

LOSING PRAVDA

Ethics and The Press
in Post-Truth Russia

NATALIA ROUDAKOVA

What happens when journalism is made superfluous? Combining ethnography, media analysis, and moral and political theory, this book examines the unravelling of professional journalism in Russia during the 1990s and 2000s and its effects on society. It argues that contrary to widespread assumptions, late Soviet-era journalists shared a cultural contract with their audiences that ensured that their work was guided by a truth-telling ethic. Postcommunist economic and political upheaval led not so much to greater press freedom as to the de-professionalization of journalism because journalists found themselves having to monetize their truth-seeking skills. This has culminated in a perception of journalists as political prostitutes, or members of the "second oldest profession", as they are commonly termed in Russia. Roudakova argues that this cultural shift has fundamentally eroded the value of truth-seeking and truth-telling in Russian society. Beyond Russia, this book illustrates what could happen to a country's public life when collective truths are regularly displaced by systematic falsehoods and fabrications.

NATALIA ROUDAKOVA is Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of California, San Diego. Educated in both the Soviet Union and the United States, she draws on her linguistic, political and social knowledge of the region. Her work combines cultural anthropology, political communication, political theory, moral philosophy, and the study of Russian history and contemporary society and culture.

'Losing Pravda is a groundbreaking study of the decline of journalism and the loss of a culture of truth in Russia. It is a wonderful news ethnography, rich in its portrayal of Russian journalists and the way they have seen their social role over many decades.'

Daniel Hallin, University of California, San Diego

'Natalia Roudakova brings deep ethnographic research, fluency in social theory, and an engaged ethical sense for the deep urgency of journalism to this thoughtful and essential book. The conditions she analyses, such as fake news, sponsored content, swirling rumors and cynicism, punctuated by the courageous few committed to telling the truth, are not unique to Russia. In a way, Roudakova has helped us understand not only the Russian scene, but also our own in the age of Donald J. Trump.'

John D. Peters, University of Iowa

'Ground-breaking. Losing Pravda is indispensable reading for anybody interested in what happens to public life in a time when our collective truths are displaced by consistent falsehood and fabrication.'

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Cardiff University

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For my parents, Anna Rudakova and Vladimir Rudakov

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Introduction

This is a book about the momentous transformation in Russia's political and public culture that took place after the fall of the Soviet Union. I take political culture to be what people know, understand, believe, and feel about politics – how it is conducted, by whom, to what ends, and with what consequences for people's individual and collective lives. Political culture thus has an epistemic and an ethical dimension. It has an institutional dimension as well: politics is practiced more visibly in particular locales and contexts and by people in particular occupations.

The sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union – and the vertiginous political transformation that ensued – offered social scientists a rare opportunity to closely observe social and political change in the making. A key concern among post-Soviet reformers and lay and academic observers was whether the intended rebuilding of political institutions away from authoritarianism would be accompanied by a corresponding shift toward liberal political beliefs among citizens. The worry was that the change in beliefs might lag behind, because beliefs are presumably harder to transform than institutional practices (or so we are told).

This book speaks to this set of concerns. However, instead of treating culture as a desired aftereffect of institutional change, I see it as a constitutive component of that change. Political regimes and people's knowledge about the world – the common and collective world people inhabit together – are closely intertwined (Glaeser 2011). Political regimes do not exist without particular epistemologies and ethics built into them; regimes and knowledge about politics stand together and change together.

This book, then, is about the ethical and epistemic dimensions of post-Soviet political change. Put differently, it is a study of political change as a cultural process. Methodologically, it was imperative for a study like this to proceed at two levels of analysis – going back and forth between the institutional level and the level of meanings. Given these goals, several political institutions slated for a democratic

transition in Russia could have served as good research locales for a study such as this. If we understand democratic politics to be about the righting of wrongs and the pursuit of justice (Ranciere 2004), then I believe that the legislative branch, the courts, and the press would all have made particularly fitting research sites.

I chose to focus on the press because access to journalists and newsrooms was far easier to secure for a single ethnographer without political connections than gaining unmitigated entry to courtrooms and legislative chambers. Another reason in favor of studying the press was the fact that I shared the educational background of many Russian journalists. Lastly, and crucially, journalism remains one of the quintessential *political* professions in modernity, alongside diplomacy and law, as Max Weber remarked a century ago. Political advocacy – taking a stance, fighting for a cause, and bearing responsibility for it – is “the politician’s element” (Weber 1946: 95). “To an outstanding degree, politics today is in fact conducted in public by means of the spoken or written word,” and “the journalist is nowadays the most important representative of the demagogic species” (Weber 1946: 96). Studying journalism’s transformation after the fall of the Soviet Union, then, offered a particularly good vantage point for studying how people’s knowledge and sentiment about politics might have transformed in that process as well.

Studying Russia’s political culture *as a process* means giving up on a predetermined set of stereotypes about how Russians *are* or what they *wanted* from the transition. Studying political culture through the vantage point of journalism in particular means going against the grain of the dominant narrative about the curtailment of press freedom in Russia over the past twenty years. More generally, it means challenging the conceptual binary between journalism and propaganda where the two are seen as mutually exclusive.¹ The dominant narrative goes like this: press freedom was granted to the (then) Soviet press by Mikhail

¹ Several admirable attempts have recently been made to unsettle that binary – whether by exposing its Cold War roots (Nerone 1995, 2013; Sparks 2000; Szpunar 2012) or by attempting to theoretically decouple journalism from democracy (Joseph 2013; Zelizer 2013; Gronvall 2015), but doing so remains difficult. This is so because it goes against the grain of centuries of liberal political thought, where journalism is conceptually tied to freedom of the press as a historical coconspirator and constitutive element of liberal democracy. And liberal democracy, in turn, remains the primary source of modern political legitimacy. Recent suggestions to think beyond democracy as the privileged site of political legitimacy in the contemporary West (Crouch 2004) inevitably push