

RECENT PhD DISSERTATIONS IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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SCHOLARSHIP

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THE REGIONAL NEWSPAPER IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

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This study explores the changes that took place in the Russian press and journalism during the period of political reforms (1985-1991) and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The study focuses on the Republic of Karelia as a case study.

With the collapse of the Soviet system, the former press structure with dominant national newspapers collapsed and the regional newspapers, which were about to preserve their circulation, became the most important part of the press. At the regional level, a new kind of competition and pluralism emerged. For example, in the Republic of Karelia the number of regional newspapers published in Russian grew from two to eleven and in the number of those in Finnish or Karelian from one to three. This development has been similar in other regions as well. According to an analysis of factors influencing the local newspaper publishing the circulation of local newspapers is higher in areas with a tradition of newspaper publishing, development of civil society and more substantial economic welfare.

Theoretically, the study is based on the notion that the Soviet Union was an illusory modern society and its modern features, like the extensive use of mass media, were partly rituals with little modernizing impact. One of the reasons behind the collapse of the Soviet system was that the peculiar, incomplete modernization of the Soviet era could not handle the pressures caused by modernization. After the collapse of the Soviet system a new round of modernization is beginning although the collapse of economy and the forced forms of modernization have also strengthened the traditional elements.

The media had an important role in the collapse of the Soviet system and this study argues that it was not only the information itself which assisted in the collapse of the society but that the way in which the media presented information was also important in discrediting the former system. After 1985, the Soviet media started to realize the traditional slogans of the media's participation in the construction of the society and provided space for various views. In so doing the press actually participated in the destruction of the social system, which was not equipped to adjust to conflicting opinions. Paradoxically, if Soviet journalism had functioned according to the Western journalistic practice of presenting the information in a way that leaves readers with a detached and non-participant relationship to politics, the collapse of the Soviet system may not have been so sudden.

In the Soviet Union, no proper journalistic sphere could develop; journalism was an extension of both political and literary spheres. In the post-Soviet condi-

tions the possibilities for its development are better, but in many other Central and Eastern European countries the development of the Western-type modern newspaper and modern news form has been more rapid. One of the reasons for this is that Russia has so far also remained outside major Western investments in the media sector which in other Central and Eastern European countries has been accompanied by imported formats and models of journalism. Moreover, Russia has longer traditions in endogenous forms of journalism, which could not be expected to change as rapidly.

The problems with the development of civil society and political system also play a role: journalism based on quotations and interpretation from the universal, commonsense point of view can develop only in conditions in which source organizations and comments are easily available and where a widely accepted common sense point of view exists. These conditions are so far poorly developed in Russia. It is also important that among the old school of journalists the adaptation of detached and standardized forms of journalism has been seen as a loss. There is some evidence that journalism has adopted practices from abroad, for example, the Finnish-language *Karjalan Sanomat* has started to resemble Western journalism more rapidly than is the case with Russian newspapers.

According to a survey conducted in Petrozavodsk in February 2000 the audience is clearly divided on the basis of age and partly on the basis of gender. The scandalous, oppositional newspaper has proven to be the most popular and successful sector of the press, while the old and new "quality", elite-oriented newspapers only appeal to a small segment of the audience.

An empirical examination of journalism in two newspapers indicates that journalists have gained clear control of the production of newspaper text. In the Soviet era the newspapers were filled with articles by outside authors and official texts, while during a short period of *glasnost* the letters to the editor played an important role. On the other hand, journalistic control has not become complete with regard to these texts. Among the different textual strategies, the professional news form has received more popularity although non-commentary monologue and a news form in which the citations from sources are mixed with comments by journalist are still common. Only the texts written solely by outside authors have clearly diminished in the newspapers.