

## COMMENT AND RESPONSE

### MEDIA COVERAGE OF TRAGEDY REFLECTS TRAGEDY OF RUSSIAN MEDIA

*Diana Maley*  
*Furman University*

In her essay “Beslan School Tragedy: The Rhetoric of the Russian Media,” Olga Zaytseva analyzes the Russian media’s attempts to reinforce the cultural assumptions and values of the Russian population. She applies Maurice Charland’s theory of constitutive rhetoric to the Russian media’s behavior, stating that Russian nationals “provided unstated assumptions, actively participating in self-persuasion and reinforcing cultural values and beliefs” (39). Two years after her article was published, it makes sense to reexamine Zaytseva’s claims regarding the rhetoric of the Beslan situation. While documentation of censorship in the Russian media can be found prior to 2005, since the publication of Zaytseva’s essay several articles regarding the state of the Russian media have been published in such sources as Harvard University’s *Nieman Reports*, the *European Journal of Communication*, and the Society of Professional Journalists’ *Quill* magazine, all demonstrating an increasing lack of freedom in the Russian media and making accusations of corruption. Building upon Zaytseva’s thorough research on the Beslan coverage, I use these articles to provide further insight into the questions she raises regarding public participation and ideology boosting in Russian journalism, but I argue that due to the Russian media’s inherent compulsion to advocate the government’s agenda and demonstrated inability to break free from government influence, we cannot accurately gauge the unity of the Russian people through analysis of media content.

A 2005 article in the *Nieman Reports* outlines the increasing number of atrocities suffered by the independent press in Russia. The article mentions the government’s efforts to take control of the national broadcast media, the eleven unsolved murders of journalists during Vladimir Putin’s presidency, the forced resignation of *Izvestiya*’s chief editor, and the fabrication of criminal cases against journalists to suppress information (Lupis 118–19). Growing awareness among industry leaders can be found in the *European Journal of Communication*, which quotes Johann Fritz, president of the International Press Institute, speaking about the Russian press at the 2001 World Congress for Information Cooperation: “Self-censorship is widespread in the regions as a result of physical attacks and threats against journalists” (Simons and Strovsky 205). These are merely a few examples of the rise in coverage of corruption and control in the Russian media.

Most important, this body of journalism in the far freer international press provides a safe outlet for Russians to express their opinions publicly. One such article published in April 2004’s *Quill* magazine offers one Russian’s perspective on the lack of public participation in the ideological persuasion process with the Russian press. *Quill* published an interview with Oleg Panfilov, director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, an organization founded in 2000 by the Russian Union of Journalists for the purpose of protecting media freedom in the Russian Federation. When asked if moral pressure could provide enough influence on the Kremlin to decriminalize libel, Panfilov replied,

“The mechanism of citizen pressure on the government isn’t there in Russia or in the other former Soviet republics, or if it exists, it’s barely noticeable” (Trombly 33). Later in the interview, discussing the influence of international organizations on the Kremlin’s policy decisions, he says, “International organizations often wait for the population itself to protest, and the population doesn’t protest. Chechnya is a good example—there’s been a war for nine years. Are there mass protests in Moscow? No. The population is silent.” The lack of public protest and the reluctance to state views opposing the government certainly make it more difficult for Russian journalists to gauge public opinion on such politically charged issues as the Beslan tragedy or to estimate the unity of the nation.

Even more troubling is a notion set forth in two articles published in the *European Journal of Communication*. Both articles imply that the Russian media is not capable of maintaining objectivity and acting on the people’s behalf due to its overwhelming bias toward promoting the government’s agenda and swaying public opinion. Greg Simons and Dmitry Strovsky suggest that the Russian media have always operated under the assumption that serving the state was foremost (196). After discussing the history and development of the Russian media from the early eighteenth century to the current day, Simons and Strovsky conclude that “mass media outlets have been considered more as a vehicle through which to acquire political capital rather than a profit-making enterprise in its own right” (208). Katrin Voltmer writes on the motive of large Russian corporations to purchase newspapers and other media outlets: “The motive of profit-making does not seem to be the driving force for the companies’ investment in newspapers as most of them notoriously make deficits. Apparently, newspapers are regarded as a means of influencing public opinion and eventually the overall political situation, as well as government decision-making” (473). This idea directly applies to Zaytseva’s idea of the Russian media “offering national unity as the rhetorical cure,” which Zaytseva identifies as a pseudo-solution that doesn’t resolve conflict but does encourage public support of the government (43–44). Headlines collected by Zaytseva, such as “There Is Little That Threatens the Unity of the Country Right Now,” “Trust in President Putin Is an Expression of Our Last Hope,” and “Antiterrorist Rally Will Not Become Antigovernment,” all suggest pro-Putin or pro-government themes and reinforce these views of the Russian media (42).

Since Zaytseva’s essay was published, international concern over the poor state of the Russian media has risen, with recent articles reporting new, worse atrocities committed by the Russian government against the independent press. Combining Zaytseva’s research and analysis with newer information and interpretation, it is clear that the Russian media cannot perform the necessary civic duties of the press. Being unable to remain neutral and providing limited information on current issues and events renders the “rhetoric” of the Russian media little more than propaganda.

## Works Cited

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