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Hating the Bear?

Root Causes of Perceived anti-Russian Slant in Western News Coverage of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War

Pedro Spivakovsky-Gonzalez

Abstract

Many criticized Western newspapers for taking a pro-Georgian perspective at the outset of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, and for initially portraying the crisis as an unprovoked Russian invasion. Russians protested against the story line, reminiscent of the Cold War, that Russia was implementing a premeditated plan to exert control over Georgia, and accused Westerners of promoting anti-Russian propaganda. On the other hand, the United States and Western Europe have some of the freest and most independent media in the world, so what explains this alleged anti-Russian slant? This paper examines the experience of Western journalists from major publications, and the process by which news articles on the crisis were created, presenting the results of over fifteen interviews with American, British, and French journalists who covered the conflict. These interviews show that Western news coverage of the war was marked more by particular structural obstacles than by the preconceived opinions or political inclinations of these journalists. Structural obstacles to balanced coverage included (i) the logistical challenges that accompanied the unique timing and complexity of the war and (ii) limited access to South Ossetia. This paper shows that what best explains the initial anti-Russian coverage in the Western press is not the personal attitude of Western correspondents on the ground, but rather the lack of access to the Russian and South Ossetian perspectives, which resulted from security threats and the intransigence of the Russian army in South Ossetia. In some cases, decisions made by editors and other home office reporters, removed from the events on the ground, may have played a role in contributing to unbalanced coverage.

“Few international events of this magnitude have been so quickly submerged under a cloud of polemics involving both spin and disinformation.”— Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Guns of August 2008*

1. Introduction

In August of 2008, war broke out between Russia and Georgia over the status of Georgia’s separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹ The responses to the crisis, broadly categorized as pro-Georgian and pro-Russian, have resulted partly from the competing narratives of the conflict promoted by the Western² and Russian media.

In Russia, the link between the government position and the media is quite clear. Russia remains one of the countries with the lowest levels of press freedom in the world.³ State control of the media has ensured that news outlets give the perspective of the Russian government. Thus, it is not surprising that Russian media coverage of the conflict presented a pro-Russian viewpoint.

A more troubling question, however, is why *Western* news coverage of the crisis initially seemed so one-sided. Since countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have a free and independent press,⁴ the striking similarity between the official position of Western governments and the Western media perspective—both assuming initially that Georgia had been attacked first—deserves closer inspection. Answering this question may hold valuable implications for many groups in society. For citizens and voters, it could facilitate an understanding of the process that influences all the information they receive through the media. For journalists, it could allow them to question the news-gathering process. For policy-makers, it could provide insights on how to manage foreign media during an international crisis. Thus, an examination of Western news coverage of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war could contribute to our understanding of the role and process of news coverage in international conflicts.

This analysis examines the experiences of journalists covering the conflict, and the process by which news articles on the crisis were created: from the impressions of war correspondents on the scene to the role played by journalists and editors who contributed to the creation of the final news product from their offices in Washington, New York, London, and Paris.

Initially, I conducted interviews with correspondents assigned to cover the conflict for two representative publications from each country, including three correspondents each from the *Washington Post* (*WP*) and *Le Monde* (*LM*), two each from the *New York Times* (*NYT*) and *Le Figaro* (*LF*), and one each from *The Guardian* (*TG*) and *The Times* (*TT*) (See Table 1 for a list of interviewees). I supplemented these interviews with additional interviews with other Western reporters. These included Romain Goguelin, a French reporter working for *France24* (*F24*) at the time and the only

¹ This paper examines only Western coverage of the main front of the conflict (in South Ossetia).

² Throughout this paper, the term ‘Western’ will refer to American and Western European; specifically, American, British, and French.

³ Freedom House, *Combined Average Ratings: Independent Countries 2009*, available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=475&year=2009>

⁴ *Ibid.*

Western journalist I interviewed who was allowed to stay overnight in Tskhinvali with the Russian armed forces. I also interviewed Andrew Osborn, a British correspondent working for the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*, whose claim to fame in the small world of Moscow-based Western journalists was walking all the way from Tskhinvali to Gori during the war, considered by many an impressive feat. In addition, I interviewed a Russian reporter from *ITAR-TASS* (a Russian state news agency), and a representative from the liberal Russian media, to provide additional context for my research.

Table 1: List of Interviewees by News Organization

Journalist	News Organization	Date Interviewed	Location during the War
Susan Chira (*)	<i>NYT (editor)</i>	March 30, 2009	New York
Andrew Kramer	<i>NYT</i>	March 25, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori, Moscow
Anne Barnard	<i>NYT</i>	April 26, 2010	Moscow, New York
Peter Finn	<i>WP</i>	February 2, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori, Tskhinvali, Vladikavkaz
Tara Bahrapour	<i>WP</i>	February 16, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori
Jonathan Finer	<i>WP</i>	April 19, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori
John Burgess	<i>WP (editor)</i>	April 19, 2010	Washington
Andrew Osborn	<i>WSJ</i>	March 27, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori, Tskhinvali, Vladikavkaz
Luke Harding	<i>TG</i>	March 25, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori, Tskhinvali, Vladikavkaz
Charles Bremner	<i>TT</i>	March 23, 2010	Moscow, Tbilisi
Fabrice Nodé-Langlois	<i>LF</i>	March 23, 2010	Moscow
Laure Mandeville	<i>LF</i>	April 25, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori
Marie Jégo	<i>LM</i>	March 25, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori
Alexandre Billette	<i>LM</i>	March 27, 2010	Moscow
Piotr Smolar	<i>LM</i>	April 15, 2010	Tbilisi, Gori, Tskhinvali, Vladikavkaz
Romain Goguelin	<i>F24</i>	March 27, 2010	Tskhinvali
Aleksandra Prokopenko	<i>ITAR-TASS</i>	March 27, 2010	London

(*) Interview not conducted. An online interview transcript from March 2009 was used.

I conducted about half of the interviews by phone, and the other half in person, during research trips to Paris and Moscow. I conducted all but three interviews in English (the three remaining interviews I conducted in French). The decision to conduct a substantial amount of interviews in person rather than by phone proved instrumental in providing additional insights, because these interviews typically lasted much longer, and because journalists were willing to reward the expense and long hours of travel by putting me in touch with other foreign correspondents in the area.

Although, in the end, every interview took on a life of its own, I prepared a standard list of questions to ask every journalist (see Appendix for a list of questions). I always supplemented this basic framework with follow-up questions and additional discussions. As more interviews took place, I included new questions about the robustness of my findings and other journalists' perspectives on the claims made in this paper. I also contacted foreign desk editors and journalists who had not covered the conflict on the ground, but who had helped to put together information coming in from different correspondents, as well as those who had written articles covering the 'diplomatic side' of the conflict from Washington, Paris or London. The interviews with these journalists form the basis of my findings and analysis, showing that certain structural factors contributed to the distortion of Western news coverage of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

First, I outline the context within which Western coverage took place, by providing a brief background on the conflict. The remainder of this paper presents the key factors (inherent in the structure of the news-making process) that influenced wartime coverage. This includes the role of the unique timing and complexity of the war, as well as the role of editorial decisions made by editors and other correspondents who participated in creating the final news product. Most importantly, this paper explains the role of security threats and the Russian army in preventing Western journalists from gaining access to the Russian and South Ossetian perspectives, which, in the end, became the major obstacle to balanced coverage.

“Today’s Georgia is offering you calm and protection, which you lack so much.”
– Georgian President Saakashvili (to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, April 29, 2008)⁵

2. Brief Description of the Conflict

Just before midnight on August 7, 2008, a Georgian military official announced Georgia’s intention to ‘restore constitutional order’ in its separatist region of South Ossetia. This was a response to the intensification of fighting (which had begun several weeks prior) between the Georgian military and South Ossetian separatists, despite a unilateral ceasefire called by Georgia. By 1 am on August 8, 2008, Georgia launched a large-scale military attack on Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital. In response, by 1:30 am, Russian tank columns crossed from Russia into South Ossetia to repel the Georgian attack.⁶ At the same time, in Abkhazia, another separatist region of Georgia, Abkhazian separatists with Russian military support attacked the Kodori Gorge (which Abkhazians believe to be a part of their territory) to expel all Georgians from it.⁷

For the next five days, Georgia and Russia (supported by the South Ossetian and Abkhazian separatists) engaged in a full-scale war, leading to significant human losses and widespread destruction in several towns and villages. By August 11, Georgian soldiers had been expelled from both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Moreover, Russian forces advanced beyond Abkhazia and South Ossetia into other parts of Georgia, destroying key infrastructure and setting up military checkpoints.⁸

On August 12, 2008, the ceasefire agreement between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev officially ended the fighting and in theory restricted Russian troops to within 14 km of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian borders. Russia recognized both regions as independent states on August 18, 2008.

⁵ “Saakashvili Calls on Abkhazians, Ossetians to Jointly Resist External Force,” Civil.ge, Tbilisi, April 29, 2008.

⁶ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Russia & Georgia: The Fallout*, August 22, 2008; http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/europe/caucasus/195_russia_vs_georgia___the_fallout.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



The villages between Gori (in Georgia ‘proper’) and Tskhinvali (in South Ossetia) played an important role in the misinformation that characterized the conflict, because they were in an area that was fought over twice (first during the initial Georgian advance, and then during the Russian advance). The region is a patchwork of two coexisting populations: between Gori and Tskhinvali, in both the Georgian and the South Ossetian parts, there are intermixed ethnic South Ossetian and ethnic Georgian villages. As described by Piotr Smolar (Le Monde), “it’s very complicated because you have different layers: you have one Georgian village, one South Ossetian village, one Georgian, one South Ossetian.” Thus, when the Georgian and Russian armies crossed over it, each could claim that the other had committed atrocities in this region.

The governments of Russia and Georgia utilized the media in an information war to convince their citizens and the rest of the world that they were simply responding to an attack from the other side. Although scholars disagree on whether it was the Western or the Russian press that was more biased, there is an academic consensus that the media obscured the underlying complexity of this crisis.

At the outset, Georgia’s perspective on the conflict was portrayed in the Western press much more effectively than Russia’s perspective, allowing the Georgian leadership to win the hearts and minds of Westerners relatively quickly. American scholar Charles King describes Georgia’s impressive public relations effort, citing Georgia’s hourly updates to foreign journalists and the numerous and dramatic TV appearances by well-

⁹ Fred Kagan, *Eastern European Strategy Group*, American Enterprise Institute, August 27-28, 2008.

spoken and Western-educated Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who “hit every major talking point meaningful to Western audiences, including claims of ethnic cleansing and genocide.”¹⁰ In contrast, King describes Russia’s public relations effort as “feeble,” saying Moscow did not work as hard to impress its version of events on the international media.¹¹

Russian newspaper *Vedomosti* protested against this developing trend in an August 11, 2008 editorial, urging Russia to take action in the public relations battle with the West over global perceptions of the conflict: “Officials must give many interviews and tirelessly spell out the Russian position on all key issues.”¹² This statement from a typically non-nationalist publication often critical of the Russian government shows the degree to which some Russian newspapers thought Western coverage was unfair.

Some complaints about Georgia’s monopoly over the media war were also reflected in a few American opinion papers. American scholar (and Russian émigré) Dimitri Simes criticized the “hysterical and one-sided U.S. media coverage,” describing the suggestion that Russia started the war as “simply a distortion of reality.”¹³ Another critical perspective of the American media can be found in an op-ed by Russian native Olga Ivanova, who was working at the *Washington Post* at the time she publicly criticized its coverage of the crisis. She complained that although a free press requires an independent source of information, “the Georgian President quickly became a chief newsmaker for Western media outlets” and nobody bothered to examine the Russian version of events.¹⁴

The media played the crucial role in simplifying the portrayal of the Georgia crisis for a global audience. This made the media a key actor in the conflict, determining winners and losers by promoting a one-sided perspective. However, despite the media’s crucial role in the war, and despite the various scholarly perspectives on it, little has been written about the process through which Western journalists covered the conflict. By closely examining the news-making process, this paper presents a starting point for such research.

¹⁰ Charles King, “The Five-Day War: Managing Moscow after the Georgia Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs* 87 (2008): 2

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Russia Won the War, but the Media Battle Rages On,” *Vedomosti*, August 11, 2008, sec. Editorial.

¹³ Dimitri K. Simes, “Russian Roulette,” *National Interest*, no. 98 (November 2008): 4-7

¹⁴ Olga Ivanova, “A Free Press? Not This Time,” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2008.

“What they’re looking for mainly is a human story, not complexity...complexity stinks, complexity is boring.” – Piotr Smolar (*Le Monde*)¹⁵

3. Simplified Story Lines

Most newspapers did not have anybody stationed in Georgia on August 8. French correspondents Fabrice Nodé-Langlois (*LF*) and Laure Mandeville (*LF*), as well as Piotr Smolar (*LM*) and Alexandre Billette (*LM*) believe that the fact that most French staff journalists were on vacation at the time played a role in determining the perspective displayed in the first stories on the conflict. The absence of French staff journalists in Moscow in summer is so pervasive that Billette (*LM*) cited a common joke: “If you’re a freelance journalist, and it’s August, stay in Moscow, because you’ll make money, since all the staff journalists will be gone!”¹⁶ Piotr Smolar (*LM*) admitted: “of course I think it played a role, the fact that it happened in August. As many others, I was on holiday.”¹⁷

According to Nodé-Langlois (*LF*), this lack of reporters was a problem because it meant not only that many people would cover the conflict from afar, but also that publications often only had one correspondent available, and would send that correspondent to Georgia:

It takes longer to get a visa to go to Russia, which is why it was easier to send people directly to Georgia...also, the priority was to go to Tbilisi, since that’s where the war was, which explains the immediate pro-Georgian viewpoint. It’s a small detail but I think it had big consequences.¹⁸

Smolar (*LM*) provided the same reasoning for the prevalence of Western journalists in Georgia: “two obvious reasons: one, because that’s where it started, and the second one is that it was easy to get there.”¹⁹ When asked whether this had an impact on the pro-Georgian nature of some of the coverage, he responded: “Well, of course it did! [...] when you’re in Georgia you talk to people scared because the Russians are coming...well of course you have a pro-Georgian perspective; it’s not because you’re dishonest, it’s because that’s what you hear!”²⁰

Nodé-Langlois (*LF*) believes that not having an informed correspondent on the ground often led to a distorted picture of the start of the conflict. He believes that having more journalists would have brought a more balanced perspective, because more would have been able to go to Vladikavkaz (in Russia) at the start of the conflict and covered the exodus of many Ossetian refugees who had been fleeing the Georgian assault. Even after the war was over, Smolar (*LM*) was surprised at how few Western journalists there

¹⁵ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

¹⁶ Alexandre Billette (*LM*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010. Billette is referring to the notion that many important events in Russia happen in August, such as the 1991 Soviet coup d’état attempt, the 2003 Beslan school massacre, and the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

¹⁷ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

¹⁸ Fabrice Nodé-Langlois (*LF*). In Person Interview. Paris, France. March 23, 2010.

¹⁹ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

were in Vladikavkaz: “I’ve been in situations where there are a lot of journalists, and that was not the case....there were many, many more journalists in Tbilisi.”²¹ The reliance mostly on journalists based in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi (or mostly in touch with officials in Tbilisi) played a key role in distorting Western coverage of the conflict.

Many of the correspondents available to go to Georgia at the time were less familiar with the Russia-Georgia conflict. “Many of the journalists that knew Russia best were on vacation...many others who were sent to Georgia didn’t really understand the problem.”²² This was an example of ‘parachute journalism,’²³ which occurs when papers limit their staff of foreign correspondents, leading to less specialized coverage. Smolar (*LM*) also agrees on this point, arguing that it played a key role in simplifying the story and promoting a one-sided perspective:

This was a world crisis, in the middle of August, so many journalists were sent to Georgia who were in Georgia for the first time in their life. I’m not saying all of them...a lot of them were covering the region, they knew things, but many were in Georgia for the first time. I’m not questioning at all their honesty, I’m just saying that the normal reaction is that you react through your impressions, your emotions, through your own personal perspective, from what you see and the people you talk to [...] and if you don’t have the historical background to say, well, wait, things are just a little bit more complicated, or, Saakashvili had a responsibility in it too, well, you’ll write a certain story.²⁴

Smolar (*LM*) believes that, vacation time notwithstanding, the deficiencies in coverage of this conflict manifest a larger trend in journalism, where the decreasing specialization of foreign correspondents often leads to the oversimplification of events. Many believe this process has been exacerbated by advances in technology (because newspapers are cutting back on foreign bureaus, as free online news lower demand for printed newspapers), and by the 24-hour news cycle (because of the pressure to meet instant deadlines and the need to elucidate complex events in little time—and space, in the case of the print media). This is problematic because it is more likely to lead to erroneous coverage, and because this can especially affect the important stories (the complex ones).²⁵ According to Smolar (*LM*), this problem is not only the result of financial constraints faced by newspapers, but also the result of newspapers’ attempts to tailor news to their readers:

I think that journalists are less and less specialized, and that really has huge consequences on the way we report on this sort of major crisis: less and less experience, and complexity is not interesting for news editors,

²¹ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

²² Fabrice Nodé-Langlois (*LF*). In Person Interview. Paris, France. March 23, 2010.

²³ Jim Lederman, *Battle Lines: The American Media and the Intifada*, New York, NY: Westview Pr (Short Disc), 1993.

²⁴ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

²⁵ Mort Rosenblum, *Who Stole the News: Why We Can't Keep Up With What Happens in the World and What We Can Do About It*, Toronto, Canada: Wiley, 1995, p.10

especially talking about television; what they're looking for mainly is a human story, not complexity...complexity stinks, complexity is boring.²⁶

This may have contributed to the dominance of particular story lines in news coverage of the conflict (e.g. 'the big bad Russia attacks innocent democratic Georgia' or 'the big bad Georgia attacks the small innocent South Ossetia'). In the words of Laure Mandeville (*LF*), "the most difficult thing was to convey in simpler terms, in a relatively limited space, all these elements which led to that kind of crisis."²⁷ Charles Bremner (*TT*) agrees with this characterization, saying "there was a lot of coverage of tanks rolling and people suffering, but not a lot of facts about what was actually going on."²⁸

The problem of pre-determined 'story lines' ("frames into which a journalist can place seemingly random events and give them coherence"²⁹) is particularly relevant to the 2008 conflict in Georgia. The need for a story line comes from the fact that event-driven coverage often requires certain 'narrative glue' that provides continuity. Thus, reporters and editors may find it easier to cover events that fit a particular narrative rather than explaining what is actually occurring or looking for the correct (more complex) story.³⁰ The longer these story lines linger, the more natural they feel when retold. This explains, for example, how natural it may have felt for many American media outlets to accept a Cold War narrative in their coverage of the 2008 Georgia crisis.

However, it is difficult to gauge to what extent these story lines subliminally influenced correspondents. For example, Peter Finn (*WP*) stated that although at the beginning many American and European reporters may have submitted to the story line, "'the Russian bear invades tiny country,'...that story line changed over time with greater and greater skepticism of Georgia's role in all of this."³¹ John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor) admitted that Finn's article, reconstructing the lead-up to the war, had brought to light many facts about the Russian and Georgian moves that were not previously known. Jonathan Finan (*WP*) also admitted that he "became much less confident in the narrative, which prevailed in the beginning, that this was an act of premeditated Russian aggression. Georgia definitely bore a lot of responsibility for the way the conflict began, which is not something I would have known coming in."³² Thus, simplified story lines did affect many journalists, who started covering the conflict with a certain view of who, exactly, bore responsibility for the war.

In contrast, other correspondents said that their view of the conflict did not change fundamentally, because they had covered the region and knew from the beginning that it was a very complex story. For example, Marie Jégo (*LM*), Piotr Smolar (*LM*), Alexandre Billette (*LM*), Fabrice Nodé-Langlois (*LF*) and Andrew Osborn (*WSJ*), among others, mentioned that their vision of the responsibility on both sides did not change substantially over time. Whether they knew it before they went to Georgia, or whether they learned it

²⁶ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

²⁷ Laure Mandeville (*LF*). Telephone Interview. April 25, 2010.

²⁸ Charles Bremner (*TT*). In Person Interview. Paris, France. March 23, 2010.

²⁹ Jim Lederman, *Battle Lines: The American Media and the Intifada*, New York, NY: Westview Pr (Short Disc), 1993. p.12

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.15

³¹ Peter Finn (*WP*). Telephone Interview. February 2, 2010.

³² Jonathan Finan (*WP*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

after they had spent some time there, correspondents on the ground were more attuned to the complexities of the conflict than journalists based in the home offices.

Indeed, some correspondents felt that editorial decisions made by people removed from the events on the ground in some cases incorporated a more anti-Russian perspective. Thus, even if experienced correspondents had a lot of freedom in determining what stories to write, sometimes these stories would be reformatted or enhanced at the editorial level in a way that altered the original intent of the correspondents.

John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor) agreed that sometimes editors and newspaper staff had to simplify the language used in news articles, to make them more accessible to the newspaper's readers. Despite seeking to find a "balance of writing for people who know everything and for people who know nothing about the conflict,"³³ Burgess admitted that correspondents sometimes swayed in the direction of writing for experts and the people deeply immersed in the story, which is something that editors and newspaper staff tried to fight against, saying that "not everyone has as much appreciation for this very complicated situation as you do, and that the writing has to be tailored to them."³⁴ This suggests that even if correspondents might present a complex picture, there is an element of simplification that occurs (with the best interest of the readers in mind) in the home offices of newspapers.

In general, most correspondents on the ground stated that they typically played the principal role in determining how to carry out the coverage, which was appropriate because they usually had more information and a much better sense of what was important and feasible. For example, Peter Finn (*WP*) said that the key decision-making role went to the correspondent, since "[editors] are looking for you to direct the coverage."³⁵ Finn (*WP*), Finer (*WP*) and Bahrapour (*WP*) said their editors did not try to overly influence the story they were writing. For example, Finer (*WP*) said "I never got the impression that any of my editors had any strong viewpoint on who's right and who's wrong."³⁶ All three of them spoke of a collaborative process in which editor and correspondent discussed potential news stories, and agreed on how to move forward. John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor) also recalled thinking that the on-the-ground correspondents had the right instincts about where to go: "I don't really remember having any real conflicts with them."³⁷

Finn (*WP*) described editors as providing useful guidance insofar as they were able to read reports from the newswire services (such as AP or Reuters) more frequently, and also because they could help to marshal resources at home, often sending other correspondents to confirm stories (e.g. to the White House or State Department). In most cases, these did not constitute attempts to direct the coverage of the correspondents.

Finer (*WP*) also mentioned that editors could sometimes take a broader view on the coverage of the conflict, since "when you're living in the middle of it, it's very easy to get tunnel vision."³⁸ John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor) echoed these sentiments

³³ John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Peter Finn (*WP*). Telephone Interview. February 2, 2010.

³⁶ Jonathan Finer (*WP*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

³⁷ John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

³⁸ Jonathan Finer (*WP*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

about the role of the editor, saying that he was able to communicate to correspondents on the ground what he and higher-level editors perceived as potential information gaps in the coverage: “back here in Washington, I may have a better perspective of ‘what does the average American want to read about this conflict?’”³⁹ Burgess described how “sometimes [higher-level editors] have very specific instructions: ‘we want a story that says X, Y, and Z.’”⁴⁰ This presents the possibility that people uninformed about the conflict directed some of the coverage. However, Burgess was sure to note that these were only broader thematic suggestions about what kind of story might be desirable (e.g. stepping back to understand broader issues or causes of the conflict, or focusing on the plight of civilians during the war). Indeed, as Burgess described, the Assistant Managing Editor who worked above him, David Hoffman, actually had an impressive understanding of the region, having served as Moscow correspondent in the past. In addition, Burgess’s main recollection is that “there wasn’t a whole lot of that; we basically ran the coverage the way we wanted.”⁴¹

Susan Chira (*NYT* Foreign Desk Editor) also described foreign correspondents as the leaders in the process, saying that the best correspondents were the agenda-setters, those who succeeded in “thoughtfully selecting the most telling themes that illuminate a region, rather than merely being buffeted by events.”⁴² Chira described the ideal correspondents as “self-starters who work independently and have demonstrated news judgment, since they cannot wait for editors in New York to guide them to what is important.”⁴³ Andrew Kramer (*NYT*) said that the reporting that took place during the day, without guidance from New York but in consultation with colleagues and the bureau in Moscow, often became the kernel of the day’s story. All this suggests that editors at the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* did not seek to micromanage the work of their correspondents, but rather trusted them to cover the key stories.

A similar trend is visible among the Western European publications. Luke Harding (*TG*), Marie Jégo (*LM*), Piotr Smolar (*LM*), and Laure Mandeville (*LF*) all stated that they had significant freedom in determining where to go; in many cases, even more than the Americans. For example, Piotr Smolar (*LM*) enthusiastically said: “one thing has to be said about *Le Monde*, is that journalists on the ground have amazing, incredible, *infinite* freedom, and that’s really something to be underlined.”⁴⁴ As in the case of American correspondents, Smolar (*LM*) mentioned that discussions with editors were quite helpful, but that in the end he had the most control over the story:

I make those decisions, I make the calls, we just discuss the different angles, and different topics, and it’s good that we have those discussions, because when you’re on the ground you don’t always have a very good

³⁹ John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Susan Chira, *Talk to the Newsroom: Foreign Editor*, March 30, 2009, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/30/business/media/30askthetimes.html>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

perspective, and so this discussion is very healthy, but the freedom we have is the most precious thing we have in this job.⁴⁵

Laure Mandeville (*LF*) also noted that editors in Paris would never tell her how to cover a story: “No, I was totally in control...they wouldn’t dare.”⁴⁶

As described by Marie Jégo (*LM*), the editors were not very informed on the conflict. For example, she recalled in amusement how perplexed one of her editors was to hear that she was always heading to Gori. In fact, to most people covering the conflict, this was the obvious place to go, because that is where the frontline was!

While both American and Western European correspondents on the ground had a lot of freedom in determining what story to cover, there were other ways in which editorial decisions could impact the final news output. In both American and Western European publications, the structure of the newspaper, the formatting of the final news articles, and in some cases, the choice of op-eds, could play an important role in effectively revising the work of correspondents on the ground, sometimes promoting a more anti-Russian version of events.

Some correspondents believed that the influence of journalists and editors not on the ground served to incorporate a more anti-Russian perspective because these people were typically more skeptical of claims made by Russian authorities than the correspondents in Moscow, who were often more knowledgeable about present-day Russia. For example, Alexandre Billette (*LM*) explained quite comically how as a freelance journalist, he would often have to fight back against some smaller newspapers asking him to take a particular stance on a certain story:

Foreign journalists in Moscow are less anti-Russian than the others...people outside, in France, for example, think it’s evil, and they are much more skeptical than us. It’s sometimes uncomfortable for us... sometimes they are waiting for something and they already know what they want to read...and of course it is always on the anti-Russian side...sometimes you have to fight with them by phone for 10 minutes just to explain: no, there’s nothing there.⁴⁷

When asked whether he thought that editorial influence had played a large role in the coverage, he responded that undoubtedly it had. He cited an example where he and Marie Jégo (*LM*) had submitted factually correct articles that were given much less space (even when one added the length of their articles) than a large one-page op-ed by Bernard-Henri Lévy, a well-known Parisian intellectual. Lévy had written a pro-Georgian op-ed called ‘Choses vues dans la Géorgie en guerre’ (‘Things seen in a Georgia at war’), which according to Billette (*LM*) led to a little scandal in Paris, because “the ‘things seen’ were not true at all... he said Gori was burning, but Gori was NOT burning!”⁴⁸

When asked what percentage of misperceptions were caused by on-the-ground correspondents versus journalists in the newspaper home cities (Paris, London, etc.),

⁴⁵ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

⁴⁶ Laure Mandeville (*LF*). Telephone Interview. April 25, 2010.

⁴⁷ Alexandre Billette (*LM*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Billette (*LM*) said that “85-90 percent is from the hometown.”⁴⁹ He said that while he and Marie Jégo (*LM*) had different points of view on some things, they both relied on facts: “It’s not the same thing as in Paris or in Washington, where they didn’t see it!”⁵⁰ Piotr Smolar (*LM*) was also shocked by Lévy’s article, but he did not believe it meant editors were unfairly choosing among op-ed contributions to the paper.⁵¹

Piotr Smolar (*LM*) did not believe that home office reporters could control the writing of the articles, but he did recognize that “they have an influence when we receive contributions from the outside, from specialist researchers, by choosing some and rejecting others... or in the title of the articles.”⁵² As stated by several correspondents, this pressure could sometimes distort the coverage of the conflict.

According to John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor), it was impossible for American publications to choose op-eds to counteract or balance the news articles themselves, because the news operation and the editorial operation in American newspapers are genuinely separated. In contrast, Burgess described European newspapers as sometimes disregarding the distinction between the news and the editorial sections:

Oh yeah there are definite differences...the American and Western European journalistic traditions are very different: there is not this division between editorials and news that we have in this country. I had a friend who was a correspondent for a German newspaper, [...] and you know, he would write the day’s story and then send it off, and then sit down and write the editorial *about* the day’s story!⁵³

This suggests that there may be important differences between American and European newspapers in the degree to which editors and home office staff can impact the final news output after the correspondents have submitted their stories. Still, in either case, it is possible that small *ad hoc* changes made to articles without the input of the correspondents who had written them may have distorted the portrayal of certain events. Andrew Kramer (*NYT*) explained how “people call in a story and somebody at the desk writes it,”⁵⁴ taking pieces from the different correspondents’ reports and then compiling them into one article. This process may have resulted in articles with erroneous nuance and emphasis in some publications, although Kramer never felt this was the case at the *New York Times*.

Finally, as mentioned above, editors often worked to simplify the language in news articles, to make them more accessible to newspaper readers. All this suggests that journalists who were not closely covering the conflict (but who still played a role in creating the final news product) may have incorporated a more anti-Russian stance than the on-the-ground correspondents themselves. However, as argued below, a larger part of the Western media’s identification with the Georgian viewpoint was a response to

⁴⁹ Alexandre Billette (*LM*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

⁵⁴ Andrew Kramer (*NYT*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

conscious decisions by the Russian and South Ossetian authorities to prevent Western reporters from entering the conflict zone.

“On the Georgian side, as a journalist, you were free to do whatever you wanted. In South Ossetia, it was completely different: it was impossible to work independently as a journalist, because we were followed around by Kremlin men wherever we went.”

– Luke Harding (*The Guardian*)⁵⁵

4. Limited Access to the Russian Perspective

Limited access to the Russian and South Ossetian version of events was the key structural obstacle to coverage of the conflict by Western journalists, and it resulted from security threats and the strict regulations imposed by the Russian authorities. Many correspondents said that during the fighting (especially on August 8-12, before the Russians established their control), they were able to travel freely in the war zone at their own risk. In the words of Peter Finn (*WP*), “until Russian lines settled down, in the very early days, moving into the area where the Russians were advancing was somewhat dangerous.”⁵⁶ After the fighting stopped, when checkpoints had been set up, access became much more controlled and limited, this time by the Russian army. Thus, Western journalists were tasked with substantiating claims about who had committed what crimes in an environment with little security before August 12 and little official access after August 12.

Security Threats

Security threats were nearly unanimously cited as one of the greatest obstacles to the correspondents located on the ground in Georgia. Before August 12, security played the key role in hindering journalists’ access to Tbilisi, Gori, and especially Tskhinvali. Even after August 12, Russian officials used the pretext of security threats to limit Western journalists’ access, thereby becoming a major structural obstacle themselves. To some extent, however, these security threats were real because of the erratic behavior of the Ossetian separatist militias.

For most Western reporters, the first difficulty was associated with getting to the conflict area. The Tbilisi airport had been shut down for security reasons. This meant that most journalists had to find alternative means of getting into Georgia. Many flew to Baku (Azerbaijan) or to Yerevan (Armenia) and then drove all night to get to Tbilisi, arriving after August 9. As they covered the first few days of the conflict, most Western journalists would spend the nights in Tbilisi, and many would travel daily to Gori and to the surrounding area as security permitted.⁵⁷

Bullets were still flying between Russians and Georgians by the time the first Western reporters appeared in Gori. Journalists were still exposed to all the unexploded shells and munitions in Gori that people were showing them as proof of the Russian attack. As an example of the precarious security situation, many correspondents cited the death of a Dutch correspondent who was in Gori’s central square when it was bombed by

⁵⁵ Luke Harding (*TG*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

⁵⁶ Peter Finn (*WP*). Telephone Interview. February 2, 2010.

⁵⁷ Finn (*WP*), Bahrapour (*WP*), Harding (*TG*), Kramer (*NYT*), Mandeville (*LF*).

the Russians. Thus, journalists were able to go into Gori at their own risk and experience with the Georgians the impending arrival of the Russian troops. This kind of access to Gori was only possible until August 12, when the Russians bombed and took over the town.⁵⁸

Access to South Ossetia was also difficult before the August 12 ceasefire for reasons of security. For example, Andrew Kramer (*NYT*) recalls stopping at a bridge next to a Russian peacekeeping checkpoint between Gori and Tskhinvali, and being told that the road to Tskhinvali was open. However, farther down the road he could see civilian cars being shot at by what he suspected were South Ossetian mercenaries:

They weren't blocking anybody from using that road...a lot of journalists were there...and every once in a while, somebody would try to drive up that road, and if they did, they were always shot at by South Ossetian mercenaries. I didn't go...a Polish guy went, and he had to hop out of his car, and he was pinned down...a *Newsweek* freelance photographer was killed trying to make that trip.⁵⁹

Most correspondents said that the gravest danger came from the Ossetian militias or gangs that moved freely through the region during the 5-day conflict, alternatively attacking ethnic Georgians or defending ethnic Ossetians, depending on one's perspective. In the words of Laure Mandeville (*LF*), "there really were issues of security from the Ossetian militias...they were pretty crazy."⁶⁰ Most correspondents believed these militias were not being adequately controlled by the Russian forces, even near the Russian checkpoints. Luke Harding (*TG*), who referred to the Ossetian militias as "absolutely wild...a complete hazard,"⁶¹ described one instance where an Ossetian officer descended from a car and started waving his pistol aggressively, while his soldiers were firing shots into the ground, simply at the sight of Western journalists waiting near a Russian checkpoint. Jonathan Finer (*WP*) recalled another instance when Ossetian militants stole a journalist's car right next to a checkpoint.

These militias were not necessarily targeting Western journalists, however. Andrew Kramer (*NYT*), cited above, was unsure whether the Ossetians shooting on the bridge knew they were shooting at journalists. Peter Finn (*WP*) said that even some Russian journalists had been shot, because the Ossetian militias "weren't distinguishing, friend or foe, press or not."⁶² In the words of Jonathan Finer (*WP*), compared to other conflicts, "it was less predictably dangerous...in some conflicts you know where the dangerous parts are, but here, all of a sudden someone might get shot at a checkpoint somewhere."⁶³ Overall, it is indisputable that threats to security significantly affected Western coverage of the war.

⁵⁸ Finn (*WP*), Harding (*TG*), Jégo (*LM*).

⁵⁹ Andrew Kramer (*NYT*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

⁶⁰ Laure Mandeville (*LF*). Telephone Interview. April 25, 2010.

⁶¹ Luke Harding (*TG*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

⁶² Peter Finn (*WP*). Telephone Interview. February 2, 2010.

⁶³ Jonathan Finer (*WP*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

Russian Control of the War Zone

From the accounts of most Western journalists, the Russian on-the-ground interactions with the foreign press were a spectacular failure. After the August 12 ceasefire and the Russian takeover of Gori, the Russian authorities greatly restricted access to Gori, Tskhinvali, and the areas between them, becoming the major reason Western journalists did not have easy access to the Russian and South Ossetian version of events.

At first, the Russian authorities prohibited all Western journalists from entering Gori (see the map duplicated here for clarity), and then they made it necessary for Western journalists to hold official Russian accreditation in order to enter the city. This permission was typically reserved for the Moscow correspondents from flagship Western publications, who had Russian accreditation because they had worked in Moscow. This made getting into Gori (the frontline of the occupation) a key challenge for most Tbilisi-based correspondents.



On the other hand, Tara Bahrapour (*WP*) did not believe that her access to Gori was denied because she did not have proper accreditation. Rather, she said that all accessibility decisions were being negotiated on the spot and depended more on chance than on the official stance regarding journalistic access. Laure Mandeville (*LF*) also recalled this air of uncertainty: “as always in Russia, it just depends on the mood and

⁶⁴Fred Kagan, *Eastern European Strategy Group*, American Enterprise Institute, August 27-28, 2008.

behavior of the particular Colonel or General around.”⁶⁵ However, Mandeville (*LF*) also said that the Russian officers claimed this was the stance of the Kremlin. Mandeville (*LF*) suspected that there was indeed an order made somewhere in Moscow, but finally admitted “we never really got a clear answer on that.”⁶⁶

Severe Russian restrictions often forced Western correspondents to seek other ways into Gori. For example, many journalists found ways into Gori through unofficial channels (through back roads that were often quite dangerous). Others, such as Mandeville (*LF*), Harding (*TG*) and Bahrapour (*WP*) sought ways into Gori through official diplomatic channels (traveling with the French Ambassador, with high-level Georgian security officials, and the Estonian Ambassador, respectively). Despite the success of some of these trips, access to Gori after August 12 was severely limited as a result of strict Russian regulations.

Access to Tskhinvali, after the August 12 ceasefire, was even more difficult. Much to its detriment, the Russian military leadership had a very strict policy towards Western foreign correspondents seeking access to South Ossetia: if they were to see South Ossetia, it would be under Russian supervision. As a result, only Western correspondents with official Russian accreditation were allowed to go into South Ossetia and even then these correspondents could experience South Ossetia only as part of a large convoy of journalists transported by buses and escorted by the Russian army.

After August 15, these excursions were carried out sparingly at first, and then eventually daily, from Vladikavkaz (Russia) into Tskhinvali. They were meant to showcase the destruction suffered in Tskhinvali after the Georgian attack on August 8. They typically lasted only a few hours, during which Western journalists were not allowed to stray beyond a certain area. These excursions were thus very controlled and played an important role in shaping the experience of foreign journalists, especially because they represented a sharp contrast to the extreme accessibility of the Georgian officials who had invited them to lunch and waved them through all the checkpoints.

Romain Goguelin, a French reporter from *France24* who was privileged to travel with the Russian army, highlighted the absurdity of the Russian policy. He remembered preparing to tape South Ossetian refugees reentering Tskhinvali after having fled previously from their homes because of the Georgian offensive. Many of them were shouting “Thank you, Russia, thank you, you have saved us!” A Russian official told him to turn off the camera! It took Goguelin (*F24*) a lot of explaining to convince this official that evidence of Ossetian suffering caused by the Georgians was precisely what the Russians should be interested in recording.⁶⁷

When asked about the incident, Goguelin (*F24*) simply said that this was proof of Russian incompetence in media wars, and their psychological entrapment in the practices of the Cold War, according to which information should be withheld from (rather than shared with) journalists, especially if they are American or European. Goguelin (*F24*) believes this attitude in general was extremely detrimental to the Russian case: “when there was a Georgian bombardment of Tskhinvali, it really did not help the Russians that

⁶⁵ Laure Mandeville (*LF*). Telephone Interview. April 25, 2010.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Romain Goguelin (*F24*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010.

there weren't any Western journalists there...and that there were only 48 Russian journalists....because some in the West tend not to believe Russian journalists.”⁶⁸

As the only Western journalist who was staying at the Russian base near Tskhinvali, Goguelin (*F24*) believes he clearly “gave a different point of view on the conflict than someone who was on the Georgian side...many of the colleagues I knew back in Paris were completely ‘biased’ to an extreme point...I was glad to be there to bring some balance.”⁶⁹ Nodé-Langlois (*LF*) also said the Russians should have immediately brought in Western journalists, because this would have made a big difference.

In contrast, Laure Mandeville (*LF*) believes that this absence of Western journalists was not so detrimental to the Russians, because it allowed Moscow to accuse Westerners of imbalanced coverage. In addition, Mandeville (*LF*) believed that most Western journalists stationed in Tbilisi eventually ceased to promote a pro-Georgian perspective, because they became critical of Saakashvili and were more likely to view the conflict as an internal Georgian affair rather than a large land-grab by the Russians.⁷⁰

Piotr Smolar (*LM*) strongly believes that the Russians committed a terrible mistake. He recognized the contradiction (which is pertinent to the main conclusion of this paper), that while the Russians would always criticize the Western media as promoting anti-Russian propaganda, it was, in fact, the Russians themselves who had largely prevented the Western journalists from seeing their side of the story: “there is a contradiction between these two feelings. On the one hand they were frustrated, and on the other they were not allowing us to go there freely.”⁷¹

Smolar (*LM*) believes it would have been extremely easy for the Russians to allow Western journalists to just sleep in the base near Tskhinvali (as Romain Goguelin had done), and that this would have made a big difference, because the bus trips from Vladikavkaz were about 4 hours each way: “it might sound like a detail, but it’s not, because when you lose 8 hours a day on traveling, you know, you get superficial, you have less time to talk to people, to report, and to investigate.” Smolar (*LM*) believes it also would have been extremely easy and beneficial for the Russians to present to the journalists “a very high Russian officer, a guy good with words, good with journalists, who would come with a map, with a very precise timeline of what had happened,” because there would have been articles written about it within the hour.⁷²

If the Russian authorities had allowed more Western correspondents into South Ossetia, Western coverage of the war would probably have been completely different. An indication of this is that most Western correspondents I interviewed were glad to report the other side of the story (once they finally had access to it).

⁶⁸ Romain Goguelin (*F24*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Laure Mandeville (*LF*). Telephone Interview. April 25, 2010.

⁷¹ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

⁷² Ibid.

Russian Treatment of Western Journalists

Luke Harding (*TG*) also believes the Russian attitude toward the foreign press was extremely detrimental to their case. From his perspective, it was more what he viewed as blatant Russian lies and lack of respect, rather than the lack of access, that led to negative press coverage. When he first arrived in the area around Gori on August 9, Harding (*TG*) was able to speak with Georgian refugees who had fled from Ossetian gangs that had raided their village, killing teenage boys, and stealing everything in sight. He was later able to visit the villages themselves, and confirm that “these stories were quite credible. I was careful, and I got people to draw maps, to give me details of names, ages, family relationships. We built up this picture of 21st century ethnic cleansing carried out by vengeful Ossetians and facilitated by the Russians.”⁷³ Thus, when Harding (*TG*) went on his first excursion with the Russians (which started near Gori rather than in Vladikavkaz), he knew not to believe what they told him:

They drove through the same villages, the ones that I had been in the previous day, and it was clear that the houses had been burned by Ossetians...and we were now with a Kremlin spin doctor all herded on this truck...and we didn't stop...he did allow us to take pictures, but he claimed that it had been the Georgian Special Services that had burned down all these villages. He was lying, of course.⁷⁴

Harding (*TG*) was angered to hear the Russians lie so blatantly. As a journalist, he was angered by the lack of transparency, and he also “personally resented” the accusation that he was a CIA or an MI6 agent, a Western spy, and a partisan apologist for the Georgians. He believes this kind of treatment was counterproductive for the Russian relationship with the foreign press corps:

Restricting people and lying to them in a primitive way might work for the Russian press, but it just doesn't work for the international press....no one's going to believe you, if you've talked to someone in a village, who described meticulously how an Ossetian gang came in, with dates, numbers, vehicles, and burned their house, and then you're told by some Kremlin stooge that it was burned down by Georgian special agents ...it's just a fairytale for idiots!⁷⁵

According to Harding (*TG*), when he confronted one of the Russian military officials, he became quite an unpopular character on the trip, and they even threatened to throw him off the truck and to leave him behind in no man's land, in the middle of a war-zone! This probably did not help the Russian cause.

Other journalists denounced the Russians' use of security threats as a pretext to limit Western journalists' access to Tskhinvali and the villages between Gori and Tskhinvali. Andrew Osborn (*WSJ*) recounted how Western journalists on controlled

⁷³ Luke Harding (*TG*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

excursions to Tskhinvali were forced to travel in armored vehicles⁷⁶ that prevented them from even catching a glimpse of the Georgian/South Ossetian countryside. The Russians said this was a necessary measure, to protect the lives of journalists (“Of course they said it was for safety...they claimed there were still hostile elements, snipers, etc...God forbid, some Western journalists might die!”).⁷⁷ Laure Mandeville (*LF*), Piotr Smolar (*LM*) and Jonathan Finer (*WP*) also agreed that the Russians had used security as a pretext. In the words of Jonathan Finer (*WP*), “I think that was a sort of an excuse, basically. To the extent there was a threat to our security, it was from them [and the Ossetian militias they were not controlling].”⁷⁸

Piotr Smolar (*LM*) was quite frustrated by this as well: “this is the biggest crap a journalist can hear from a government: ‘security issues’...yes well of course there is a security issue, it’s a war, for God’s sake! We know we’re not going to Disneyland!”⁷⁹ Smolar (*LM*) also said that the Russians’ reputation, and especially that of the Russian army, also contributed to negative coverage. However, when asked whether the non-transparency of the Russians had led to anti-Russian coverage from outraged Western journalists, he responded: “I hope journalists are mature enough to know the difference between bad communication and the actual subject they are supposed to cover.”⁸⁰

Harding (*TG*) was angered that the Russians did not allow the Western journalists to stay in Tskhinvali overnight, or to do basic things, such as to go to the morgue (which would have been the easiest way to assess the false Russian claim that the Georgians had killed 2,000 people), or to go to Georgian villages inside South Ossetia, which had been systematically burned to the ground and destroyed by South Ossetians. In essence, he said, “they weren’t allowed to be journalists.”⁸¹ He was also extremely suspicious that locals in Tskhinvali kept ‘popping up’ out of nowhere to talk to journalists and to give them all (nearly word for word) the same story: “The people who ‘spontaneously’ talked to us all said the same thing, which is kind of suspicious. It was impossible to work independently.”⁸² However, not all correspondents who gave accounts of the trips to Tskhinvali agreed that the South Ossetians were being told what to say by the Russians.

Regardless of their opinions on whether the Tskhinvali locals were being coached, all correspondents (whether French, British, or American) concurred that the heavily controlled trips were extremely uncomfortable from a journalistic point of view. This inevitably limited their exposure to the South Ossetian version of events. Most correspondents, regardless of their country or newspaper, also agreed that these policies of the Russian authorities were simply the result of ‘bad management’ by the Russians:

They could have come up with a more sophisticated propaganda...it just needed to be more subtle. These people don’t know what Twitter is, they don’t know what social media is, they don’t speak English; they’re used to dealing with the Russian press, which will do what it’s told...these tactics

⁷⁶ Although the first trips were done by bus, eventually the Russians used armored vehicles.

⁷⁷ Andrew Osborn (*WSJ*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Finer (*WP*). Telephone Interview. April 19, 2010.

⁷⁹ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Luke Harding (*TG*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

⁸² *Ibid.*

on sophisticated Western journalists wouldn't work. It was bad management...they fall victims to their own propaganda.⁸³

Even Aleksandra Prokopenko, Russian correspondent from *ITAR-TASS*, stated clearly that this was bad Russian management. John Burgess (*WP* Foreign Desk Editor) agreed with Prokopenko (*ITAR-TASS*) that the Russian military did not feel that part of their mission was to explain to the Western media why they were in South Ossetia (with the exception of the aforementioned controlled excursions into Tskhinvali).

While most correspondents called this a problem of Russian incompetence, Piotr Smolar (*LM*) believed "it's not incompetence, it's tradition...the Russian army has never been open, never."⁸⁴ The key problem, as summarized by Smolar (*LM*), was that "the Russians are control freaks, so they are not used to good modern PR. Most of the time, Russian channels are just a propaganda tool for the government. So Russian authorities have difficulty finding a more subtle approach toward foreign media."⁸⁵ Harding (*TG*) echoed this sentiment, saying that "the problem was the Kremlin's attempts at Soviet-style micromanagement...they wouldn't actually let reporters go and make their own inquiries...and if they had, I think the Russian side of the story would have come out sooner, and would have been more positive."⁸⁶ In the words of Andrew Osborn (*WSJ*): "the Russians were their own worst enemies."⁸⁷

Stark Contrast with Georgian Accessibility

Unlike the Russians, the Georgian government responded immediately to the outbreak of the conflict with a strong media offensive. All correspondents immediately noted the extreme accessibility of Georgian officials. For example, Peter Finn (*WP*) recalled speaking to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili personally just 2 hours after arriving in Tbilisi, and mentioned that Saakashvili was so accessible that people started to wonder whether he actually had a war to manage. Similarly, Tara Bahrapour (*WP*) recalled having access to the personal cell phone numbers of numerous Georgian officials, whom she felt comfortable calling as late as 1 am for information. Luke Harding (*TG*) recalled Western journalists regularly receiving text messages from the Georgian Foreign Ministry and being able to easily talk to all the important Georgian officials. Marie Jégo (*LM*) also noted how pleasant it was to work with them, and admitted that one British correspondent had said that journalists were more attracted to the Georgians, because they were more journalist-friendly. This Georgian accessibility in Tbilisi was a stark contrast with the lack of accessibility of the Russians, with whom, in the words of Moscow correspondent Charles Bremner (*TT*), "we just got the official version."⁸⁸

Even in Moscow, official access was much more limited than in Tbilisi, despite

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Piotr Smolar (*LM*). Telephone Interview. April 15, 2010.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Luke Harding (*TG*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

⁸⁷ Andrew Osborn (*WSJ*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010.

⁸⁸ Charles Bremner (*TT*). In Person Interview. Paris, France. March 23, 2010.

the efforts to accommodate the foreign press to some degree, as stated by Fabrice Nodé-Langlois (*LF*), Alexandre Billette (*LM*), and Anne Barnard (*NYT*). For example, despite the lack of access they permitted on the ground, Nodé-Langlois (*LF*) recalled that in Moscow “[the Russians] organized press conferences nearly daily, showing maps, really trying to show that they were giving all the information.”⁸⁹ Anne Barnard (*NYT*) generally agreed that “there was at least some attempt by the Russian military to be transparent, at least compared to their past.”⁹⁰ However, apart from these daily press briefings, Moscow correspondents concurred that there was not much contact with the foreign press, which is a stark contrast with the Georgians’ 24-hour attention.

Just as Russian inaccessibility was rooted in their history and culture, this Georgian accessibility did not appear spontaneously. Rather, Bahrapour (*WP*) noted that the Georgian officials had also been extremely accessible to her and other Western journalists long before the conflict had erupted. Having lived in Georgia for about a year prior to the start of hostilities, she recalled knowing and having the contact information of many of them long before August of 2008:

They’re very accessible, they speak very good English [...] they’re very easy to get to know, they’re happy to meet you at all hours for a coffee [...] and they’re very warm and a lot of them are nice people, but it doesn’t mean you’re going to get the truth out of them!⁹¹

Finn (*WP*) described all of the Georgian officials as “by design Western-educated [...] they went out of their way to cultivate and influence the foreign press, including making the President available on a regular basis.”⁹² In addition, Bahrapour (*WP*) recognized that despite the warmth and kindness of many of the Georgian officials, they had a very particular understanding of events. When asked whether Georgian officials’ transparency made her more inclined to believe their side of the story, she responded: “I don’t consider them to be particularly transparent...just media-savvy.”⁹³

Thus, in stark contrast to the reception they received by the Russians, all correspondents spoke wonders of the access they got from the Georgian government. According to Luke Harding (*TG*):

Most importantly, we were given access! We were waved through roadblocks,...That was why the Georgians, at least initially, won the media war. Not because we worked for the CIA, but simply because they had a more sophisticated understanding of how a global media works.⁹⁴

Indeed, much has been written about the degree to which disproportionate proximity to one actor in military conflicts has affected news coverage. For example, in the British-led 1982 Falklands war, and in the American-led 2003 Iraq invasion, there

⁸⁹ Fabrice Nodé-Langlois (*LF*). In Person Interview. Paris, France. March 23, 2010.

⁹⁰ Anne Barnard (*NYT*). Email Interview. April 26, 2010.

⁹¹ Tara Bahrapour (*WP*). Telephone Interview. February 16, 2010.

⁹² Peter Finn (*WP*). Telephone Interview. February 2, 2010.

⁹³ Tara Bahrapour (*WP*). Telephone Interview. February 16, 2010.

⁹⁴ Luke Harding (*TG*). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 25, 2010.

was some criticism of reporters who (for security reasons) were embedded with army units and thus were more likely to identify with the soldiers they accompanied.⁹⁵ In the case of the Georgia war, this proximity to Georgian officials may have played a similar role, to the extent that journalists may have considered Georgians to be more Western, and thus part of their broad community. However, two important caveats are worth noting. First, in the Falklands War and in Iraq, the common nationality and a possible feeling of patriotism were likely to bind journalists and soldiers much more closely than the more diffuse common identity possible between Western journalists and Georgian officials. Secondly, in the case of Georgia, journalists were not bound to travel with Georgian officials.

In some conflicts, budget limitations can play a role in influencing news coverage, because reporters' mobility in a region can be limited by lack of funds. In addition, language barriers can affect coverage by limiting reporters' understanding of events, their exposure to the more representative local population (rather than to English-speaking elites), or their ability to build trust around them. However, not a single correspondent believed that budget or language barriers in any way hindered their coverage of the conflict. This is another reflection of their belief that lack of access to the Russian and South Ossetian perspectives proved to be a much more significant problem and the major structural factor influencing Western coverage of the war.

⁹⁵ Howard Tumber, "Prisoners of News Values?" in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, eds. Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer. 1st ed, Routledge, 2004, p. 193

“The Russians were their own worst enemies.” – Andrew Osborn (WSJ)⁹⁶

5. Conclusion

I have presented evidence that there were key structural factors that influenced Western coverage of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. The unique timing, location, and complexity of the war may have contributed to the oversimplification of coverage by some reporters not familiar with the conflict (and based mostly in Georgia). In addition, although major Western publications gave a lot of freedom to their correspondents to direct the coverage, and although the news-gathering methods were similar across all major publications, the work of home office reporters and editorial staff, by virtue of its remote nature and its detachment from the events on the ground, may have contributed to distorted coverage of the war in the Western print media. Most importantly, however, it was lack of access to the Russian and South Ossetian perspectives (as a result of security threats and the restrictive policies of the Russian military) that most significantly contributed to the imbalanced coverage of the war in the Western press.

⁹⁶ Andrew Osborn (WSJ). In Person Interview. Moscow, Russia. March 27, 2010.

Afterword

I began this research project with my own pre-conceived notions about how to objectively assess anti-Russian bias in Western news coverage of the Georgia crisis. These included the creation of a new methodological tool that would assign points to news articles based on instances of ‘bias’ present in each news article. However, in the course of my interviews, I realized that this quantitative method was subject to prohibitive methodological difficulties. First of all, aiming to create a scale of anti-Russian bias wrongfully assumed that one could easily classify each quotation, description, or source (or even the tone) within an article as being either fully pro-Russian or pro-Georgian. Moreover, this method assumed that all articles were comparable, as if they had been created under the same circumstances, had the same scope and topics, were from the same time period, and had the same amount of information. These assumptions would easily have led to the mischaracterization of news articles, of the motives of reporters, and of the root causes of the bias.

Indeed, another important finding of my research is that one cannot compare American and Western European news articles, because the American and Western European journalistic traditions and reporting styles are so different. While American and European correspondents follow the same methods to acquire information, there are fundamental differences in the way they interpret and present this information. These differences played a key role in determining the final news output of publications in the United States and Western Europe.

John Burgess (*WP*) explained that European journalists write differently because they have a different tradition; one that encourages them to take a stance rather than report only the facts. This distinction was remarkably present in every single interview. While all the American journalists believed in the need to present all sides of a story, all the European journalists said this was impossible and therefore not the role of the journalist. This was best put by Laure Mandeville (*LF*):

There are moments in journalism where of course you have to see all sides, but you can miss the center of a story if you want to balance things in a very neutral way. I think the most important thing is ‘honesty’ in journalism,...because objectivity is impossible, and neutrality can be extremely dangerous...sometimes you have to take a stance....and that’s where I see sometimes limits in American journalism, when you want to balance exactly.⁹⁷

Thus, while the day-to-day reporting efforts of American and Western European correspondents on the ground were largely similar, there were key differences in journalists’ approach to writing that complicate an effective comparison of the news articles written for American and Western European publications.

Still, reading hundreds of news articles supported my research in other ways, informing my interviews with war correspondents and deepening my knowledge of all that had been written on the conflict. Throughout this process, I realized that one cannot objectively measure the work of journalists covering an international crisis, and one

⁹⁷ Laure Mandeville (*LF*). Telephone Interview. April 25, 2010.

certainly cannot find objectively conclusive links between the personal inclinations of journalists and their coverage of a conflict. What we can do, however, and what I did in my research, is explore whether other 'structural' factors can help to explain the coverage of the war.

My personal experience with these war correspondents taught me that we should be careful about accusing these brave professionals (who are willing to risk their lives in the name of transparency) of biased or imbalanced coverage if we have not first examined the structural obstacles they had to face in the process.

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Appendix: List of Interview Questions

1. When were you in Georgia to cover the 2008 Russia-Georgia war? Where were you located during the conflict? Tbilisi? Gori? Tskhinvali?
2. In your coverage of the war, what are some of the specific logistical obstacles you encountered (difficulties of access, sources, etc)?
3. What sources were available to you (e.g. did you speak to any South Ossetians)?
4. Was language a barrier to your reporting? Were you able to rely on a translator?
5. Prior to the start of the conflict, what had been your past experiences in Georgia?
6. What had been your outlook on the conflict before you traveled there to cover it? Did your outlook change as you covered the conflict?
7. What was the role of the U.S. government (e.g. did you register at the U.S. Embassy, speak to American officials, etc.) in your coverage? Did you feel pressure from the Georgian/Russian government?
8. What was the role of budget limitations?
9. How did you decide what story to cover?
10. What was your relationship with your editors, their demands, and how they followed your work during the conflict? Did your editors question your reading of events?
11. Have you worked for other newspapers? Did you notice any paper-specific customs in terms of reporting?
12. What were your interactions with other correspondents from other countries and other papers?
13. Did you travel with the Georgian or Russian military at all?
14. Did you rely on any of the newswire services (e.g. Reuters, AP, AFP)?
15. Do you think correspondents' coverage of Russia and Georgia was affected by whether they had also been a reporter near the end of the Cold War? Was yours?
16. I've read that some European journalists include their personal analysis into the news story...do you think that is appropriate?

17. I've been reading different theories about the work of journalists, and I am just wondering your perspective on this...What is the role of the journalist?
18. Who started the 2008 Russia-Georgia war?