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Shrinking Niches for Independent Journalism: The Case of Vedomosti

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Abstract

In Summer 2020 all leading editorial staff of the business newspaper Vedomosti resigned in protest over the appointment of a new editor-in-chief after the alleged interference of its main creditor, Rosneftbank. In this article, I summarize the chain of events that led to the mass walkout and highlight the context in which it took place. What happened at Vedomosti is one incident in a line of similar ones in a changing media landscape, in which niches for independent reporting are shrinking and journalists have to compromise, adapt, or find new outlets for their reporting.

Vedomosti: Ownership Change Leads to New Editorial Policy

On 15 July 2020, all leading editorial staff of the newspaper Vedomosti resigned in protest to the appointment of Andrey Shmarov as editor-in-chief. Shmarov had been installed as acting editor-in-chief by Ivan Yerechin, who had recently bought the paper's parent company, Business News Media holding (BNM). He had also from the start been in conflict with the Vedomosti staff, who accused the new editor-in-chief of censorship and of being at odds with the paper's reporting standards.

Vedomosti, known as one of Russia's top business newspapers, was founded in 1999 by an international consortium comprised of the media companies Dow Jones (Wall Street Journal), Pearson (Financial Times) and the Finnish company Sanoma as owner of Independent Media (Moscow Times). Vedomosti's foreign owners sold their shares to poet and media manager Demyan Kudryavtsev in 2015 (and his holding "Arkan Invest" with his business partners Vladimir Voronov and Martin Pompadour), shortly after the passage of a law that forbade foreign ownership of Russian media. The appointment of Andrey Shmarov in March 2020 came amidst negotiations around selling the company to Konstantin Zyatkov of Nasha Versiya publishing house and Alexey Golubovich of the investment firm Arbat Capital. Both bidders eventually withdrew their offers and BNM was sold to Yerechin instead (for reporting on the ownership structure of Vedomosti over time see Meduza, 12.05.2020). According to investigations from Meduza, The Bell, Vedomosti and Forbes, Kudryavtsev had financed the acquisition of BNM with a loan from Gazprombank that was later refinanced with a loan from Rosneft's Russian Regional Development Bank. Based on these alleged financial ties, some observers suspect that Rosneft had a hand in the appointment of Shmarov (Rosneft's press secretary Mikhail Leontiev denies these claims) (Malkova / Mironenko, 12.05.2020).

Regardless of what led to Shmarov's appointment, open conflict with the editorial staff broke out almost immediately thereafter. Shmarov offended the Vedomosti staff by declaring that he himself did not read the paper, and was unimpressed by the editorial policy that was a source of pride for its employees (Malkova / Mironenko, 16.06.2020). Beyond such personal snubs, allegations of censorship were made, for example after Shmarov started changing article headers, made sure an article about Rosneft's chairman Igor Sechin was deleted and declared that material from the polling company "Levada Center" was not to be published anymore (Otkrytie Media, 22.04.2020). After these conflicts, it was not surprising that the permanent appointment to the position of editor-in-chief was not well-received among the staff.

The editors at Vedomosti had suggested another candidate for the post, former editor Anfisa Voronina, who they deemed to be more suitable than a candidate they saw as "alien to journalistic principles", as they put it in a letter to the new owners (Meduza, 31.03.2020). After the board elected Shmarov in a 4-2 vote, the five deputy editors-in-chief quit in protest on 15 June 2020. Dimitri Simakov, Alexander Gubski, Boris Safranov, Filipp Stepkin und Kirill Kharatyan were the five top editorial staff of Vedomosti in charge of operations. All of them had been long-time staff members, already on board before the foreign owners had to sell the newspaper in 2015. In their walkout they were joined by the acting head of the online issue and the head of the business desk. Even before the events of June 2020, other journalists had signalled their disapproval through resignation. In an open letter published in April 2020, the editors had already criticized Shmarov's new editorial policy, claiming it was not in line with the standards upheld at Vedomosti and that it would change the paper into a servile version of itself under the same label (Vedomosti, 23.04.2020). Leaving Vedomosti was then the logical consequence of his permanent appointment.

The mass walkout caused a stir within the Russian media landscape, as Vedomosti had been setting standards across the industry. Commentators saw this as a fatal blow to the publication, and suggested that attempts to get rid of the critical and independent journalists would not be possible without a loss of talent (Malkova / Mironenko, 16.06.2020). It is also noteworthy that, as the commentators remark, the fate of Vedomosti is not an isolated incident, but only one more case of disappearing spaces for critical and high-level investigative journalism.

Embattled Newsrooms, Shrinking Spaces

Observers of the events at Vedomosti felt reminded of previous cases where journalistic outlets that had been known for investigative journalism came under pressure from the authorities, which led to the firing or voluntary departure of editors or the closing of outlets (it is not always clear whether someone was fired or if they pre-empted their firing by resigning). The non-exhaustive list of newsrooms that came under pressure in the past 10 years includes those of TV channels (Dozhd.tv, RENT TV, TV2), newspapers (Vedomosti, Kommersant, Forbes) and online publications (Lenta.ru; Grani.ru, Gazeta.ru), entire media holdings (RMG) and a news agency (RIA Novosti). It is noteworthy that this “reining in” of newsrooms often took place through the owners of the media companies, while interference by state authorities often remained indirect, and that the process was dynamic and subtle (for a general description of this process see Pleines in this issue). For example, in 2014, the online publication *Lenta.ru* was investigated by the consumer protection bureau “Roskomnadzor” for an interview it published with a leader of the Ukrainian nationalist “right sector” on allegations of promoting extremism. The warning by the authorities led to the firing of editor-in-chief Galina Timtshenko and of many other staff members (Ekho Moskv, 12.05.2014). As a consequence, about 80 employees quit in solidarity, while Timtshenko was replaced by an editor from a pro-Kremlin news site. Timtshenko and others later started the exile medium *Meduza*, based in Latvia.

In 2019, two journalists of the newspaper “Kommersant” lost their jobs after they wrote an article about the pending replacement of the Federation Council’s chairperson Valentina Matvienko. While the director general of Kommersant cites the violation of professional standards as the reason for the firing, one of the fired journalists was sure that Matvienko had complained about the article to the owner, Alisher Usmanov, and that this was the true reason behind their firing (Novaya Gazeta, 20.05.2019). Eleven other journalists quit in solidarity, while over 100 other Kommersant staff signed an open letter stating that political reporting was not possible

in Russia for the foreseeable future: “The Kommersant team feels obliged to inform its readers that Kommersant will not be able to inform them about Russian policy for an indefinite period of time. Readers, partners and advertisers of Kommersant Publishing House will be deprived of quality and unbiased coverage of a number of domestic political events” (Chernykh, 20.05.2019).

A third example concerns the fate of the RBC Media holding owned at that time by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov. The medium was famous for investigative formats, including coverage connected to the Panama Papers. In 2016, one of three editors was suddenly let go, while the other two quit. They were replaced by two editors who had formerly worked at the news agency Tass. While the exact cause of the dismissal is not clear, it is likely that it was connected to the reporting that often came into the crosshairs of those in power, e.g. stories about the origin of their wealth.

From the literature we know that in media markets that remain somewhat pluralistic, journalists faced with an editorial policy (or pressures to self-censor) can always decide to look for work elsewhere, somewhere where editorial policy is more in line with their moral code. Moreover, there is an understanding among journalists that more “important” media (e.g. those with higher reach) have less freedom from interferences than print outlets, smaller organizations, and more specialized or online media. As control extends over more types of media outlets, the opportunities for moving on become fewer. Hence, it is telling that Novaya Gazeta at that time saw the fate of RBC as a clear sign that niches for independent journalism were shrinking, as control was extended beyond TV with its large audience to the much smaller print and online publications (Martinov, 13.05.2016).

“Solid Double Lines” in Reporting and Self-Censorship

After they were brought in to replace the editors-in-chief at RBC, the new editors Elizaveta Golikova and Igor Trosnikov held a noteworthy meeting in which they spoke about their new guidelines for journalistic work that was later leaked. The editors compared reporting to participating in traffic, where “driving over a solid double line” was also punished. Rules in journalism, they implied, just like traffic rules, protect both those driving in cars [the journalist] and the pedestrians [the public?]. What also became clear from the exchange was—and here the limits of the traffic rules-analogy were most visible—that nobody knew where the “solid double line” was supposed to be located, and that in fact the line was “always moving” (*Meduza*, 08.06.2016). This exchange reflects how pressure in newsrooms is relayed in practice: while everybody assumes that some rules exist regarding what is permissible to write with-

out prompting a crackdown, these rules are by no means clear. Such red lines are often communicated euphemistically to the journalists, who then have to interpret them within their specific context. This might then lead to misinterpretations. This was the case at the RBC newsroom, where the traffic rules analogy leaves room for interpretation of who exactly was meant by the “pedestrians” that were also to be protected. Furthermore, as seen in the case of RBC, they sometimes emerge after the reporting has already taken place, when an owner or powerful state official takes offence and intervenes (Zeveleva 2020). Consequently, journalists attempting to manage these pressures to self-censor always operate under uncertainty.

How Can Journalists React to the Pressures to Self-Censor That Media Owners Levy on Them?

What could journalists do in reaction to the pressures they face when pursuing independent reporting? The literature suggests that many journalists react with conformism and self-censorship which is, furthermore, often internalized and not perceived as self-censorship at

all by those engaging in it (Kohut 2009, Koltsova 2006, Schimpfössl / Yablokov 2014). This is what one journalist claims is the take-home message of the developments in Russia: Working well is bad, quality does not matter, and the only thing that keeps you safe is not to quarrel with anyone in a high position (Saprykin, 14.05.2016). Other reactions might be to rationalize these pressures as being part of normal editorial processes, or to test the limits of what is permissible to write. However, as discussed before, toeing the line may be difficult if the line of acceptable writing constantly moves. Yet other journalists attempt to resist censorship instead of adjusting their reporting to it. The past decade is full of examples of mass resignations from embattled newsrooms like the ones discussed in this text, and most of the journalists who were let go did find other employment in their field. The fact that critical investigative journalism has been relegated to ever smaller niches, while TV stations, major newspapers and online media are brought under increasing control by the state has prompted those journalists who are critical of the regime to move to independent, self-owned media and blogs.

About the Author

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