

# Global de-Westernization trend in media studies and Russian journalism theory



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**ABSTRACT:** The long period of current isolation of Russian researchers from an international context — due to political reasons — has come to an end. However, their work continues to be relatively unknown abroad. Theoretical concepts from the West are poorly suited for understanding of local journalism with its original traditions and professional characteristics. The objective and subjective reasons of such a state of affairs are considered. The Russian research school should take the place of an equal partner in the international community and act according to principles of mutually advantageous exchange. A de-Westernization trend in media studies creates good conditions for this.

**KEYWORDS:** journalism study, West, East, de-Westernization trend, national identity, international context, change, Russia



## INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, scientific life more and more finds a similarity with the world's oceans, in which the existence of an isolated area of water is impossible, by virtue of the factors of globalization and of the impact of the Internet. Accordingly, in the field of media research, there is an opposition between the necessity of dialog and understanding on the one hand, and maintaining national identity, on the other. This opposition is closely related to the harmonization of Russian journalism theory with a global context in media studies. The aim of our article consists in discovering this contradiction in its real volume and forms of display. This purpose requires the solution of some tasks, namely: first, to show that questions of interaction between Russian and Western colleagues are complex, and they have deep cultural underlying reasons; secondly, to characterize changes in a global media research community which create a favorable background for internationalization of Russian research; thirdly, to reveal objective and subjective obstacles for the arranging of interaction, and fourthly, to specify some practical steps towards intensifying international cooperation.

For a comparison, the maximal interest in Russian literature in the West existed in the period of “semi-open” society, from the 1950s till the 1970s. However, this interest in many respects was predetermined by reasons of political conjuncture. According to the remarkable recognition of the American scholar, Parthe:

Scholarship and journalism in the West... focused to a large degree on what lay outside the official system — on *samizdat* (literature circulated underground), *tamizdat* (literature written in the USSR but published abroad), and, to some extent, on émigré literature... The underlying assumptions are that “delayed” literature (*zaderzhannaia literatura*), by virtue of its having been delayed, carries a uniformly higher value than anything that was officially published in the USSR, and that those who did publish through official channels necessarily compromised the truth and even the artistic quality of their works. (1992, p. ix)

Coming back to journalism and media, one is compelled to recognize that in this field the situation looks even more dramatic. The works of Russian researchers are scarcely known abroad, and there is no demand for their textbooks in the universities of Europe and America. Vanity does not allow us to agree with the opinion that Russian researchers are fatally worse than their foreign colleagues. Maybe it is necessary to join the popular thesis that we are others, if not a different other? So, in addressing foreign readers, the Russian scientist builds his historical and cultural reflections on the idea of the special destiny of Russia and Russians:

Literature, visual art, theater, music, and later cinema became the most important parts of the whole culture, competing with philosophy as well as with governmental institutions and partly substituting them. (Ivanov, 2008, p. 124)

As though about an atypical nation, alien, not “international”.

The author expects objections because a lot has been written about the Russian mass media in recent years in world literature, both by Russian and foreign authors. Presently, in articles and books such themes appeared as Perestroika and the Soviet media (McNair, 2012), censorship in contemporary Russia (Simons & Strovsky, 2006), a new Russian media model (Vartanova, 2012), television and power in Russia (Mickiewicz, 2008), professional characteristics of Russian journalists (Pasti, Chernysh & Svitich, 2012), Russian media in a transitional democracy (Voltmer, 2013), and so forth. At the same time a subject of our attention is not the description of the state of affairs in the Russian media, but disclosure to the world of a “laboratory” of Russian researchers, their views, theoretical sympathies and decisions. Thus, it is not so important, whether views concern Russian journalism or globally, to sociology of the media or history of journalism, etc. Certainly, it is necessary to worry not about individual authors, whose names are already well-known in the West, but about plenty of researchers, if not the majority of them.

A little paradoxically, the situation in journalism theory looks similar to the key question in the research field of modern border studies, whose status since the 1990s has been increasing, for borders have become a focus of mainstream

post-positivist social theories. Particularly, in the case of EU-Russian border crossings:

... there is a need for both theoretical and policy-oriented research, focusing on the ways of efficient dialogue, conceptual and empirical perspectives of gatekeepers and border crossers. (Golunov, 2013, pp. 934–951)

## INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT IN CHANGE

The considerably changing global reality increasingly disturbs critical minds in the West. In recent decades, suggestions have appeared more often to expand geographical horizons of reasoning on the condition and development of the mass media; and in this way to overcome current isolation of Western research culture from the world of the other. Some works, in which the central place belongs to the ideas of internationalization and de-Westernization of media studies, have become an actual challenge to the stable system of representation and empirical basis. These works include Downing's *Internationalizing Media Theory: Transition, Power, Culture — Reflections on Media in Russia, Poland and Hungary* (1996), which has been issued with the expressive publisher's characteristic on the cover of the issue: "This provocative book". Perhaps it was difficult to estimate differently the work which contained such unusual ideas:

Furthermore, and equally crucially, the overwhelming body of media communication theory is based upon data from two spots, Britain and the United States, which have [...] remarkably similar leitmotifs in their cultural, economic and political history that mark them out from most other nations on the planet. (Downing, 1996, p. x)

One may notice in brackets, that the author substantially based the conclusions on Russian material. Then, the collective work under the leadership of Curran and Park *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (2000) aroused a high wave of solidarity and attempts to continue the begun analysis. For example, Waisbord is convinced:

Featuring a dozen chapters from around the world, the book makes a normative argument for why the field needs to be more inclusive and worldly. It stands as a prime example of the latest push towards the "internationalization" of media studies. [...] De-Westernization implies opening up analytical horizons by considering cases from around the world that are not known either due to language obstacles or disinterest. Given that the importance of the non-West is not news for non-Western scholars, Curran and Park's goal is primarily to encourage curiosity about other regions among Anglo-American researchers. (Waisbord, 2013, p. 2)

Some well-known European scientists in turn, promoted similar theses and initiatives. For example, Thussu (2009) should be mentioned with his appeal to internationalize media studies via taking into consideration regional and national specificities. He offered very impressive formulation of the De-Westernization (internalization) trend in global media studies: New globalization = "Anglobalization"

+ Rise of the Rest (nations). One of the enthusiasts of cross-cultural research has been Ekecrantz, who wrote:

In the era of globalization, internationalistic agendas have to be radicalized, opened up also to non-Western media thought, setting out from existing regional modernities and transformations... Media studies shares with sociology and political science difficulties in coming to grips with the realities of a transnationalized and transforming world. One explanation is a certain, lingering "methodological nationalism" [...] implying that the nation state still provides the presupposed and mostly implicit conceptual frame... (Ekecrantz, 2007, pp. 169–170)

In 1990, Ekecrantz together with Olsson organized an extensive program of media studies in the states of the Baltic Sea area, in which the northern capital of Russia, St Petersburg was included (Ekecrantz et al., 1999).

So, the global research context begins to change from separation and isolation (West vs. East) towards cooperation, perhaps not so radically and rapidly, but clearly. It should be taken into consideration in the Russian scholars' community, if it does not wish to be associated with methodological nationalism. The task is to recognize properly the main directions and demands of the changing process as well as desirable benefits and priorities.

In fact, Russian experts have directly joined the international exchange of views on basic categories of journalistic science, and there is a large set of acknowledgment of this. The author may refer to his personal experience as a guest editor of the special issue of the *Russian Journal of Communication* (2011). This issue was devoted to a theme *The Disciplinary Identity of the Media Researcher: A View from St. Petersburg* and it was arranged by a big group of professors of St Petersburg State University. However, the stated problems are realized by the Russian scholars' community only in general as a stimulus for anxiety and interest, but not as a subject of analysis in routine research practices. Perhaps reasons of objective and subjective origins for such a situation exist?

## **WHY WEAK COOPERATION?**

On an objective level a long-term autotrophic development of a science pertaining national limits (or, at least, irregular international interaction) is affected. The influence of this factor is being overcome within recent decades. This is due to a strengthening tradition of participation in conferences and training abroad, organization of comparative research in partnership with foreign universities, and free access to foreign publications and databases. However, greater radical decisions are required for an intensification of international partnership.

For example, the situation with publication of research products in reviewed journals with a high world rating is changing slowly. It is necessary to point out that historically Russian scientists considered publishing monographs and fundamental coursebooks as a most prestigious achievement. However, for a long time

the practice has been to give priority to journal articles. Perhaps this different interpretation partly serves as a reason for the absence in Russia of journals on journalism and media which are registered in the largest databases: *Web of Science* and *Scopus*. Russian authors are compelled to offer their works to leading foreign journals and adapt them to corresponding standards and theoretical traditions. There is no blame of this or that side; however it is a fact of complicated reality. Accordingly, Russians in principal are unable to have good results within the parameters of publications in *Scopus*.

It should be added that the given situation is characteristic of national science as a whole. According to bibliographic statistics, in 2002 America headed the list of countries having the greatest quantity of publications in *Web of Science* with 32.0 per cent and Russia occupied ninth place, with 3.09 per cent. Ten years later, Russian works decreased to 2.06 per cent while America has kept its leadership despite the share of articles decreasing to 27.13 per cent (Podorvanyuk, 2013). An especially low level of publication activity may be seen in social studies. On the basis of the *Top 100 Research Fronts* report from the Thomson Reuters Media Corporation, experts have come to the conclusion that Russian scientists have appeared outside of leading groups in the direction of social studies, while Americans are leading again (Todorov, 2013).

Then, it is time to found in Russia the academic center for journalism studies and media within the territory of Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Now such centers are organized in some foreign institutions such as: Universities of Birmingham and Nottingham (UK), Uppsala University (Sweden), Universities of Helsinki and Tampere (Finland), Harvard University (USA), etc. There are no such centers in Russia, at least as instituted research organizations, and it is improbable to consider this state of affairs as satisfactory.

On a subjective level, interest in integration into the world community is restrained by disbelief of the high dividends from such investments of intellectual capital. These doubts, in fact are similar to error, but there is a grain of truth in them, and consequently it is unnecessary to reject them a priori.

Firstly, it is difficult for domestic researchers to adapt unconditionally those doctrines which have been developed within the Western theory of journalism and experienced (or are even declared) in the editorial process. As a Swedish analyst remarks:

Traditional western ideals of objectivity and impartiality seem to dominate many newsrooms, and there are many similarities in professional routines and editorial processes. (Nygren, 2012, p. 6)

Nevertheless, the author has a doubt that the named ideals precisely correlate with the genetic nature and traditions of the Russian press. Some European researchers also critically evaluate them (Pöttker, 2011, pp. 10–11). Are Western traditions of objectivity and impartiality, as categorically declared in media theory so

strong in practical journalism? Otherwise, do they so reliably determine a formation of uniform style of journalistic activity? Some results of the empirical projects devoted to this theme, are. Projects are taken from proceedings of the ECREA conference, *Diversity of Journalisms* (July, 2011, Pamplona, Spain). The theme of the conference also attracts attention in a studied aspect. The idea of national-cultural identity of the press occupied strong positions in European journalism, both in a practice and in science. A rather unexpected effect was caused between the years 2000 and 2009 by the comparative study of media in six developed democracies: America, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, and Finland. The investigator writes in his report:

I argue that, despite frequent predictions of progressive “system convergence” [...] the last decade has been characterized by an “absence of Americanisation” of the news institutions in the five European countries considered. National institutional differences have remained persistent in a time of otherwise profound change. This finding is of considerable importance for understanding journalism and its role in democracy, since a growing body of research suggests that “liberal” (market-dominated) media systems like the American one increase the information gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, have lower electoral turnout, and may lead large parts of the population to tune out of public life. (Nielsen, 2011, p. 397)

Other research has compared verbal professional declarations of war correspondents with the texts of their articles. In a frame of comparison the materials of the American and French press have been considered:

The interviews show that French and American war correspondents identify the same fundamental values, accuracy and fairness. They also mention the same criteria for the definition of good journalistic practices, such as evidence-based statements or fair characterization of the protagonists in news reports... However, analysis of French newspaper articles covering foreign conflicts reveals a gap between what the interviewed journalists say that should be done and what journalists actually did. French war correspondents are essentially authors, whose personal presence is more marked than the Americans and who ultimately fulfill a bardic function. (Boudana, 2011, p. 399)

Secondly, a theory developing in the West could not be treated as the ideal of harmony and accuracy. For example:

The prominent feature of media research is certain freedom in use of terms and designations, which sometimes leads to a terminological disorder, to a designation of opposite processes by the same term. (Dunas, 2013b, p. 8)

Thirdly, the Western theory of journalism is not in the least holistic and homogenous in conceptual dimension. There is a rich spectrum of directions within it, including mutually exclusive ones. This means that Eastern researchers who wish to move using “Western” vectors must concretize at least what paradigm or theoretical frame they choose. It should be additionally noted that the majority of different schools in the West have a common feature; namely their mass communica-

tion base. This strongly narrows a corner of sight on journalism and is atypical for Russian scientific tradition. In the West media research is normally considered as a social and political discipline while in Russia (mostly) it traditionally belongs to the philological branch of sciences.

As it seems, here we find one of the key points of divergence of the Russian research tradition with the Western paradigm. Distinction in theoretical viewpoints is an effect of a difference in experience of practice, which for theorists serves as the object of attention and in turn imperiously predetermines vectors of scientific interest. Experts know well that historically and genetically, Russian journalism is undividedly connected with literature, and accordingly, it developed as a literary-centric activity in the forms and professional ideology. From this circumstance, an active role of the author follows, essentially more active than is accepted in Western journalism, which extols objectivity and worships the neutral interpretation of the fact. To recognize the existence of the given features, even those researchers are compelled who treat Eastern journalism traditions without obvious sympathy in comparison with Western impartiality. Jakubowicz has remarked on this connection:

Journalists, it was assumed, must redefine themselves from propaganda tools to providers of competently collected and written information and non-partisan, impartial interpreters of social reality... [But Central and Eastern European countries want journalists to become a mouthpiece for the people]. That... is a reflection of the traditional role of the intelligentsia in Central and Eastern European countries. This results in a type of journalism that is conviction-driven. By subordinating their work to promoting social and political change, journalists must necessarily opt for a partisan, advocacy-oriented and campaigning style of writing, bordering at times on propaganda... (Jakubowicz, 2001, p. 75)

We do not agree with a strong correlation between every case of a journalist's self-expression and propaganda. It is a popular simplification in thinking on journalism. Nevertheless, besides theoretical disputation, a great cultural differentiation of Western and Eastern journalism was truly caught in the cited article. On this platform, the analogous divergence in journalism theory should be taken into account. The reflection of the truth of events has never been rejected in Russian journalism, both in practice and in theory. Also, great attention is paid to the literary quality of a product, a rich set of genres and forms, the author's personality, and the like. Publications should be attractive to the public for other reasons than just to gain knowledge about events, the solution of problems, and so forth. Readers also feel pleasure from the reading of a high-quality text or the viewing of a skillfully made telecast.

Such divergences make impossible simple copying of Western experience and methodology in Russian media, both in practice and in theory. This is a part of general problem of searching for ways of cooperation of different cultures. In turn, one main mistake of many observers of Russian media theory and practice is; they

regularly use the so-called transitological paradigm of analysis. Sparks examined the explanatory potential of the transitological theory, which in recent decades formed the basis for analysis of changes in the fields of politics and media in post-communist countries. As he writes:

At least, the model of political change advanced by transitology is that there are observable twin processes of democratic political change and the burgeoning of market economies. Together, these factors are working to change previously undemocratic societies in the direction of the political and economic conditions prevailing in the USA... This approach also strongly influences much of the writing about media in former communist countries... In other words, the really-existing media of different countries are measured against what has come to be known as the “liberal model.” [The analysis of media changes in Russia, Poland and China] demonstrated that transitology gives very little insight into the prevailing situations. (Sparks, 2008, pp. 7–9)

Relying upon this conclusion, one cannot agree in full with the radical opinion that in a large number of Eastern countries, the liberal project: “never had a chance due to lack of the political culture required for acceptance of media independence and continued state control of the media” (Jakubowicz, 2001, p. 70). Perhaps the aforementioned countries needn’t accept the Western liberal project? Who knows? This is not a question of transitology per se; a mostly political approach quite often forces scholars to compare the incomparable, in essence — media phenomena created by different cultures. Put briefly, not only political criteria should be used for the estimation of media realities and not political ones play a decisive role in the complex of journalism theory.

Finally, Western does not mean global. The authoritative researchers emphasize that there is diversity on a map of media and communications theories. According to Downing, besides Britain and the United States:

The other nations on whose experience and culture media communication theory has mostly been based have been Germany, France and Italy, although the rapid growth of media studies in the Canadian and Australian academies has recently added those nations to the list. (Downing, 1996, p. x)

McQuail increases this list when he mentions candidates to be recognized as original national schools: France and the francophone area; the United Kingdom; Germany; the Scandinavian region; the Mediterranean region with Italy leading and Spain following (2009, p. 288). Of course, there is no Russia amongst these counties as well as other CEE countries. Relating to a specific Russian sphere of interests one has to widen the list once again. For the huge country in a whole and especially for the Siberian areas, the Asian-Pacific region has a great importance. Qualified experts know well that media systems of the West and Asia experience rather inconsistent mutual relations, and there are bases to speak about intercontinental contradictions in the theory. Speaking on the autonomy of CEE as a distinctive media system, Czech scholars truly remark:



There are times when the imaginary East/West barrier is still in place, in “our” mind, as “we” feel “we” are different, “we” have different historical experiences, and it is possible “they” feel the same. However, this particular context of historic experience and consciousness should be explored and reflected not only in the research of media structures and systems, but also, if not more importantly, in the research of media audiences, everyday media practices, and the role and use of media for establishing national, as well as individual identities. (Reifová & Pavlíčková, 2013, pp. 131–135)

## CONCLUDING IDEAS

Thus, within a theme of the international context for the Russian research of journalism and mass media, there are some dominant tasks. The first and the most essential among these, at a level of an axiom, is a necessity to exist in this context and to do much, including active study, taking from it productive ideas, senses, techniques of work, and contacts. In this connection, Russian scholars must substantially change their academic traditions, from a more “literary” style to strong argumentation according to international standards. Secondly, a clear representation is needed on the condition of world science, which has such characteristics as discrepancy, heterogeneity, and imperfection. Thirdly, the task is to bring to a world research practice the best elements of knowledge and experience, which may be found in national science. If the context is international, it means it is forming with our active participation in the role of the subject of action, instead of on the basis of noncritical borrowing.

This conclusion meets strong support in the works which develop the de-Westernizing paradigm in the field of journalism studies. For example the researchers from South Africa write in this connection:

The difference between a dialogic and an inclusive approach is important. Even if diverse journalisms are *included* in a global purview, some of them could still be marginalized or ghettoized as “alternative” journalisms or as belonging to geographically specific areas, and therefore unable to exert pressure on the dominant mainstream to change like they would in a truly *dialogic* approach [...]. Inclusive approaches thus far have resulted in the “reluctant” acceptance of models that differ from Anglo-American ones. (Wasserman & de Beer, 2009, p. 429)

Some corresponding ideas may be found in the current publications on the Russian media situation. The detailed analysis of transformations, which has occurred with the Russian press in recent decades, gives the basis for conclusions that world science can gather from this experience rather valuable material for generalizations on a high theoretical level:

The example of the Russian mass media and journalism, undoubtedly, has universal value in spite of the fact that in them the big place belongs to the factors of the national origin. Having appeared in the center of double transition — from socialism to market economy and democracy on the one hand, and from the analog mass media to digital, interactive ones on the other, the media system



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Sergey G. Korkonosenko

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