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# Post-truth Eras

Jonathan Mair

Losing Pravda: Ethics and The Press in Post-Truth Russia By Natalia Roudakova

‘Yes, [the journalist] has a right to *vymysel* [fabrication of detail] and *domy-sel* [guesswork] – to exaggeration based, if you will, on intuition ... But one has to guess truthfully, so as not to arouse doubt in the reader.’

– from a textbook for journalists by Valery Agranovsky, published in the Soviet Union in 1978, (quoted in Roudakova p.63)

‘[There] are things that don’t necessarily need to be true as long as they’re believed.’ Alexander Nix, CEO of Cambridge Analytica<sup>1</sup>

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that there is a sense in which we are living in a post-truth era, is post-truth something that is completely new or something that has always been with us? There is no shortage of arguments in favour of one or the other of these interpretations. Some of the things that have been mooted as definitive of the post-truth era, such as the online economy of attention, are clearly very new. Others, such as cynicism about the motives of powerful people and scepticism about their claims, are probably universal. There is nothing puzzling about that. Contempt for the truth, like most of the phenomena that anthropologists deal with, is surely the result of a mixture of factors, some of which are very much of their time, associated with particular people and their practices and strategic interests, and, at the same time, very old and rooted in centuries-old institutions and universal human capacities.

In order to work our way out of simplistic oppositions into a more nuanced and flexible understanding of contemporary attitudes to truth and fakery, we could do worse than to consider comparable cases in which seeking or speaking truth is devalued, or in which the notion of truth itself loses its currency. *Losing Pravda*, Natalia Roudakova’s fascinating and ambitious study of Russian journalism through the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, presents an opportunity to do just that. Based on a combination of analyses of published newspaper articles, textbooks and memoirs authored by journalists, interviews with retired journalists who had written for the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/cambridge-analyticas-self-own/556016/>

popular *Leninskaya Smena*, and ethnographic fieldwork carried out in newspaper offices in Nizhny Novgorod in the early 2000s, the book details the changing nature of journalism as a profession defined above all by its relationship to truth.

The introduction presents, as overdue for correction, a widely accepted narrative of journalism in Russia and the Soviet Union that runs as follows: newspapers and other media were nothing but tools of propaganda for most of the Soviet era, Glasnost and then the adoption of international professional journalistic standards in the early 1990s allowed for real freedom of the press and a commitment to truth—a golden era that was short-lived because the corruption of Yeltsin's later years, and then the authoritarianism of Putin's rule meant a return to the bad old days.

Roudakova claims to have uncovered a more complex picture. While she agrees that recent decades have seen an erosion of the value placed on truth in Russian journalism, she argues that the result, which she characterises as widespread cynicism, is quite different from that seen in the Soviet period. Before the fall of Communism, journalists were subject to heavy censorship and played a central role in the production and dissemination of propaganda. Nonetheless, Roudakova insists, most members of the profession were keenly concerned with seeking and speaking truth, albeit in ways that might seem exotic to us from our twenty-first century viewpoint.

In the Soviet period, newspapers and other media organisations were organs of the governing Communist Party. Journalists were expected to develop propagandistic narratives under the direction of the Party. For most of the period, galley proofs were signed off by Party censors before each day's edition was allowed to go to press. Newspapers carried little in the way of *news* in the sense of up-to-the-moment coverage of what was happening in the USSR and abroad. Instead, they published essays, including *ocherki*—lengthy morality tales based on real life stories. Where newspapers had a news department, it tended to be small and unappreciated. For example, *Leninskaya Smena* featured news, in a column on the front page, charmlessly referred to as the 'news hole'. During the 70s and 80s, this was the domain of Valentina Buzmakova, a senior journalist who was considered eccentric because she enjoyed being a reporter. She was supported by an ever-changing team of interns in a hurry to get out of news and into *proper* journalism. Roudakova explains that even Buzmakova could find only enough news to fill the news hole once or twice a week.

And yet, within the constraints of censorship and notwithstanding the aversion to 'news', there was space for an attachment, in some cases a passionate attachment, to journalism as a professional practice defined by truth-seeking and truth-speaking. Yes, the press was censored, but the censors' concerns were generally narrow. Journalists could not question socialism. Censors would not allow them to report on accidents, disasters or particularly violent crime. The personal lives of

Soviet leaders were also out of bounds. Those were important limitations, of course, but they left plenty of topics about which it was possible to speak truth to power, and to everyone else. This space for fact-finding, exposure and contention is an area that, according to Roudakova, has been little understood by work that concentrates on the constraints of Soviet political life—work such as Alexei Yurchak's influential study of Soviet era formalism (2005), of which she otherwise approves.

In fact, from the beginning, Roudakova explains, the Bolsheviks had publicly adopted a model of surveillance from below in which ordinary people had a duty to denounce the abuse of power by office holders. In the Soviet Union, the press was the main institution through which this accountability could be enforced. Though this meant the relationship of the press and the state could be difficult, Roudakova suggests that Soviet government depended on this function for its legitimacy and was thus constrained to recognise the freedom of the press to some, always limited, extent. When journalists received letters from Soviet citizens complaining of injustice, they were obliged to investigate, and some journalists were both willing and permitted to investigate allegations with sustained exposure of wrongdoing.

Investigation, whether it was to look into an alleged abuse of power, or to gather materials for an *ocherk*, was not simply a formality. Journalism required fieldwork. Roudakova reports that *Leninskaya Smena* journalists were expected to spend about a third of their time in the field. Writers of *ocherk* might write only one or two pieces a year. In her memoirs, Inna Rudenko, a leading *ocherkist* for another national paper, the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, recalled the lengths she went to in order to gather materials for her essays, in terms that will be resonant for any ethnographer:

I lived their lives with them went to work with them, visited their friends with them, got to know their relatives, we drank tea together, went to the theater together. [...] I always brought back so many small details, subtle things. (Quoted on p. 63)

Other *ocherkists* were not so punctilious: Rudenko remarks in the same passage that her colleagues said it was not possible to write a feature story without making up details. But if they fabricated minor particulars, that should not be taken as a sign that they did not care about the truth at all. The truth of an *ocherk* was a moral message with general application, and mastery of the genre was a matter of providing enough detail of the specific case in order to make the story so evocative that the general truth would become meaningful for the reader. As Anatoly Agranovsky counselled in his textbook for aspiring journalists, 'It is important *not* to break yourself from reality so much that it would lead to an averaging of an image, to stereotypical descriptions. This would harm the truth and truthfulness' (quoted on p. 63). Roudakova suggests that this focus on the *imponderabilia* of specific

cases even provided a way around the censors as skilled *ocherkists* could hint at widespread social problems while never raising their eyes from the prosaic level of their particular case studies.

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In 1990, Russia passed a law on the press forbidding censorship, removing the party/state monopoly on media ownership, and taking steps to ensure a degree of editorial independence from owners. The Russian government, keen to be seen to be supporting democracy provided grants to support press outlets. These developments spurred an exciting period of activity for journalists. Roudakova reports that newspaper editors and founders of private television channels spoke in heady tones about the responsibility of independent media to hold the government to account, influenced by international discourses of accountability and transparency.

This excitement about the new fourth estate was not to last. Yeltsin's economic liberalization, beginning in January 1992, led immediately to a sharp rise in the cost of paper and ink. Rapidly growing inflation meant ordinary Russians, once enthusiastic consumers of print media, bought fewer and fewer newspapers and magazines. Editors resorted to barter with printing presses, paper mills and banks, first offering advertising space, then shares. Journalists left established newspapers to join new enterprises, which often quickly failed. As media enterprises ran out of cash, salaries were slashed and then went unpaid.

Some publications limped on, then petered out. Others found a novel solution for their money problems, one that once again shifted the nature of journalistic practice. The advent of contentious democratic elections in the early 1990s presented an opportunity for the media. Roudakova explains that in the absence of rules on election coverage such as existed in established democracies, ambiguity arose over the boundary between paid-for political advertising on the one hand and coverage that simply happened to benefit a candidate on the other. In the run up to the election, television channels and newspapers invited the candidates to sign contracts for promotional coverage. The mechanics of this process are not completely clear on my reading of the book, but my understanding of the account is that *any* coverage of the candidate, including simply appearing on screen was subsequently counted as political advertising and charged for. Candidates also appear to have been charged for *any* negative coverage of their opponents.

Media outlets had found an important source of funding—the periodic glut of funding associated with elections came to be known as the 'harvest yield'. However, by interpreting all political reporting as promotion of this or that political faction, they significantly undermined the idea that journalists were involved in a pursuit of truth beyond partisan spin. It was not until 2002 that a law on advertising attempted to regulate this situation. However, it did so by defining political advertising not as paid-for content, but as 'activity aiding to create a positive or a

negative impression of a candidate among voters' (117). The ironic result, Roudakova argues, was to undermine journalistic truthfulness yet further. All coverage of political issues was now *legally* classified as advertising, and had to be placed in editorial sections of newspapers marked as opinion rather than news.

Far from establishing itself as the fourth estate as had been hoped in the brief, hopeful period of 1990-91, journalism came to be known—among journalists too—as the 'second oldest profession', which was a snide way of saying that journalists were simply prostitutes. According to Roudakova, journalists themselves also lost the sense that they were engaged in a common practice with common standards. In the offices of *The Observer*, where she conducted fieldwork in 2002, only a few of the most senior journalists had been working for more than a year. Junior roles were subject to rapid churn, filled by inexperienced staff without the skills or wherewithal to take a stand against the instrumentalization of journalistic practice. Accusations of unprofessionalism were everywhere, writes Roudakova,

These accusations were compounded by the breakdown of the Soviet system of on-the-job mentorship and peer control among journalists, by fast spread of behind-closed-doors appraisals of journalistic labor by private employers, by fast turnover of personnel, and by an understanding that journalistic ethics was now a deeply personal rather than collective matter. (123)

However, Roudakova takes issue with accounts of this period that leave no room for journalistic ethics at all. Journalists she interviewed and worked with did, she explains, try to justify their work in moral terms, even if they could rarely see themselves as being engaged in a practice of truth-seeking and truth-telling. Instead, some they justified their practice in terms of being good team players or loyal friends, willing to do what was necessary to bring in money for their organizations..

As the 2000s wore on, Putin's consolidation of power across the country meant that truly contentious elections at any level became rarer. Money for election coverage dried up, so media organizations increasingly entered into contracts to provide tiers of government with public relations services instead. As politicians faced less competition for journalists' favour, their attitude became more brazen. Journalists complained they were being treated as servants, and were increasingly subject to harassment and even assassination if they did not fulfil that role. At the same time, they frequently faced insults and abuse when dealing with a public that had lost all respect for the profession.

In 2012, the deputy minister of mass communication, Alexei Volin, was invited to speak at a conference held at the Department of Journalism at Moscow State University. Roudakova takes his contemptuous speech as emblematic of the cynicism of Russia's leaders at that time. He responded to the title of the conference, 'Journalism and its public mission', by telling the assembled journalists, lecturers

and students that,

Journalism has no mission. Journalism is a business. Young journalists should know that they will be writing whatever their owner tells them. If you are not teaching them about that part of the job, you are committing a crime. (178)

The book ends on a more optimistic note, describing the the practice of speaking truth to power and rejection of cynicism that characterised some of the media reaction to opposition protests in 2011 and 2012. Magazines and newspapers covered the crisis and when editors were put under pressure by owners to curtail their coverage, there were some high-profile resignations. Journalists and bloggers began to promote the virtue of accuracy and dialed down the *pathos* or sensationalism that had come to pass for a sign of truthfulness during the long years of cynicism.

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Roudakova's book is subtitled *Ethics and the Press in Post-Truth Russia*, but the term 'post-truth' does not appear in the index, and the obvious comparison with the erosion of trust in journalism associated with Trump and Brexit is only mentioned in the final few pages of the book. Nonetheless, I think the book is an important resource for those of us interested in understanding post-truth in other societies, and not only because the unabashed cynicism of the Russian establishment and its instrumental use of media have latterly come to intersect in significant ways with the production and consumption of news in Europe and the US.

Roudakova analyses the transformation of Soviet and Russian journalism at a number of different levels of abstraction. The book is densely argued and in the summary above I have omitted much of the discussion of thinkers from Foucault to Habermas to Sloterdijk. In places, the author speaks in terms of timeless categories such as ideology and propaganda (the latter is defined as an instance of 'instrumental communication' in Habermas's terms). In other places, she makes broad-brush distinctions between socialist and capitalist epistemology. The latter is supposedly based on a relativist or pluralist conception of truth; because of advertising, Roudakova claims that members of capitalist societies expect and tolerate lies. On the other hand, she sees Soviet socialism as having been based on a form of epistemological realism, in which the truth of historical materialism could be taken for granted and the only questions to answer were how it manifested in the world and how the present situation differed from—that is, fell short—of the future in which socialism was to have been realised. For my money, these attempts at high theoretical analysis ring hollow in comparison with the rich and multi-factorial accounts of journalistic practice that they attempt to explain. Maybe there is something in the idea of Soviet epistemological realism, but it inevitably

runs into the problem of the complexity and contingency of the data in relation to which it can only seem simplistic.

The same could be said for Roudakova's use of virtue ethics, another important strand of analysis running through the book. Drawing on Bernard Williams' *Truth and truthfulness* (2002), Roudakova identifies six virtues associated with seeking and speaking the truth: concern with accuracy, standing by one's words, sincerity, seriousness, reflexivity, and courage. Again, in my view, the reduction of journalists' complex practices to these context-free virtues adds little to our understanding, because it flattens the ethnographic specificity. Virtues are clearly an important part of being a journalist on Roudakova's account, but they are historically specific virtues—the virtue of being, for example, a good *ocherkist*—whose value is internal to the practice, tied up in specific forms, institutions and relationships, and which are ultimately irreducible to transhistorical categories of accuracy, sincerity and so on.

What makes it possible for Roudakova's book to transcend the analytical categories that she attempts to impose on her material is the fact that her key comparison is not between something that she's really interested in on the one hand and some idealized alternative or unspecified 'we'<sup>2</sup>, that serves merely as a contrast, as is so often the practice in anthropological analysis. True, in a number of places she does contrast Soviet and Russian journalism with a basically ahistorical ideal of the press in liberal democracies derived from her discussion of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt—a definition that is supposed to apply, presumably, from the first French Republic to Trump's America. However, the comparison that matters is the juxtaposition of Soviet-era journalism and post-Soviet Russian journalism. Neither is a mere foil for the other, each is presented in vivid detail, and the heterogeneity and contingency of causes emerges irrepressibly from the page. It becomes clear that the journalistic commitment to truth is no more dependent on a specific conception of the public sphere than it is on the price of paper or the unintended consequences of media regulation.

That is not to say that no neat contrasts emerge from the detail. In a blog post about a 2012 case in which an opposition leader claimed to have been tortured and government officials flatly denied the accusations, Tomsk-based journalist Yulia Muchnik complained that the comparisons that were then being drawn with the time of Stalin's Great Terror were misleading. 'This reality is hideous, disgusting, absurd', she wrote,

But most importantly—it is different. ...no one believes anybody, anything can turn out to be true or not true. Everything is relative, no one's authority is respected, all words are worthless, all slogans disgusting. ...This is a very different reality, where none of us had been before. (192)

Ultimately, this is Roudakova's conclusion, too. The cynicism of the contempo-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/ChuaWho>



rary period looks superficially like the disengagement of the Soviet era, but they are different in at least two respects. First, Soviet leaders and cultural producers such as journalists could never have admitted to cynicism openly. (Reacting angrily to a claim that the profession has always been cynical, one of Roudakova's veteran journalists wonders why contemporary cynicism is thought to be preferable to the hypocrisy of her own generation.) Second, cynicism in the Soviet period was limited—journalists and politicians may have scorned this or that policy or politician, but they tended to do so in a way that was congruent with the aims of socialism. Journalists, in particular, were able to see their scepticism as *kritika* and *samokritika*—the criticism and self-criticism that Lenin thought were a distinctive part of the socialist system of government.

This distinction between Soviet and post-Soviet journalism supports a further, ideal-type distinction with more general application, one that may help us to understand the variety of 'post-truth' in other contexts. It is a distinction between two attitudes that look similar from the point of view of an external observer, but different from the inside. On the one hand, there is contempt for the idea of truth and the virtues that produce it. This is exemplified by the cynical attitude that Roudakova sees as widespread, though not universal, among Russian journalists, media owners and politicians in much of the Post-Soviet era.

On the other hand, there are situations in which truth *is* valued, but in a way that is very different from, or in conflict with, the way in which the observer understands or values truth. That is to say, there are people who may look to others as though they have a cavalier disregard for truthfulness because they are labouring under a programme or regime of truth (to borrow vocabulary from Paul Veyne, 1988, not cited in Roudakova's book) with which those who observe them are not familiar or do not accept, but which nonetheless imposes its own authorising knowledge practices and truth conditions. Producing and recognising truth are not context free activities, but ones that can depend on a combination of learned knowledge and skills including implicit or explicit theories about the nature of the mind (that is, about metacognition), of expertise, evidence, forms of expression of truth and so on. This is the way Roudakova wants us to understand Soviet-era journalists. They cared about the truth—at least some of them did, and they were respected for it—despite their adherence to practices and standards that look scandalous or perverse by the standards of other kinds of journalism.

Another way of expressing this distinction is to say that someone who wishes to understand other people's relationship to truth must learn to distinguish rigorously between the lack of a commitment to truthfulness and a commitment that differs so greatly from his or her own that it looks like a lack. Getting this right is, it seems to me, a crucial element in the ethnographic study of 'post-truth'. Rather than trying to define a post-truth syndrome in general terms, we would do better to ask, for specific individuals and groups involved in producing or consuming content that is described as post-truth, to what extent they are really contemptuous

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<http://aotcpress.com/articles/posttruth-eras/>

of truthfulness rather than being engaged in distinctive programmes of truth. Is the sort of conspiracy-theory-based interpretation of the news characteristic of Alex Jones' Infowars website and many alt-right imitators pure cynicism and instrumentalization of content? Or is it a distinctive practice of truth production? Are climate sceptics simply cynics? Some, like the Russian politicians and media owners Roudakova describes, clearly think public discourse is a sort of Gramscian war of position. On the other hand, as much as scientists may despair at climate sceptics' rejection of scientific canons such as peer review, it is evident that many of the sceptics see themselves as the true heirs of the scientific spirit of the Enlightenment, heeding Kant's exhortation to dare to know by shrugging off the childish attachment to authority and established opinion.

Understanding the different modes in which people value truthfulness or deprecate it by recognizing the plurality of regimes of truth, will be essential if we want to contribute to making sense of the culture and politics of truth of our time. This is something we should aspire to do if we haven't given up on anthropology itself being a practice of truth-seeking and truth-speaking, which I hope we haven't. Roudakova's careful and complex comparison of Soviet-era and post-Soviet Russian journalism will provide us with a valuable model for how to go about this task.

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