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How the Internet Turns Journalists Into Punks

By Alexei Pankin

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It seems as if Russia's best journalists have set out to completely undermine President Dmitry Medvedev's stated ideology that "freedom is better than a lack of freedom." At least, it seems that way after reading the nasty bickering between journalists on the blogosphere during the past week.

Six years ago, I served as the ombudsman for Izvestia. My job was to apply recognized professional standards and ethical principles in responding publicly to readers' complaints about articles that appeared in the newspaper. For example, in September 2005 Izvestia published three articles by journalist Igor Naidenov about the situation in Beslan one year after the tragedy in which terrorists killed 334 people, including 186 children. One of Naidenov's articles, titled "Envy," described the feelings of Beslan residents who were jealous of victims' families who received compensation. Another article, titled "Hate," spoke of the negative feelings toward the Ingush, who made up the bulk of the Beslan terrorists.

The leader of the Beslan Mothers organization publicly cursed him for the articles. Naidenov returned from Beslan in a state of stress. As ombudsman, I sided with the journalist in this dispute. A few months later, Naidenov was given the Andrei Sakharov award for investigative journalism. His greatest advocate for that nomination was Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who explained her strong support by saying: "He wrote the truth about those unfortunate people. I also knew about it, but did not dare to make it public."

And yet, even having this experience of independent ethical arbitration, I find myself unable to understand the current behavior of journalists in the blogosphere.

Nikolai Uskov, GQ's editor-in-chief and a member of the media working group for the U.S.-Russia Binational Presidential Commission, was offended by an offhand remark about his work made by Leonid Bershidsky, former Vedomosti editor-in-chief and founder of the Slon.ru business web publication. Uskov posted a message on LiveJournal addressed to Bershidsky with the heading "Scumbag Bershidsky." Of the 220 words in message, 15 were obscene.

Oleg Kashin, the journalist best known for having been brutally beaten at the entrance to his apartment building, used obscene language in his blog to describe how Ren-TV — along with Marian Maximovskaya, clearly the most outspoken opposition television anchor on national television — tried to convince him to give an interview. And all of this was just an ordinary phone conversation, according to Kashin.

Similarly, Ekho Moskvy anchor Ksenia Larina made the unsubstantiated accusation that Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the Russia Today television network, complained to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin about Ekho Moskvy's supposedly "incorrect politics," which, according to Larina, resulted in Putin giving a dressing-down to Alexei Venediktov, Ekho Moskvy's editor-in-chief. Rather than resolve the matter in court, Simonyan responded with a post on LiveJournal that seemed to imply that Ekho Moskvy pays many of its employees under the table to avoid taxes. With passions escalating, the other side then accused Simonyan of being a stool pigeon.

To be fair, these journalists generally produce high-quality media products on the air and in print while working within the limits of their own editorial policy, legal requirements and perhaps some degree of censorship. But the moment they and others venture into the unregulated, free zone of the Internet, they begin behaving like street punks.

After this, how can Medvedev convince me that freedom is better than a lack of freedom?

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