

# International Communication Gazette

<http://gaz.sagepub.com>

---

## **The Art of Balancing: Foreign Correspondence in Non-Democratic Countries: The Russian Case**

Bernadette Kester

*International Communication Gazette* 2010; 72; 51

DOI: 10.1177/1748048509350338

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://gaz.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/72/1/51>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *International Communication Gazette* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://gaz.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://gaz.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://gaz.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/72/1/51>

## THE ART OF BALANCING

### Foreign Correspondence in Non-Democratic Countries: The Russian Case

**Bernadette Kester**

**Abstract** / This article examines the problems foreign correspondents encounter when working under conditions that differ considerably from those in their home country. In order to illustrate some of the problems, in particular with regard to the accessibility and trustworthiness of sources, the article takes as a case study the experiences of 11 Dutch correspondents posted in Moscow between 1982 and 2007, and examines their strategies to cope with the restrictions encountered working in a (neo-)authoritarian state.

**Keywords** / foreign correspondence / hierarchy of influences / (neo-)authoritarian states / news / news production / news sources / Russia (1982–2007) / slow journalism

### Crisis

The profession of foreign correspondence seems to be in a kind of crisis. It is perhaps not headline news, but nowadays news media do quite regularly report on cost-reducing measures news organizations have to take due to economic and financial pressures. In almost all cases this implies cuts in the field of international news. If the permanent positions of correspondents are not cut they are often changed into freelance positions or other solutions are sought. Due to cost reductions, the growing competition from transnational news agencies (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 2004; Deuze, 2007: 158) and new media outlets (Perlmutter and Hamilton, 2008), an erosion of the traditional profession itself is taking place. It is assumed that the position correspondents held in the organization – they were once called ‘the princes of the profession’ – is changing and should be redefined (Hamilton and Jenner, 2004; Wu and Hamilton, 2004). From a commercial point of view all this sounds perhaps reasonable if one considers the fact that foreign correspondents are the most expensive reporters in news organizations, but also that foreign affairs are not a priority for most audiences, as they are more interested in local rather than global news and soft rather than hard news (Utley, 1997; Wu and Hamilton 2004).

Consequently, more news media address the greatest common denominator, and in order to keep audiences satisfied news is often presented as a sensational ‘spectacle’, as in the cases of war (Iraq) or disasters (the Asian tsunami, Hurricane

Katrina). Whereas the period after 9/11 showed a short-term rise in the interest in foreign news, as soon as the first dust settled (literally in this case) everything turned back to business as usual (Zelizer and Allan, 2002).

It is beyond doubt that the aforementioned changes have had consequences for the quantity as well as for the quality of foreign news. Not only has the quantity of foreign news diminished, particularly in the US (Cottle, 2009; Hannerz, 2004; Hess, 1996; Utley, 1997; Wu and Hamilton, 2004), it is also argued that the quality has deteriorated (Kester, 2008; Louw, 2004; Luyendijk, 2006; Paterson and Sreberny, 2004; van Ginneken, 1996).

Apart from economic pressures, technological changes have also affected the position of correspondents and in particular the production process and content of foreign news itself (Hachten and Scotton, 2007; Perlmutter and Hamilton, 2008). This has had both negative and positive consequences. Because of the Internet foreign news has become much more easily available, especially to audiences who had turned their back on traditional media outlets like radio, TV and newspapers (Mindich, 2005). With the Internet and other fast, modern transmitters the production of news has become a 24/7 reporting business. This means more news perhaps, or more of the same, but it also brings the danger of superficiality, whereas foreign news is one of the fields in news reporting that needs contextualization, analysis, explanation and clarification the most (Philo, 2004; Philo and Berry, 2004). 'Faster is not necessarily better', and we have to recognize that 'news media have an obligation to educate rather than merely inform', argues Philip Seib (2008: 163). Indeed, only when something urgent or crucial is happening, is faster news perhaps also better news. Yet this is seldom the case, as Seib rightly states. When news about other countries and cultures is presented in an oversimplified way, it will stimulate or confirm rather than criticize or counter bias and stereotypes (Louw, 2004; van Ginneken, 1996). This is an issue of concern in western multicultural societies in particular. So perhaps fast, short and superficial (or less, derogatively, 'factual') news should be left to news agencies and background reporting and analyses should become the main task of foreign correspondents (which is often already the case). Therefore diminishing the number of foreign correspondents is not a desirable solution.

But this is not all there is to it. What should be recognized and valued more by some news organizations and audiences is first the complicated job correspondents sometimes have to perform and the notion that this job needs 'slow' journalism rather than 'fast' journalism. As Nick Davies has shown in his book *Flat Earth News* (2008), slow journalism is in any case better, irrespective of being foreign or local news.

The background information that correspondents provide their audiences with is often presented from an analytical or human interest point of view. It gives insight into the lives of human beings and societies outside the direct or national scope of audiences. This is not the same as saying they provide us with a complete picture of reality. The practice of journalism is a process in which news is constructed, not 'found' (Tuchman, 1978), although 'constructed' does not mean 'made up'. There is a real world out there where real things happen, but which events become news,

and thereby appear to most people as what really happened, depends on a variety of factors (Gauthier, 2005; Schudson, 2005). News production is a process in which selection takes place on different levels, and that finally influences and frames media content (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). 'Moments' of selecting news and information, as well as deciding what is worthwhile sharing with audiences, depends on the personal outlook of the reporter (and editor for that matter), journalistic routines, the policy of the news organization, extra-media influences (political parties, information managers, lobby groups) and the more abstract influence that society at large (ideology, political media system) has over journalism and what its position, social function and aims should be.

Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese (1996) constructed a concentric model, a 'donut' as they call it, in which each level represents one of the aforementioned 'moments' of selection, from the 'ideological' outer circle to the 'personal' circle or level in the middle. The levels of influence affect every reporter who is involved in the news construction process, be it rank-and-file journalists or the foreign correspondents, who operate more independently (Perlmutter and Hamilton, 2008; Tunstall, 1971). What this model would imply, and what should particularly be addressed in the case of foreign news production, is further sublevels that represent the different social, political and/or cultural spaces in which foreign reporters have to work. One could imagine another partly overlapping 'donut', representing the foreign societies (with the same levels of selection, except for the news organization) in which the correspondents function. This other social context demands different skills and different ways of dealing with routines and sources while the news organization at home demands the same news (standard) to satisfy the home audiences. For instance, a foreign reporter has to speak another language or has to make extensive use of interpreters and/or fixers; he or she has to know the norms and values of his or her new environment and sometimes has to deal with other routines because of another time zone, and other institutional daily rhythms. The only thing that remains more or less a consistent factor is the policy of the news organization.

## The Balancing Act

In 1947, the Hutchins Commission, a special American Commission on the Freedom of the Press, recommended that:

*... journalists reporting on foreign affairs. . . . are supposed to convey a representative picture of different groups and predominant values in those societies. At the same time, foreign correspondents are expected to perform similar tasks for their own society, illuminating their own country's values and goals by reporting on the activities of others in a framework comprehensible to home-country readers. (Pollock, 1981: 4)*

In other words, foreign correspondents have one foot firmly rooted in familiar (back)ground and one in un- or partly familiar ground. Extending the metaphor one could say the more both worlds differ, the more unbalanced the reporter and/or reports are. This balancing act undoubtedly leaves its traces on the content of the correspondent's news and background reports, although this will be less the case when a correspondent works in a cultural environment that resonates with his or her

own culture and society or once he or she has overcome the culture shock (which takes time) (Galtung and Ruge, 1999).

As Eric Louw noticed: 'Journalists necessarily experience real difficulties when sent to cover societies grounded upon unfamiliar religions (such as Anglo journalists in the Muslim world); or to societies that are extremely complex (such as the Balkans, *Russia*, or South Africa)' (Louw, 2004: 154; my emphasis). Is it not ironic that the countries we (westerners) believe we have not much in common with are also where we have the fewest correspondents based? Louw mentions five other reasons for possible journalistic misreadings: (1) cultural bias-ridden reporting; (2) the deployment of simplistic role labels or reductionist explanations; (3) the use of binary oppositions in complex situations, such as in the good vs bad guys or villains vs victims frame; (4) journalists' tendency to select people, sources and contacts with whom they feel familiar and who confirm their world view; and (5) the tendency 'to read foreign issues in terms of "home" understandings and agendas' (Louw, 2004: 154–9), a phenomenon also known as the 'domestication' of news (Clausen, 2004: 36).

How correspondents deal with non-familiar situations has been researched by anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, among others. In his book *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents* (2004), Hannerz undertook ethnographic fieldwork in order to explore a 'tribe' called 'foreign correspondents'. In focusing on the production side of foreign news, the journalistic practice of foreign reporters and foreign news editors, Hannerz gives an insightful, fascinating and detailed account. Although Hannerz's study does not result in any clear-cut conclusions, it addresses in a nuanced way many of the aforementioned problems or obstacles correspondents meet in their daily practice.

To further explore the practice of foreign correspondence one could turn to the books written by the reporters themselves. They seem to be more productive than their fellow journalists at home are in publishing books about their experiences. Most of these books are collections of articles published earlier, or they contain articles that did not make it to the newspaper pages at all, for editorial reasons. Yet these books seldom address the gathering and framing process of news and background reports themselves. They often ignore the obstacles the reporter was confronted with or they churn out adventurous stories. In other words, these accounts, as interesting as they are, do not offer much explicit insight into the journalistic practices of correspondents working under unfamiliar and restricted conditions.

An exception to what seems to be the rule is the book *Het zijn net mensen. Beelden van het Midden-Oosten* [*People Like Us: The Truth about Reporting the Middle East*!] by the Dutch (former) correspondent Joris Luyendijk. He has written a critical and (self-)reflexive account of the difficulties foreign correspondents encounter when working under the conditions of authoritarian states that are most Arabic countries. The book is based on his own experiences as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East, having Cairo, Beirut and Jerusalem as his base, during the period 1998–2003. Not hindered by any restraint or fear of being called disloyal towards his colleagues, so it seems, in his book Luyendijk 'unveils' the pragmatics of everyday practice and news production by foreign correspondents.

His experiences led him to the conclusion that practising journalism (according to western standards) under (semi-)dictatorial circumstances is an impossible task – something that is generally denied, ignored or not acknowledged enough by most correspondents. According to Luyendijk, many facts, numbers or statistics (if they exist at all) coming from governmental sources or from indigenous media, are unreliable or falsified; human interest stories are problematic because ‘the man in the street’ is afraid to talk (women are often not allowed to speak at all), let alone complain about his personal conditions. He will refrain from criticizing the regime under which he lives. In Luyendijk’s view reporters also too often neglect what living in an authoritarian regime really means. They neglect this, for example, by treating protest demonstrations, that are (almost always) instigated by the government, as spontaneous (or organized) protests by the people, comparable to western forms of free expression; or by mentioning governments and their representatives as if they were democratic institutions or democratically elected.

One point Luyendijk particularly stresses is that many correspondents deny that working in non-democratic, authoritarian countries has negative consequences for the content of their news production. Most correspondents do not mention these limitations in their reports.

Some of the limitations Luyendijk mentions are more general in character and thereby not only confined to the practice of (foreign) journalism under dictatorships. Such practices would entail the major impossibility of objective reporting, the dominance of certain news values, the discarding of the complexity of events or processes in the way (TV) news is presented and the agenda-setting power of international news agencies. More specific are the limitations that have to do with an insufficient knowledge of the culture, religion, history and language. However, Luyendijk considers the (in)accessibility and (un)reliability of sources one of the most important restrictions correspondents are met with when working under dictatorships. If news is in large part routine-based and thus mainly source-led (Gans, 1980; Sigal, 1986), correspondents working under such restricted conditions face serious problems. Therefore he pleads for a new form of journalism (where foreign news is concerned) with greater transparency and more self- and journalistic reflexivity as an integral part of news and background reports. One could perhaps call this proposed new form of journalistic representation ‘real existing journalism’ or ‘empirical journalism’ as distinguished from the regular normative (news as a ‘true’ window on the world) and less transparent journalism.

## **Case Study: Dutch Foreign Correspondents in Russia**

My research is focused on Dutch foreign correspondents who have had their ‘beat’ in Moscow some time during the period 1982–2007. Eleven (mostly former) correspondents were interviewed about their experiences in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation (in the following both are referred to as Russia) respectively. After having interviewed eight correspondents, the accounts, especially concerning specific journalistic procedures like the approach and use of sources, started to become repetitive and eventually nothing else was mentioned that would give any further insight

into their daily practice. Remembering the impressions of their stay in Russia did not seem to be a problem, however. Most remembered their experiences in Moscow very well.

Most of them worked for quality broadsheets (traditionally the media that pay the most attention to international news), sometimes combined with work for TV and/or radio. In general the interviews, conducted in 2007 and 2008, lasted approximately 75 minutes each. They were held at different locations, at their homes (3), in a cafe (2), at their place of work (news building) (5), or by phone (1). All interviews were recorded, with permission. I also had the interviewees' permission to quote them, which I decided to do in an anonymous way.

My basic research question concerned the ways correspondents coped with the different environment, society or culture in which they were based, and if and in what ways changes in the political system and the availability of sources affected their work. As a country that changed quite radically in a short period of time, Russia was an almost obvious choice for my research.

Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) model was used to formulate sensitizing concepts which were taken as a starting point for my topic list used in the semi-structured interviews. Seven topics in particular were addressed in the interviews: educational and professional background; first encounters with the Soviet Union/Russia and living conditions; the build-up of a network of information (sources) and their approach to sources; surveillance; subjects covered; the relation with editors at home; technological means of communication; and the social, cultural and political-ideological differences with the home country. The model was also used as an organizing principle for the codes appointed to the transcribed interviews at a later stage of the research (Wester and Peters, 2004: 77).

To code the interviews the Atlas-ti 5.5 computer program was applied. During the initial phase the transcribed interviews were coded in an 'open' way, meaning I coded everything that (could have) influenced the journalistic output. In subsequent coding phases the influences model of Shoemaker and Reese proved useful in arranging and rearranging these different codes under the more conceptual headings, i.e. the different levels of the model. By doing this, it became clear that it would be appropriate to develop a second model, representing a 'second' context, was appropriate. But before designing such a 'new' model (which will not be undertaken in this article) it will be necessary to investigate in more depth, first, the contextual influences on the production process of foreign news and, second, the produced media content itself (and the sources that are used). This would enable the researcher to assess the following statement made by William Hachten and James Scotton:

*... the freedom of access that a foreign reporter enjoys is usually directly related to the amount of independence and access enjoyed by local journalists themselves. If local journalists are harassed or news media controlled by a particular government, so very likely will be the foreign correspondent. (Hachten and Scotton, 2007: 131)*

Research on press freedom carried out by organizations like Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and others (see also Becker, 2003; Richter, 2008) conclude that perhaps news organizations in Russia have been freeing themselves more and

more from their past shackles, but they are still subject to oppressive mechanisms by the state. Despite the end of Communism as a totalitarian state ideology, Freedom House's annual Survey of Press Freedom had been rating Russia as 'Partly Free' since 1992 (Freedom House, Map of Press Freedom, Country Report, 2003). In 2005, Russia moved to the 'Not Free' rating (Freedom House, Map of Press Freedom, Country Report, 2005) and according to the latest survey Russia is still to be regarded as 'Not Free', even as 'experiencing the most acute deterioration' (Freedom House, Map of Press Freedom, Country Report, 2009). According to the definitions of the Freedom House ratings, 'Not Free' refers to those countries 'where basic political rights are absent, and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied'; 'Partly Free' countries are 'characterized by some restrictions on political rights and civil liberties, often in a context of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic strife or civil war'. Reporters Without Borders has expressed concern about Russia's 'absence of pluralism in news and information, an intensifying crackdown against journalists . . . and the drastic state of press freedom in Chechnya' (BBC News, 2009).

Considering what Hachten and Scotton and Luyendijk have observed, it was to be expected that the situation for correspondents based in Moscow was in certain ways problematic. That is, as these experts imply, under the aforementioned circumstances prevalent in Russia practising journalism according to certain professional standards is difficult to say the least.

The following standards, codes or values are generally considered to define the professionalism of (western) journalists: 'reliability (attribution to sources and verification of facts); fairness (to sources and the public); balance (give a voice to different perspectives); independence (no commercial or political dependency); distance (impartiality); relevance (inform about substantial developments and social problems); and social responsibility (self-reflection and accountability)' (Vasterman, 2004: 266). Although such standards are inherently idealistic and have to be discerned from practice-based journalism (Joseph, 2005), they still show how important source accessibility is (which in journalism goes without saying), and how significant having access to more than one source is, particularly to sources that take different positions or sides.

Taking the relation between sources and journalists as a starting point, the rest of this article focuses on the strategies correspondents develop during their work in countries with different political media systems, using the Moscow correspondents as my case study. How did they gather their news? Who were the sources they turned to for their news facts? How and from whom did they get the most information? What sources were mostly used? To answer these questions I focus only on those parts of the interviews where the use of sources and source accessibility were explicitly addressed.

In order to distinguish between different sources that were mentioned in the interviews I took Leon Sigal's source classification as a starting point. He differentiates between routine channels (official sources, press conferences, non-spontaneous events like speeches), informal channels (like background briefings, leaks, non-governmental proceedings and reports from other news organizations) and enterprise channels (like interviews, spontaneous events witnessed firsthand, independent

research and reporter's own conclusion and analysis) (Sigal, 1999: 225). One can add 'experts' (like academics) as an important source too (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 130–1).

## The Russian Context

It is beyond the scope of this article to make a detailed comparison between western societies and Russian society, or the Arab societies in which Luyendijk worked. It is also too easy to blithely state that Russian and Arab countries are both authoritarian, or that western societies are democratic and Russia is not (or not in the same way); one can almost differentiate as much between different western countries (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) as one can between Arab countries (Mellor, 2007; Sakr, 2001; Sreberny, 2001), and in all countries media systems change over the course of time, as the case of Russia shows (Bassow, 1988; Zassoursky, 2004: 20–1).

To avoid essentialism I took the political media system as a starting point, in order to give an impression of Russian society. How different was Russian society for the Dutch correspondents? And – considering the fact that Russia developed from a socialist, totalitarian political system, via a transformational semi-democratic system, into a neo-authoritarian capitalist system – how did correspondents experience working under circumstances that differed so much from their own? In other words, did they themselves manage to practise journalism according to western standards or values?

To start with the differences, one could in a broad sweep state that Western Europeans do perhaps consider the Russians as different, but not in an irreconcilable way. During the Communist era, it was clear the Soviet people belonged to the ideological 'other'. On their first encounter those correspondents who stayed in Russia until approximately 2000 experienced the country as indeed quite different from where they came from. The impressions mentioned had to do with: the role of the secret service; the long queues at the shops and the complicated way of running errands generally; the bureaucracy that made all practical issues in daily life so time consuming; appointments that were so easily cancelled; bad medical care; corruption; bad roads; the scarcely lit streets at night; and so on. But also those correspondents who lived in Russia after 2000 told me that in order to be able to work as a journalist you had to be very flexible and patient and you had to know how to deal with constant insecurity and absurd situations. These inconveniences had to do with a lack of security, comfort and luxury but also with the Russian people themselves. While some correspondents did not consider Russians that different from Dutch people, other correspondents believed in the existence of a kind of national mentality, the so-called 'Russian soul'.

When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, some things altered radically, while others stayed more or less the same, as the correspondents noted. Russia was opening up to the world and Russians seemed to have become much closer to 'us', Europeans that is, thanks to Gorbachev's successful international public diplomacy. Boris Yeltsin continued to close the gap in a much more radical way: by the dissolution in 1991 of the Soviet Union into a Russian Federation, by the democratization and

decentralization of institutions of power and most of all by stimulating free market liberalism. However, although many things changed, overall transformations were not as radical as they were perceived from the outside. Until the end of the 1990s, Russia's political, economic and legal systems were still in a transitional phase, only slowly developing towards a more democratic, capitalist or neoliberal society. There was still much corruption and tycoons and 'barons' reigned the industries, politics and media (Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky, 2008). With the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, Russia continued to become a free market economy from which more people than ever, yet not by far the majority, benefited. However, at the same time the political system became more autocratic, or neo-authoritarian (Becker, 2004). Where the current media system (and the freedom of press) is concerned, one could compare the Russian media system roughly with that of Italy (except for the historical context), at least according to the indicators Hallin and Mancini (2004) use in their theory on western media systems. Russia currently represents more of a 'polarized pluralist' media system in which professionalization is weak, but state intervention strong (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The following sections are all based on the content of the interviews, except where references are made to other sources.

## Profile and Background of the Correspondents

The correspondents I interviewed were based in Moscow during different periods of time and consequently, during relatively different political systems (some reporters covered more than one era): the Communist totalitarian and non-free era under Yuri Andropov (1982–3) and Konstantin Chernenko, (1984–5) (one correspondent<sup>2</sup>); the transitional phase of the Mikhail Gorbachev administration (1985–91) (four correspondents); the partly free Russian society under Boris Yeltsin (1991–9) (four correspondents); and the non-free Vladimir Putin administration (2000–8) (two correspondents). Before addressing the role of sources, I briefly summarize the correspondents' personal and professional backgrounds, as this played a major role in topics and sources addressed in their reports.

The personal and professional profile of the correspondents largely resembles the general profile Stephen Hess found after conducting a survey of hundreds of US foreign correspondents during the early 1990s (Hess, 1996). Hess's sample consisted mostly of white, heterosexual males, in their forties, with academic backgrounds. This profile roughly matches the general profile of Dutch correspondents (Verduyn, 2005), although in my sample two correspondents were female, at least one was not heterosexual and they were generally under 40 during their time in Moscow – most being in their late twenties or thirties when they started to work in Moscow.

Few of the interviewees took up their post in Moscow with their family. Most correspondents experienced Russia as a very interesting but also a very challenging and tough place to be. They would not have missed it for the world, but because the workload was quite heavy some of them were totally exhausted by the end of their time there. The length of their stay varied between three to seven years. Daily

life was not particularly easy, especially during the 1980s. Due to Russian bureaucracy, running ordinary household affairs was very time consuming. But also socially it was not always easy. It often took some time to learn the language well enough to become acquainted with people outside the circle of colleagues from their home country or from other foreign news media. Some of them experienced times of loneliness, although the often overwhelming amount of newsworthy events and developments kept them busy enough.

Concerning the general professional backgrounds of the Dutch reporters, all of them already had a few years of journalistic experience before they were asked to go to Russia for their newspaper. One could therefore describe them as being socialized in and loyal to the news organization they were part of (Breed, 1955; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Sigal, 1999) Most worked for a liberal (*NRC Handelsblad*) or leftist (*de Volkskrant*) newspaper, others for a religiously oriented newspaper (*Trouw*) or the regional press. Certainly, the national newspapers among these are well-regarded, quality newspapers in the Netherlands. All but two of the correspondents held a permanent position.

As to their educational background, only one of the correspondents had a non-academic background, the others took Slavonic and Russian studies (four) or history in university. The non-academic correspondent was the only one educated in journalism. The ones who had taken Russian studies spoke the language fluently, the others more or less learned Russian during their stay. In order to cope with the language problem many made use of interpreters and although they felt handicapped for a while, they told me it never really stood in the way of doing their job well.

## The Final Years of Communism (1982–5)

From the first 'decree on the press' issued by Lenin in 1917, until the first post-Communist new press law in August 1990, the basic premise of Soviet press policy read 'those not for us are against us' (Murray, 1994: 3). 'Stalin [1922–53] completed the construction, begun by Lenin, of a media machine which was totally obedient and so self-regulating that the censorship agency, *Glavlit*, was largely redundant' (Murray, 1994: 23; see also Koltsova, 2006: 25–6). In the post-Stalinist era, dominated by Khrushchev (1953–64) and Brezhnev (1964–82), the shackles on the press were only slightly loosened. However, the propagated idea of a happy society still dictated the news. Disasters and calamities were simply not reported: 'bad news was no news' (Murray, 1994: 28, 16). After Brezhnev died Soviet politics were safeguarded by his two successors, Chernenko and Andropov. Nothing really changed with respect to press policies.

Only one of the correspondents I interviewed was based in Moscow during this period. At that time he was one of the few correspondents in Moscow and the first for his newspaper. This meant he had to build up his network of information all by himself. Although one would perhaps expect that subsequent colleagues would make use of each other's network, this was not the case. Every correspondent who newly arrived had to find his or her own way through the Russian web of available sources.

During the early 1980s, routine and informal channels were to a certain degree accessible. Yet, information was not considered to be of much value because all information, including that of the press agency TASS and other Soviet news media, was dictated by the government. Obviously, this kind of information was of some worth when the foreign news desk at home was interested in the official statements on certain issues, but the correspondent himself was more interested in what was hidden behind the official statements. This meant that he had to know how to read between the lines, how to compare between different media and how to explore alternative sources in order to get some idea of what was going on in the higher echelons. All correspondents (including those in the later periods) did their best to find people who could provide them with some kind of inside information, people who mastered so-called 'Kremlinology': the ability to explain Russian state politics by 'seeing' through all the manoeuvres that took place behind the solid walls of the Kremlin and distil from that what people could expect to happen in the near future.

Sometimes colleagues befriended from foreign press bureaus were of some help. Press agencies were and are almost always better equipped and have (or had) considerably more personnel. Besides, in the hierarchy of information channels the authorities or their information managers were much more likely to provide Reuters or AP with information than some unknown journalist from the Netherlands.

The correspondent felt that the only way to lay his hands on more background information was to explore other, sometimes secondary, sources or use alternative methods. What I would call a 'phenomenological' method proved successful in that sense: writing down what your everyday experiences were, what you observed in the streets or what people talked about at parties. This provided readers with a human interest point of view and with at least some knowledge of the living conditions in the Soviet Union. Taxi drivers, a classic source, were popular among correspondents (more than one recounted this to me) especially when they didn't tell the driver they were journalists, or even better, when they pretended to be from Estonia or Lithuania (although people coming from those countries speak with an accent, in the eyes of most Russian people they were still considered to be 'one of us').

Experts, mostly academics, were also valuable sources, especially the more critical ones. Most correspondents had at least one expert at their disposal. They were particularly valuable when information from other sources had to be checked. But there was always one problem: secret service surveillance from the KGB. During the totalitarian regime, visitors from abroad, and foreign journalists in particular, were highly suspect. Also 'our' correspondent in Moscow at the time was closely watched by the KGB. The correspondent's secretary (and probably his housekeeper too) worked for the secret service and had to report back on a weekly basis. But surveillance was not only restricted to the home. Often the correspondent was followed in the streets, and a KGB agent would be posted, day and night, in front of the building where he (and other foreigners) lived. This made it almost impossible to be visited by Russians; everyone, but especially Russians, were screened. He often felt annoyed and sometimes even intimidated or threatened by this surveillance. Openly interviewing people was out of the question and official sources were to be distrusted or regarded as purely propagandistic. If he wanted to make a short TV film

somewhere, he had to ask for permission and could only hire Russian camera men. If he wanted to visit places outside Moscow, he had to join state-conducted tours together with his colleagues. This was the only legal way to 'explore' other regions. Looking back at his experience he called it a kind of ritual dance, however intimating that sometimes could be.

Once a month this reporter had his 'ritual' lunch with an official delegate from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (from which he had received his accreditation):

*We both played our role. . . . It was his task to point out to me the so-called mistakes I had made in my news reports or written impressions about for example the Soviet agricultural plans. . . . The bureau he worked for had quite a backlog because often his remarks were about pieces written months ago. . . . I never changed anything, I just said 'I hadn't viewed it from that angle' and then everybody was happy again and the official felt he had done his job.*

## The Gorbachev Era (1985–91)

Surveillance was certainly not restricted to the Soviet era. Almost every correspondent was at some stage confronted with the secret service. This took several different forms, depending on the period and sometimes also on the political background of the reporter. The correspondent mentioned in the previous section was not politically engaged at all, but was still considered suspect simply for being a correspondent. Subsequent reporters (I interviewed four of them from the Gorbachev period) were more politically engaged and, more importantly, they spoke Russian fluently. They had studied Slavonic and Russian and had visited Russia before. This gave them a great advantage, because it also meant they already had contacts that were of use during their time as a correspondent. They knew the language and country well enough to become involved in Russian society in a way one could call sociopolitically engaged. This engagement started during their studies in the 1970s, when they became involved in Soviet dissident circles and read the underground *samizdat* literature (uncensored and unpublished books or articles). This meant they were not engaged in the way leftist fellow travellers were. Rather, they took a much more critical stance, one that was not really popular during those days among people on the political left. They actively showed compassion with the (former) victims of the political system, be it ordinary people and victims of the KGB or political dissidents, by offering advice, (material) help and of course by making their causes known to the public at home.

These years of the Gorbachev administration were characterized as the 'Partly Free' period. Even until the end of 1990, when a new press law was issued, it was still considered problematic to criticize the authorities. The secret service still dominated political and social life (Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky, 2008; Murray, 1994: 51). No wonder that no fewer than three of the Dutch correspondents had confrontations with the Russian secret service. One was even expelled because of his work as an ombudsman. Alongside his job as correspondent, he wrote letters of complaint to the Russian state for people who were harassed or badly treated by the official institutions, in particular by KGB officers. This gave him a rare opportunity to gain a deeper insight into the daily troubles ordinary people encountered when living

under political constraints. Another correspondent mentioned the intimidating effect of KGB agents during a demonstration by Jewish people who wished to emigrate. The KGB filmed everything, including the correspondents who were present. Some time later she was called by her 'mentor' at the press service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They had lunch and he mentioned her presence at the demonstration, but did not dare to reprimand her. Things at least had already changed that much.

Although surveillance affected the work of the reporters in many ways, they almost always found ways to escape from the eyes of the secret service agents and perform their job as journalists as well as the circumstances allowed. This 'escape' had also become much easier now that all kinds of restrictions were slowly being lifted, like for example having to ask permission to travel outside Moscow.

During this period routine channels were much more easily accessible than before. But most official sources were considered suspicious because they were still representing the party line. Zassoursky (2004: 21) calls this the 'Glasnost-oriented propaganda machine'. The same was true for expert sources. Despite more freedom of speech, people were trained to be suspicious and correspondents had to build up a relation of trust before people really felt free to convey or share any kind of critical information.

On the other hand, once restrictions and censorship were officially banned after the Press Law of August 1990, everyone with an opinion was more than happy to talk to the (foreign) press. Zassoursky notes that indeed during the final years of the Gorbachev era and the first years under Yeltsin, 'the press was a genuinely independent institution, and in an environment of weak political authority and chaotic economy, had enormous power' (Zassoursky, 2004: 16). Now people were not afraid anymore; as one correspondent recalled:

*... they really felt like talking to you, the more the better, they wanted to tell you their life story ... it really was a journalistic goldmine, I even interviewed a former censor (and later someone from the KGB), which was really exceptional (and even made it to The New York Times).*

Also politicians, who until then had kept themselves hidden behind Kremlin walls became more open and accessible.

The general urge to communicate and to speak out freely could also be observed in the Russian media themselves. There was a real 'hunger for news', as one correspondent mentioned. A new critical generation of journalists took their chance to finally perform an un- or less restricted form of journalism (see also Pasti, 2005). It did not mean, however, a kind of journalism in which facts and opinion were strictly separated. On the contrary: it became a highly biased press, full of rumours and sensational news, irrespective of whether it was based on one or no source at all. Everything was considered to be newsworthy.

This openness changed things considerably for the correspondents, who used the main Russian media as an important source of newsworthy facts. Beside consulting the main international and Russian press agencies, most reporters read more than 10 newspapers and watched TV news programmes on a daily basis. But all Russian sources, however important in providing the correspondents with the main news,

had to be handled with care. Again but in a different way, correspondents now had to read between the lines. International press agencies (Reuters, AP) provided correspondents with much more valuable information and many of them bowed to what they had to offer.

## The Yeltsin Years (1991–9)

In August 1991, Boris Yeltsin came to power as the first Russian president. In the summer of 1996 he was re-elected. Things changed radically now that Yeltsin freed Russia from its totalitarian past by discarding the Communist Party and its political institutions. The economic system was to become a capitalist one. This had major consequences for news organizations. Since the Press Law of 1990, newspapers could operate in a way independent from the state, being free from censorship or, at least, from direct censorship. As Andrei Richter (2008: 308) shows in his study on censorship and media freedom in post-Soviet states, 'the absence of censors has in some cases been "compensated" in other ways'. Indirect or 'soft' censorship was practised in several forms, from 'restricting information and advertising for disloyal media' to 'in-house censorship' to 'illegal pressure', such as using violence against journalists especially when they had covered or tried to cover 'armed conflict' (the Chechen wars), 'corruption, financial crime, the drugs trade, terrorism or ethnic conflict' (Richter, 2008: 310, 313; see also Koltsova, 2006: 60–72).

Nevertheless, this period can still be characterized as a period with a hitherto unknown (press) freedom. In addition, Yeltsin freed the media from state control by abolishing public subsidies. 'The golden age for journalism', as one of the correspondents called the era that commenced with the new Press Law, continued under Yeltsin but simultaneously had less positive consequences (see also McNair, 2000). Although the media was less and less centralized and state-controlled, it now became regulated by forces of the free market. The tendency towards privatization meant the emergence of other powers, like business groups or corporate 'clans' managed by national media tycoons or barons like Vladimir Gusinsky, Boris Berezovsky and Sergei Lisovsky (Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky, 2008; McNair, 2000: 87–8).

These new developments, becoming particularly visible after Yeltsin's re-election (Koltsova, 2006: 32), also had their impact on the content of the media. A clear tendency was visible in the broadcasting of more popular TV programmes and a stronger emphasis on sensational news a tendency also referred to as 'tabloidization' (Esser, 1999).

Despite bureaucratic obstacles, routine sources were relatively accessible and interviews fairly easy to arrange. Almost every day a press conference organized by politicians from the Duma took place, most ministries however were still inaccessible. Newspapers, as informal channels, were really free for a short period of time but before long they were bought up by and came under the control of media tycoons. This made these media less of a reliable source. So, again, correspondents had to read between the lines. But because information was more freely available than ever before, no one really complained. As one correspondent said, 'it was enough to be able to write a story. Readers don't want you to go too deep into Russian affairs anyway. After reading three Russian names they lose focus.'

## The New Tsar Elect (1999–2007)

While the coming to power of Yeltsin and all subsequent moves he made could be called revolutionary, a counter-revolution took place when former KGB agent Vladimir Putin took over. Within a few years most influential media organizations were brought under state control, just like all national TV networks. 'The Kremlin keeps "stop lists" of individuals (political opponents, uncompromised critics) who are barred from national television. The coverage of sensitive issues is thoroughly filtered to ensure that the picture of Russian life delivered to viewers is not politically disturbing or provocative', wrote *The Washington Post* editor Masha Lipman (2005: 320). It was almost like an echo from the Soviet era where bad news was considered no news. Many critical journalists lived in fear of being threatened or even killed. Self-censorship became the rule once more. As already indicated, Putin's Russia was (and still is, under Medvedev) a non-free country where respect for civilian rights and press freedom is concerned.

Two of the correspondents I interviewed were posted in Russia during the Putin years. They confirmed that things had been getting more tense and strict, although the Russians also seemed to have become more relaxed and self-confident over these last years. There were also contradictions. One claimed that 'people could be easily approached when you wanted to know about certain facts, but asking about their opinion was problematic'. The other correspondent contradicted this by saying that 'it was rather easy to approach people; they even dared to say Putin was an idiot or that politicians were acting as if they were members of the mafia'. On the other hand, the same correspondent also noted that it was very difficult to approach politicians. The Kremlin was a bastion, the ministries were closed and so were many archives. Travelling to Chechnya, without official permission, was out of the question. State-conducted tours were organized, the so-called Kremlin tours, but he wanted to interview people without any possible interference. This made it hard to report about politics in a trustworthy way. He admitted: 'We just had to speculate about many things and we deduced a lot from signals picked up from different "sources".'

## Epilogue

This article addresses the different ways in which correspondents dealt with complex political media systems with respect to the production of news and background reports. It focuses on the accessibility and trustworthiness of sources of information in different periods in recent Russian history, from the perspective of several Dutch foreign correspondents. It became clear that correspondents had to weigh their sources constantly, independent of the period. Only during the first years under Yeltsin did most sources seem to be open and correspondents even felt overwhelmed by the number of available sources. In other words, at that moment they could easily meet western journalistic standards. But this was only for a short period of time. In all other times reporters had to use different strategies in order to get reliable information: they had to be able to read between the lines of Russian news reports, they had to listen carefully and critically to the information representatives of political (and economic) power shared with them at press conferences, they had

to make extensive use of (critical) experts and were sometimes forced to limit themselves to making observations of daily life. In other words, interpreting was their main job, be it the political-economic state of affairs or what this meant for the ordinary Russian.

In relation to this Dan Berkowitz wrote: 'As long as journalists need to write beyond their opinions alone, as long as they see themselves as conveyors of information rather than interpreters of issues and occurrences, they will need to rely on sources' (Berkowitz, 2009: 112). Nevertheless, conveyors of information are also always more or less interpreters. They put their information into an accepted narrative frame, thereby prioritizing certain pieces of information over others. The question is whether correspondents are, by nature, merely 'conveyors of information' or first and foremost 'interpreters of issues and occurrences' that take place in environments which deviate from the ones of their readers, watchers and listeners. Another observation Berkowitz makes seems relevant in this respect: 'The country where reporters interact with their sources does make a difference, partly because of press system differences, but also because of the role that media play in a specific culture' (Berkowitz, 2009: 111). Journalists working within western democratic media systems tend to have a rather transparent relationship with authoritative sources in the sense that the channels between them are relatively open and are accessible from both sides. There is sometimes even a strong interdependency (symbiosis). This was and is certainly not the case in Russia. But all correspondents made shift with what they had.

This article is about their experiences, about Russia through their eyes, and how they dealt with different situations. In order to say more about how things affected their work, more research, in the form of content analysis, has to be done, particularly concerning the issue of transparency.

What hopefully has become clear is that there is a growing tension between the undermining of slow journalism due to economic pressures on the one hand, and the necessary interpretative style of journalism correspondents need to practise when working in authoritarian countries. We have to admit that practising foreign correspondence in authoritarian states has significant limitations, but it is still an open question whether this always entails 'bad' journalism. The forced necessity to explore non-conventional and secondary sources can lead to surprisingly 'good' journalism, as Lyendijk himself has many times shown in his own journalistic work.

## Notes

1. The book is forthcoming in the UK in spring 2010 (Profile Publishers).
2. During the totalitarian regime only a few Dutch correspondents were based in the Soviet Union. Most of them are not alive any more.

## References

- Bassow, W. (1988) *The Moscow Correspondents: Reporting on Russia from the Revolution to Glasnost*. New York: William Morrow.

- BBC News (2009) 'Country Profile: Russia (Media)', April; at: [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country\\_profiles/1102275.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1102275.stm)
- Becker, J. (2003) 'Keeping Track of Press Freedom', *European Journal of Communication* 18(1): 107–12.
- Becker, J. (2004) 'Lessons from Russia: A Neo-Authoritarian Media System', *European Journal of Communication* 19(2): 139–63.
- Berkowitz, D.A. (2009) 'Reporters and Their Sources', pp. 102–15 in K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch (eds) *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Boyd-Barrett, O. and T. Rantanen (2004) 'News Agencies as News Sources', pp. 31–45 in C. Paterson and A. Sreberny (eds) *International News in the 21st Century*. Luton: John Libbey/University of Luton Press.
- Breed, W. (1955) 'Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis', *Social Force* 33: 326–35.
- Clausen, L. (2004) 'Localizing the Global: "Domestication" Processes in International News Production', *Media, Culture and Society* 26(1): 25–44.
- Cottle, S. (2009) *Global Crisis Reporting: Journalism in the Global Age*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press.
- Davies, N. (2008) *Flat Earth News*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Deuze, M. (2007) *Media Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Esser, F. (1999) ' "Tabloidization" of News: A Comparative Analysis of Anglo-American and German Press Journalism', *European Journal of Communication* 14(3): 291–324.
- Felshtinsky, J.G. and V.V. Pribylovsky (2008) *The Age of Assassins: The Rise and Rise of Vladimir Putin*. London: Gibson Square.
- Freedom House, Map(s) of Press Freedom (2002–9) at: [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org) (accessed April 2009)
- Gauthier, G. (2005) 'A Realist Point of View on News Journalism', *Journalism Studies* 6(1): 51–60.
- Galtung, J. and M. Holmboe Ruge (1999) 'The Structure of Foreign News', pp. 21–31 in H. Tumber (ed.) *News: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Orig. pub. 1965.)
- Gans, H.J. (1980) *Deciding What's News*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hachten, W.A. and J.F. Scotton (2007) *The World News Prism: Global Information in a Satellite Age*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hallin, D.C. and P. Mancini (2004) *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamilton, J. Maxwell and E. Jenner (2004) 'Redefining Foreign Correspondence', *Journalism* 5(3): 301–21.
- Hannerz, U. (2004) *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Hess, S. (1996) *International News and Foreign Correspondents*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Joseph, B. (2005) 'Journalism in the Global Age: Between Normative and Empirical', *Gazette* 67(6): 575–90.
- Kester, B.C.M. (2008) 'Working at the End of the Assembly Line: A Conversation with Joris Luyendijk about the Impossibility of Doing Western-Style Journalism in Arab Countries', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(4): 500–6.
- Koltsova, O. (2006) *News Media and Power in Russia*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lipman, M. (2005) 'Constrained or Irrelevant: The Media in Putin's Russia', *Current History* October: 319–24.
- Louw, E.P. (2004) 'Journalists Reporting from Foreign Places', pp. 151–62 in A.S. de Beer and J.C. Merrill (eds) *Global Journalism: Topical Issues and Media Systems*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Luyendijk, J. (2006) *Het zijn net mensen. Beelden van het Midden-Oosten [People Like Us: The Truth about Reporting the Middle East]*. Amsterdam: Podium.
- McNair, B. (2000) 'Power, Profit, Corruption, and Lies: The Russian Media in the 1990s', pp. 79–94 in J. Curran and M.-J. Park (eds) *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Mellor, N. (2007) *Modern Arab Journalism: Problems and Prospects*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Mindich, D.T.Z. (2005) *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under Forty Don't Follow the News*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Murray, J. (1994) *The Russian Press from Brezhnev to Yeltsin: Behind the Paper Curtain*. Aldershot: Elgar.
- Pasti, S. (2005) 'Two Generations of Contemporary Russian Journalists', *European Journal of Communication* 20(1): 89–115.
- Paterson, C. and A. Sreberny (eds) (2004) *International News in the 21st Century*. Luton: John Libbey/University of Luton Press.
- Perlmutter, D. and J. Maxwell Hamilton (eds) (2008) *From Pigeons to News Portals: Foreign Reporting and the Challenge of New Technology*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Philo, G. (2004) 'The Mass Production of Ignorance: News Content and Audience Understanding', pp. 199–224 in C. Paterson and A. Sreberny (eds) *International News in the 21st Century*. Luton: John Libbey/University of Luton Press.
- Philo, G. and M. Berry (2004) *Bad News From Israel*. London: Pluto Press.
- Pollock, J. Crothers (1981) *The Politics of Crisis Reporting: Learning to be a Foreign Correspondent*. New York: Praeger.
- Richter, A. (2008) 'Post-Soviet Perspective on Censorship and Freedom of the Media: An Overview', *International Communication Gazette* 70(5): 307–24.
- Sakr, N. (2001) *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*. London and New York: I.B. Taurus.
- Schudson, M. (2005) 'Four Approaches to the Sociology of News', pp. 172–97 in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society*, 4th edn. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Seib, P. (2008) 'The Real-Time Challenge: Speed and the Integrity of International News Coverage', pp. 150–66 in D. Perlmutter and J. Maxwell Hamilton (eds) *From Pigeons to News Portals: Foreign Reporting and the Challenge of New Technology*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Shoemaker, P. and S. Reese (1996) *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influence on Mass Media Content*, 2nd edn. New York: Longman.
- Sigal, L.V. (1986) 'Sources Make the News', pp. 9–37 in R.K. Manoff and M. Schudson (eds) *Reading the News*. New York: Random House.
- Sigal, L.V. (1999) 'Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking', pp. 224–34 in H. Tumber (ed.) *News: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Orig. pub. 1973.)
- Sreberny, A. (2001) 'Mediated Culture in the Middle East: Diffusion, Democracy, Difficulties', *Gazette* 63(2–3): 101–19.
- Tuchman, G. (1978) *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- Tunstall, J. (1971) *Journalists at Work*. London: Constable.
- Utley, G. (1997) 'The Shrinking of Foreign News: From Broadcast to Narrowcast', *Foreign Affairs* 76(2): 2–10.
- Van Ginneken, J. (1996) *De schepping van de wereld in het nieuws*. Houten: Bohn Stafleu van Loghum.
- Vasterman, P. (2004) *Mediahype*. Amsterdam: Aksant
- Verduyn, S. (2005) "'Van onze correspondent". Een onderzoek naar de Nederlandse buitenland-correspondent', master's thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Wester, F. and V. Peters (2004) *Kwalitatieve Analyse. Uitgangspunten en procedures* Bussum: Coutinho.
- Wu, D. and J. Maxwell Hamilton (2004) 'US Foreign Correspondents: Changes and Continuity at the Turn of the Century', *Gazette* 66(6): 517–32.
- Zassoursky, I. (2004) *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Zelizer, B. and S. Allan (eds) (2002) *Journalism after September 11*. London: Routledge.

**Bernadette C.M. Kester** works as assistant professor at the Media Department and the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC) at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research interests centre on foreign correspondence, international news and media and (historical) representation. She is author of *Film Front Weimar* (Amsterdam University Press, 1998, trans. 2003) about the representation of the First World War in German films; and *Focus op Korea* (Sdu Uitgevers, 2000); and has published articles on media and conflict. She serves as editorial chair of *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*,

the Dutch journal of media history. In 2008 she initiated and organized the international expert meeting 'Transparency in Foreign News Reporting'. An interview by Kester with Luyendijk appeared in *Press/Politics* (13(4), 2008).

**Address** *Erasmus University Rotterdam, Communication and Media (FHKW), Room L2-49, PO Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands. [email: kester@fhk.eur.nl]*

**Fonte: International Communication Gazette, v. 72, n. 1, p. 51-69, 2010. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://online.sagepub.com>>. Acesso em: 2 fev.2010.**

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais.