force field approach presented by Kunelius (1996) has been applied in the analysis of the narrative structures of the stories. It is based on analysis of the transparency and the identifiability of the voice of the story itself on the one hand, and on the other, the analysis of the independence and dependence of the story on outside voices. The movement between these narrative situations is also analysed.

As a result, six common types of narrative structure have been found.

1. The first type of structure represents narrative transparency and an independent voice. In these stories there is no quotation and the voice of the story does not speak from its own position as an actor (e.g. by using 'I' or 'we' forms).
2. The second type represents the Western professional news structure where the narrative moves between the transparent voice of the story and reported speech (including reported speech without direct citations). In some cases this structure might be incomplete, having only one long citation from the source.
3. The third type comprises identifiable commentary is accompanied by reported speech. This could be called 'news from author's position' in which reported speech is mixed with visible comments or participation of the reporter.
4. The fourth type is pure commentary, which includes an independent and identifiable voice of the story.
5. The fifth type includes interviews in which both voices are identifiable (interviews in question - answer form),
6. The sixth type includes only stories and comments from outside authors
7. Some more complex stories with could not be included in these categories.

Table 1. Space of Different Narrative Structures in *Leninskaya pravda* / *Severnyi Kurier* / *Kurier Karelii* (%)

Narrative structure	Journalistic description	Modern journalistic style	News from author's position	Comment, editorial style	Interview, both voices visible	Plain foreign text	Other
1985	24.0	14.4	12.7	9.6	2.6	28.9	7.8
1987	22.2	12.6	12.0	6.5	7.0	35.3	4.4
1989	18.4	7.7	19.4	9.2	5.8	32.4	7.1
1991	25.3	13.1	10.8	7.7	10.0	28.8	4.3
1993	16.0	22.6	11.8	8.9	12.5	23.4	4.8
1995	18.4	26.2	14.2	9.5	11.8	15.6	4.3
1997	17.7	30.7	15.9	5.8	7.0	20.7	2.2
1999	24.5	18.5	21.8	8.8	9.7	12.6	4.1
2001	25.3	26.3	12.7	2.4	8.8	19.6	4.9
2003	15.7	36.8	10.1	7.3	18.4	11.0	0.7

Based on sample of two weeks (1985-1999) or of one week (2001-2003)

The change in narrative structures has happened slowly and it has not been unidirectional. The clearest difference is between the Soviet (1985-1989/1991) and post-Soviet (from 1991 / 1993 onward) periods. In the post-Soviet period,

there are more interviews, more professional news narratives and less ‘pure news’ (category 1), less use of texts from outside authors and less mixture of news and commentary.

A closer look reveals some interesting points, e.g. in 1985 the majority (57%) of the professional news narratives came from news agencies (most of them were foreign news by TASS), while in 1999-2003 the most of them were written by staff journalists and only less than 10-20% came from news agencies. Therefore, the decline of this kind of material at the end of the 1980s was due to the decline of news agency material. The one remnant of the ‘author’s position’ that seems to have most resisted the passage of time is the practise of calling local people or conditions “us” or “our”, as in “our hockey players” (meaning Karelian or Russian hockey players) or “in our city” (meaning Petrozavodsk).

The analysis of narrative structures does not directly take into account the pyramid structure, but in general pyramid structure can be found in the first two narrative styles and to a lesser degree in the third style. It seems reasonable that within these categories the pyramid structure (or its elements) has become more common.

In *Karjalan Sanomat* the increase in the professional news narrative has been more rapid and more complete than in *Severnyi Kurier*. The share of the professional news narrative and its less developed forms has reached over half of the space. It has increased mainly at the cost of both completely foreign text and journalistic monologue, but also at the cost of the opinionated news form (Pietiläinen 2002, 424-425).

In general, the move has been away from texts by both outside authors and identifiable narrative voices and towards narrative transparency and independence. The use of foreign voices in news narrative has not yet developed to a similar level, as is the case in northern European journalism although the commentator role is clearly declining.

Discussion

Russian newspapers are in the process of being Americanised, even at the regional level, as has happened elsewhere in Europe. The process has been amazingly rapid and it is only understandable that some practices of an earlier time still remain.

In Russia, as elsewhere, this move is criticised as a loss of opinionated journalism, major articles of discussion and literary critique. Contemporary Russia very much resembles France at the end of the 19th century (Chalaby 1996a, 309). It seems reasonable to expect that market development will push Russian journalism in the same direction as has happened, for example, in France (Napoli 2001; Chalaby 1996a, 1996b, 1998). That will mean the spread of the

news paradigm, less newspapers but more factual information and less opinions of an individual journalist but a stronger position of journalism in society.

It seems reasonable that the diffusion of the news paradigm takes time. Even if the Putin era has marked some possible setbacks in the developing of independent television journalism on the level of structures and control, it has not had any major influence on the practice of journalism. The 'Euronews' channel that the state-owned channel *Kultura* (Culture) transmits in Russian represents a new kind of presentation and orientation towards news. Although the viewing figures of this channel are not large, it certainly has an influence on journalists. The news paradigm is largely imported from abroad and the relationship to foreign cultural imports has an influence on the level of its popularity in contemporary Russia.

Both journalism and those working in it need to change their attitude towards facts and they have to internalise a completely different position towards the world; not the one of a participant, but that of an invisible spectator. There might be several factors such as the competition between the media which may be obstacles to this change.

Also the orientation to the truth-value of facts needs to be changed before the news narrative can be considered to be similar with northern European journalism. Pure facts in invisible and independent narration are not enough in order to present the news, but quotations and foreign voice are needed as well. It might be that the traditional genre system of Russian journalism, which does not include a news report genre, is one of the obstacles to this. Another obstacle might be the working conditions in that facts and interviewees are difficult to find (cf Sosnovskaya 2000). However, the position of journalist is the major factor, as northern European journalists would rather not file a story than write it from their own position without sources. This is still significantly not the case in Russian journalism, even though it has declined during recent years.

Notes

1. I do not use expressions like "Western journalism" in comparison with "Soviet" or "Russian journalism" but compare Russian journalism with northern European journalism which I know the best. The empirical material for this article is based on newspapers published in Petrozavodsk, the capital of the Republic of Karelia, mainly to one newspaper *Leninskaya Pravda / Severnyi Kurier / Kurier Karelii*. The methods and more empirical data are reported in Pietiläinen 2002.
2. This statement comes from Igor Yakovenko, the Secretary General of Russian Union of Journalists, in a seminar in February 2004.

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[In the original article references were placed at the end of the book]

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