News Agency Coverage of Conflict Among Russia's Political Elite

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This study reviews coverage of a spat between Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in 2009 and 2010, analyzing how the Thomson Reuters and Interfax news agencies report on conflict among political elites in post-Soviet and post-perestroika Russia. Using framing theories and discourse and thematic analyses, the research deconstructs the reports from the two agencies, one headquartered in London and New York and the other in Moscow, analyzing how they comply with Western journalistic principles while navigating the constraints on professional journalism in Russia. The qualitative study concludes that orientation, reporting conventions, and editorial decisions led Interfax and Reuters to privilege certain perspectives while downplaying others.

Introduction

Arguably, the history of the Russian press is a legacy of state censorship of varied intensity and multiple tensions between journalism and politics. From its outset with the emergence of *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti* in 1703, the formal press was indelibly marked by government propaganda (Azhgikhina, 2007). Vartanova (2012) concludes that Tsar Peter the Great introduced the newspaper as a communicative tool for the Russian elite. Lenin's press decree of 1917 and Stalin's press policy of the mid-1900s, stipulating the expectations and regulation of the Russian press, constituted foundational policy in the communist era (Koltsova, 2006; Murray, 1994).

Media censorship under Khrushchev (1953–1964) and Brezhnev (1964–1982) was less severe than it had been under their predecessors, but these later administrations remained intolerant of press activities that threatened to disturb the constructed ideology and image of a buoyant and effervescent Russian state and society. Public debate following the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, the unfolding collapse of the Russian economy, and the top-down transformation of governance through *perestroika* (restructuring or deregulation) and *glasnost* (informational transparency) redefined and reconfigured the Russian press (Rasuvayev & Verrall, 1992; Schillinger & Porter, 1991).

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In June 1990, President Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded in introducing new media laws that theoretically abolished censorship and opened up the media market (Arutunyan, 2009). By 1991, the Law of the Russian Federation on Mass Media was facilitating the expansion of independent news media institutions and offering journalists protection from a range of repressions that epitomized the country's political history (De Smaele & Vartanova, 2007). A year later, the new laws' impact was conspicuous, with over 400 newly registered publications and media companies (Azhgikhina, 2007; Koikkalainen, 2008).

Unfortunately, this watershed period was fleeting (Azhgikhina, 2007; Vartanova, 2007). Ideological warfare between the Berezovskii, Gusinskii and other "oligarch" media empires, along with the evolution of untamed media debates fueled by mudslinging polemics, created new tensions between the state and the media and also alienated elements of the Russian public (Radio Free Europe, 2007; Vartanova, 2012). Russian scholars have termed this congenital phase of elite private and public actors' media manipulation in mass campaigns the "mediatization of politics" (Vartanova, 2007, p. 104).

Since perestroika, the media climate, though less oppressive than during the era of totalitarian communist rule, has remained relatively restrictive and dangerous for journalists willing to challenge the established order. Numerous organizations have reported on the many challenges to freedom of the press in Russia (Becker, 2003; Richter, 2008). The New York–based media watchdog Committee to Protect Journalists (2011) classified Russia as the third most dangerous country for journalists. Additionally, surveys conducted by Freedom House in 2005 and 2009 assigned Russia a "Not Free" rating in a freedom of the press index measuring the extent to which corruption, human rights, political victimization, and violence undermine effective journalism (Freedom House, 2009).

Azhgikhina (2007) notes that in Russia, many editors and media owners avoid confrontation with public officials, religious leaders, and the business elite for fear of recriminations through tax inspections or lawsuits. Additionally, national tragedies and threats of terrorism have emboldened state authorities to rationalize their increasing suppression of press freedom (Azhgikhina, 2007). Arutunyan (2009) observes that contemporary Russian media oligarchs have adopted a pro-Kremlin policy meant to keep them in good standing with the government authorities and political elites. Whereas McNair (2000) warns researchers not to assume that journalistic objectivity is a pervasive professional ethic in Russia, Koikkalainen (2008) notes that financial journalism in Russia mirrors Western models. She identifies Russian business publications as prominent importers of Western journalistic practices, a posture dovetailing with their political economic interests (Koikkalainen, 2007). She also explains that the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times* are the modern Russian financial press's most influential role models (Koikkalainen, 2008). The influence of Reuters cannot be understated. The most prominent supplier of financial news in Eastern Europe (Rantanen, 1998), Reuters has a strong presence in Russia. Rantanen (2002) reports that in 1994, the agency's Moscow branch had a predominantly Russian staff of 110.

The development of the non-state news agency Interfax (established in 1989) lends credence to Koikkalainen's (2008) observation. Thomson Reuters and Bloomberg (the world's major financial news agencies, both headquartered in North America) significantly influenced the shaping of Interfax. Rantanen (2002) credits Interfax with introducing Western news styles in Russian news agencies' domestic

practices. Interfax turned increasingly toward covering economic, financial, and business news for non-media clients as a principal source of revenue and today is a leading source, worldwide, of both general and financial news from post-Soviet Russia, Central Asia, and China (Interfax, 2012). Meanwhile, Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue, globalism and the ubiquity of Western journalistic models have led to increased convergence and standardization of journalistic practice around the world. We believe these theoretical perspectives conclusively legitimize our pairing of Interfax and Reuters in this study.

The publicized brawl staged from 2009 to 2010 between Yury Luzhkov, mayor of Moscow for 22 years, and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev offers a fitting platform for analyzing how reputable international news agencies from two different geographical and cultural orientations professionally report on highly charged and sensitive political conflicts within the repressive Russian media climate. Since Interfax and Reuters are both market-oriented global news agencies providing a wide range of subscription-based information services, we reasonably assume that public perception of their credibility as news providers potentially impacts their business models. Reuters claims to offer world news that is trustworthy and free from bias (Thomson Reuters, 2011), while investors, businesses, and media outlets worldwide rely on Interfax for accurate reporting of news in and about Russia. Interfax boasts a global network of 1,000 staff with a daily production of 3,000 stories ("Bloomberg Offers Interfax Russian Newswire Service," 2010).

We were curious about how these global news agencies used contemporary Western journalistic models to report on this unusual case of overt, inflamed aggression between two of Russia's most powerful politicians. We hypothesized that the conflation of market forces, conventional and routine journalistic practices, and Russian political elites' tendency to manipulate controversial news coverage would invariably weigh heavily on the agencies' news coverage. We also expected Interfax's coverage to differ significantly from Reuters' because, we hypothesized, it is likely to be more vulnerable to political manipulation and reprisals for professional coverage of the conflict—after all, not only is Interfax headquartered in Russia, but its business strategy depends heavily on access to information from Russia's political and corporate elites ("Bloomberg Offers Interfax Russian Newswire Service," 2010; Rantanen, 2002).

Background

In December 2004, President Vladimir Putin signed a new bill in parliament outlawing the appointment of regional governors and mayors by popular vote, reversing democratic provisions that Boris Yelstin negotiated and signed in 1993. Under the new law, the president of Russia has the right to appoint any or all of the country's 89 regional leaders and recommend them to the regional legislatures for confirmation.

In July 2008, four months after being appointed President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev vowed to replace dozens of regional governors, stressing his preference for a younger generation of regional leaders with business savvy and considerable corporate experience. Although President Medvedev had mentioned no names, popular interpretations pointed to Moscow's Mayor Yury Luzhkov and Tatarstan's Governor Mintimer Shaimiyev (Faulconbridge, 2008) as potential targets for replacement.

Eight months after taking his presidential oath, and four months after publicly disclosing his intentions to overhaul regional leadership, Medvedev took a counterpunch from Moscow's powerful mayor, Yury Luzhkov, in an unusual public display of dissent from the ruling elite. In February 2009, at the height of Russia's struggle to deal with its worst economic recession in 15 years, Mayor Luzhkov publicly criticized the Kremlin's economic policies, stating that they were worsening the financial crisis (Shchedrov, 2009).

Luzhkov's attack came the day after President Medvedev sacked the governors of the Oryol, Pskov, and Voronezh regions. Medvedev resented Luzhkov's overt challenge to his authority (Dyomkin, Sweeney, & Williams, 2008), and when Levada Center polls indicated that 63% of Muscovites believed Moscow's council elections had been fraudulent, Medvedev blamed city officials, claiming that they had not put enough pressure on Mayor Luzhkov to liberalize city elections (Humphries, 2009).

While the spat between President Medvedev and Mayor Luzhkov played out in the Russian media, public calls to investigate state officials for corruption intensified. These demands resounded against the backdrop of a February 2008 report in the Russian magazine *Finans* and an April 2010 issue of *Forbes Magazine* that both ranked Mayor Luzhkov's wife, Yelena Baturina, as the richest woman in Russia (Paxton, 2010). With an expanding empire rooted in a Moscow-based construction business, Baturina rose to billionaire status during her husband's tenure controlling Moscow's public coffers.

Neither the buzz of complaints among the Russian citizenry about public corruption nor the Kremlin's explicit agenda to unseat regional leaders induced Luzhkov to resign as had Murtaza Rakhimov, veteran governor of the oil-producing region of Bashkortostan. Unlike Rakhimov, Luzhkov continued to defy the Kremlin, openly supporting Khimki Forest protestors and adopting a bellicose stance against influential civic groups like the gay rights movement (Bratersky, 2010).

Indifference to the forces of nature, however, would prove the greatest factor in the Moscow mayor's unwitting undoing. In August 2010, a record heat wave in Moscow set forests and peat deposits ablaze, claiming 52 lives, leaving 4,000 people homeless, and destroying prized military installations (Ferris-Rotman, 2010). While President Medvedev ordered army troops to the city to assist ill-equipped firefighters and from his own pocket donated 350,000 rubles for victim assistance, Mayor Luzhkov was away on vacation throughout the six most destructive days of fires in the city (Ferris-Rotman, 2010).

Mayor Luzhkov, reeling from widespread public discontent that threatened to erode his popularity, built on generous social programs, was now vulnerable. Calls for his resignation were as diverse as they were vociferous, but Russia's most powerful regional leader was resolute. Luzhkov's arrogance and resilience infuriated the Kremlin and bolstered Medvedev's original plan to oust him from office, culminating in his forced resignation. The impasse between Luzhkov and Medvedev, throughout which Putin remained a cautious and opportunistic mediator, was possibly the most publicized of the historical squabbles among Russia's political elite that presaged a possible fracturing of the Kremlin's traditionally undisputed authority.

Researching News Framing

A news report is part of a particular type of discourse, a communicative act or event made up of complex units of linguistic, cultural, and social forms, meanings, and actions (Van Dijk, 1988). The powerful are able to use news media to structure societal discourses facilitating their own agendas and protecting their own interests (Krauss, 2005). They can prescribe what the general population should see, hear, and think by dominating particular narratives and prioritizing certain versions of reality. The news media's capacity to mediate social realities makes them sites of multiple power struggles where, as Goldman and Rajagopal (1991) note, the unreported is as important as the reported in navigating toward truth.

In their discursive functions, news reports emphasize precision and truthfulness through rhetorical devices such as direct observation, interviews, quotations, descriptions, and numbers. Furthermore, news stories do not exist outside the practice of journalism and are constructed rather than discovered by the journalistic process (Tuchman, 1978). Inherent in this explanation is journalism's value-based practice of classifying only certain aspects of reality as news, what Klaehn (2009) considers judgment of what is or is not newsworthy.

Decision making at different levels of the news production process influences news content. Ideological and structural factors within and without news organizations also contribute to news creation (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Invariably, internal and external assertions of power and influence determine the outcome of news production. Internally, the personal ideologies of reporters and editors, journalistic models, and institutional policy are unavoidable. Externally, political, ideological, and cultural forces throughout society contribute to defining and often dictating the news-making process (Kester, 2010).

Literature is replete with research outlining various ways the news media influence public opinion and perception (Entman, 1993; Peng, 2008). Entman (1993) refers to the media's process of creating meaning as *framing*, in which they construct communicative texts by selectively prioritizing certain aspects of reality to advance a particular definition, interpretation, evaluation, or recommendation of an event, issue, or concept.

Tankard (2001) outlines three main theoretical constructs of framing research: the media package, multidimensionality, and the list of frames. The theory of the media package focuses on linguistic markers such as keywords and common language (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The multidimensional theory of media frames deconstructs news stories into multiple structures, commonly categorized as edits, sources, visual imagery, syntax, script, theme, and rhetoric (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Alternately, Tankard's list of 11 frames focuses on empirical precision by offering reliable coding measures (Reese, 2007). Although various researchers prioritize particular adaptations of framing theory, they all consistently highlight judgment and selectivity in how media producers represent reality. Entman (1993) notes that news organizations frame reality by making judgments on inclusion, exclusion, illumination, and suppression. Peng (2008) concurs, describing framing as "a process of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 362).

Boyd-Barrett (2004) suggests that one of the ways news editors promote the dominant authorities' positions is to assign their most valued reporters to cover the government's viewpoint. His arguments build on McChesney's (1999) proposition that the news media's process of framing relies heavily on official sources. These elite sources are often automatically legitimized, and their views are rarely verified. Editors and journalists who offend powerful news makers by questioning either their veracity or the bias of their perspectives leave themselves open to recriminatory denial of future access (Cromwell, 2001).

Hackett (1984) explains that the framing approach is an effective means of interrogating news because it allows the researcher to examine the multiple subliminal messages beneath the otherwise un-interrogated text. Perhaps more important, the framing method allows identification of the shared principles that operate to create symbolic meaning about the world (Reese, 2007). This approach to deconstructing meaning offers multiple insights into the major issues surrounding the media's interpretation of particular events (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

The framing analysis in this study, much like Denton and Kuypers' (2008) qualitative method of framing, looks beyond bias to examine how the two news agencies under study represent the original perspectives of the political actors shaping the story. For us, the question is not simply whether communication is biased but also what aspects of the communication are prioritized.

Method

We conducted a qualitative analysis of news reports from the Thomson Reuters and Interfax news agencies covering the public spat between Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Our sample totaled 105 stories—26 from Thomson Reuters and 79 from Interfax—published between September 10, 2010, and October 5, 2010. The sampling period begins four days after the publication of Luzhkov's article in the *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* newspaper criticizing Medvedev's position on a disputed highway project, and it ends with the phasing out of the quarrel as signaled by Luzhkov's appointment as professor and dean of the Department of Megalopolis Management at the International University in Moscow after he was forced out of his mayoral post in the Russian capital.

We elected to study Interfax and Reuters news coverage because we were eager to explore similarities and dissimilarities in coverage of a sensitive Kremlin issue by two direct competitors in the supply of news on the former Soviet Union: a Western-owned and operated global news agency, and a Moscow-based international news organization. We hypothesized, based on consistent data pointing to extensive restrictions on independent journalism in Russia, that Interfax's reportage on the conflict would exhibit a greater degree of political pressure and state influence.

Having gained permission to access the Interfax newswire service, we searched the archives of the English version of the Russia and CIS General Newswire and the Russia and CIS Business and Financial Newswire. We collected our sample by entering the word *Luzhkov* in the search engine for each day from September 5, 2010, to November 30, 2010. We sifted the results to eliminate irrelevant data, which we identified as stories with no direct or indirect reference to the Medvedev–Luzhkov impasse.

Our approach to collecting data from Reuters differed slightly from that in the case of Interfax because we did not have private access to Reuters' newswire service; notwithstanding, we were able to access the agency's archival news directly from its website. As we had done with Interfax, we entered the keyword *Luzhkov* in the site's search engine and collated relevant stories that surfaced. Our search strategy relied on the assumption that any story covered by either of the agencies would contain the keyword, and that these stories would be available in the targeted archives. We also presumed that the data we collected is relatively comprehensive of each agency's coverage of the event.

We used an analysis of discourse and a customized thematic framework to interrogate the data. We chose this dual model for its capacity to explore multifaceted and multilayered dimensions of the news texts. By analyzing the thematic structures of the stories, we were able to review themes, their hierarchy in a given story, and their placement in the news structure, attending to headlines, writing forms, and word choices to evaluate the organizational layout of the information (Van Dijk, 1988). We paid close attention to the ideological and historical context of the texts' function in establishing discourse.

To develop the analysis, we created a coding sheet based on a number of Western journalistic values that eventually produced a set of thematic categories. The coding sheet incorporated the following data sets: publication name, date of publication, story headline, story byline, story origin, types of sources, story perspective, story theme, contextual and background information, portrayal of major actors, and numerical data.

We used the category of story origin to distinguish the initiators of the story from the types of sources used, which we labeled according to the political and social positioning of the persons quoted or referenced. By grouping the news reports by story perspective we sought to answer the question of whom the story belongs to, or whose point of view or voice is dominant in the story. We supported this particular inquiry by creating a thematic category to capture the central concept threading each story. The extent to which the stories provided contextual and background information in coverage of the dispute also interested us because, as the background section of this study suggests, the conflict's historical backdrop strongly influenced interpretation of the developing issues and narratives. Since the conflict concerned public support and profiling as much as it did partisan and governmental power, we also developed a data set identifying stories' portrayal of the major actors. We used this category to search for patterns or undulations in the way the stories represented subjects in the conflict. Finally, concurring with Tankard's (2001) view that numerical data powerfully impact perceptions of facts, we tracked the news stories' use of numbers and figures.

After settling on our primary categories, we coded each story separately, starting with the news stories from Reuters and then moving to those from Interfax. Our thematic categories emerged based on patterns visible in the results of the initial coding, and we used journalistic constructs and news content analysis techniques to study and interpret these findings.

Findings

The stories published by Interfax and those published by Reuters exhibited some noticeable differences in basic profile. For instance, while Reuters provided the names of the journalists covering the stories, Interfax did not, instead attributing the stories to its editorial team. Interfax produced more stories than Reuters, but Reuters' stories tended to be longer. While Interfax ran nearly 3 times as many stories as Reuters, the total number of words in them was not quite double that in the Reuters stories. The average length of an Interfax story was 238 words, and the shortest story was a news flash of 17 words. The longest Interfax story—a September 28, 2010, overview of Medvedev's decision to sack Luzhkov—was 3,089 words. Reuters' news stories averaged 348 words in length, with the shortest story having 30 words and the longest, 851.

President Medvedev's issue of a decree dismissing Mayor Luzhkov on the morning of Tuesday, September 28, 2010, generated a surge of news reports that marked the peak of press coverage of the ongoing conflict between the two high-profile Russian politicians. On that day, Interfax presented 23% of its total stories and Reuters, 26%. Each news agency published at least half its stories on the conflict in the period comprising that same day and the two days that followed, Interfax offering 52% and Reuters 50% of its total stories.

Table 1. Story Analysis.

ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES	REUTERS	INTERFAX
Number of Stories	26	79
Stories from Press Releases/Statements	12	39
Stories from Direct Contact with Informants	2	24
Stories from other News Sources	8	15
Stories with Multiple Sources	10	11
Stories with Party/Political Insider Sources	3	19
Stories with Regional Leadership Sources	1	8
Stories with Direct Quotes from Luzhkov	4	10
Activists as % of Direct Quotes	0	14
Analysts/Pundits as % of Direct Quotes	10	33
Stories Foregrounding Luzhkov's Perspective	5	21
Stories Foregrounding Medvedev's Perspective	3	2
Stories Foregrounding Putin's Perspective	3	1
Stories Foregrounding Analysts'/Pundits' Perspective	7	9
Stories with no Major Player Dominating	7	9
Stories Referencing Russian Activists	2	12
Stories on Accusations of Luzhkov's Impropriety	4	17
Stories Focused on the Medvedev-Luzhkov Duel	5	9
Luzhkov as Challenge to Medvedev's Authority	10	13
Stories Associating Putin to the Conflict	14	2
References to Numerical Data	8	9

Story Origin

Press releases or press statements, coming mainly from Russian intellectuals, activists, and politicians, initiated most of both news agencies' stories on the conflict. Some form of press statement was the origin of 38 Interfax stories and 12 Reuters stories; however, the Interfax reporters appeared more grounded than their Reuters counterparts, initiating 30% of their stories from exclusive or direct contact with informants. Direct news hounding or deliberate initiatives by Reuters reporters accounted for only 2 of the 26 Reuters stories published.

Interfax was less dependent than Reuters on scoops and news feeds from other news media for developing its stories. While 31% of Reuters' stories attributed their origin to other news media, including Interfax, only 19% of stories reported by Interfax referenced another news medium as the initial news source (see Table 1). However, the data highlighted an unexpected trend: More than 60% of the stories Interfax developed from other news media came from a single story in the Russian opposition's weekly magazine *The New Times*.

Types of Sources

Most Interfax stories depended on a single source. Eight of its stories used two sources, and two used three sources. One exceptional Interfax story, which focused on providing an overview of the conflict, used 15 sources. Reuters, 38% of whose stories featured multiple sources, adhered more closely to the conventional Western use of journalistic sources. Party leaders and insiders were the main sources of information Interfax referenced in its coverage of the Medvedev/Luzhkov dispute. Also, in 19 of its 79 stories, Interfax quoted sources who were not major players in the dispute: these sources mostly came from the main political parties or the Kremlin. Interfax used oppositional and governmental sources in equal measure, with most of these sources coming from the United Russia Party and the party A Just Russia. In contrast, Reuters seldom relied on political sources that were peripheral to the conflict, using them only 12% of the time (see Table 1).

Direct quotes from Yury Luzhkov were the second most frequent source of information for Interfax, making up 13% of its source citations. Reuters, however, used Luzhkov's words slightly more often; his direct quotes accounted for 16% of overall sources. Interfax, meanwhile, struggled to directly access Luzhkov; most of the Luzhkov quotes the agency used came from an interview of October 4, 2010, in the opposition magazine *The New Times*. Interfax used different parts of the interview in separate stories on different days.

Interfax's presentation of Luzhkov's views played out in its multiple use of several quotes from the State Duma deputy and popular singer, Iosif Kobzon, a close friend of Luzhkov, as substitutes for Luzhkov's own views and thoughts. Apart from statements made by the Kremlin's chief spokeswoman, no such adjustment was made for Medvedev, who was also publicly reticent about the conflict.

A conspicuously effective Interfax adjustment to Luzhkov's relative unavailability was its reliance on regional and city officials closely allied to him to provide pro-Luzhkov perspectives. While Reuters made

no use of Russia's regional leadership in covering the public spat, these sources were the third major source of information for Interfax, which used them 10% of the time. The difference in the frequency of use of federal government sources who were non-major players represented another stark contrast in the profiles of the news agencies' sources. Reuters used only one federal source in its coverage, while 8% of Interfax's source usage comprised federal government officials (see Table 1).

Another significant difference in the sources each agency used was that activists' quotes were absent from Reuters' reports and relatively common in Interfax's. These activists were mainly environmental and gay rights campaigners. Throughout Interfax's coverage, activists' quotes totaled 779 words or 14% of all quoted words.

The two news agencies also differed in their reliance on expert or intellectual commentary. Analysts and independent pundits were a major source for Reuters, accounting for 33% of its use of direct quotes, but they formed only 10% of Interfax's referenced sources. The second most important sources of information for Reuters were corporate and industry executives, making up 16% of sources mentioned by the news agency. Although Interfax did not entirely ignore them, such executives formed only 10% of its identified sources.

Of the four major players—Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, and the mayor's wife, Yelena Baturina—Luzhkov was the most accessible to both the press agencies. Interestingly, Prime Minister Putin went largely unmentioned Interfax's coverage, but Reuters gave him considerable coverage. Interfax cited him directly only once, but Reuters used his words four times. President Medvedev was also rarely quoted; Reuters and Interfax each referenced him only twice. Yelena Baturina was never directly quoted by either news agency and was cited only once.

Story Perspective

Whereas both Interfax and Reuters featured varied perspectives in their coverage, both also seized reasonable opportunities to present Mayor Luzhkov's perspective. Interfax was more accommodating than Reuters, allocating examination of the conflict through Luzhkov's eyes to 27% of its stories. Reuters did the same in only 19% of its stories. Of the 79 Interfax stories examined, 21 provided some variant of Luzhkov's views, while for Reuters that figure was five. The second most common way Interfax covered the issue was to present stories in which no major player had a dominant perspective. The study found nine such stories. For Reuters, this type of treatment tied with summaries of analyses from scholars and pundits as the most popular reporting slant, registering 27% of all stories published. Only 11% of Interfax's stories highlighted the views of analysts (see Table 1). Interfax gave considerable space to Russian social activists, while Reuters hardly included their perspectives at all.

In Interfax's coverage, President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin marginally defined the tone or trajectory of the story. Interfax devoted scant attention to either man's point of view, with Medvedev's perspective predominating in 3% of stories and Putin's in only 1%. In contrast, Reuters provided these leaders with more opportunities to define the conflict; each dominated 11% of the agency's stories.

Story Theme

The dominant theme throughout Interfax's coverage of the Medvedev–Luzhkov conflict was suspicion of impropriety and alleged corruption on the part of Mayor Luzhkov. Seventeen of its 79 stories dealt with this issue; only four of Reuters' stories did. Embedded in both agencies' coverage was a quiet acknowledgment that the Russian government and political system tolerated corrupt leaders as long as they did not challenge or question the Kremlin's authority. Reference to the imprisoned Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the billionaire oil oligarch who defied Putin, validates this theory.

Accusations of election fraud and calls for investigation into Luzhkov wife's construction business were the major narratives framing the corruption theme. Although no story from Reuters explicitly linked Baturina's wealth to Luzhkov's alleged corrupt practices, some presented a gray area in which Baturina's construction business involved unscrupulous practices or illegally acquired assets warranting official investigation at the least.

Public discontent with Luzhkov was the second most pervasive theme throughout Interfax's coverage, featuring in 15 of the agency's stories. Of these, 33% concerned gay rights activism against Luzhkov, the major activity influencing this type of coverage. Other human rights issues also contributed, if sparsely, as did negative public feedback regarding Luzhkov's untrammeled and arbitrary powers. Surprisingly, Reuters hardly focused at all on the public's response to Luzhkov and presented only one such story, of a disallowed gay rally in Moscow.

The predominant thematic discourse in Reuters' coverage, and the third most dominant in Interfax's, shaped the conflict as a public test of Medvedev's leadership. Thirty-eight percent of Reuters' news stories and 16% of those from Interfax tracked Medvedev's authoritative stance on the issue and the political implications of his decision. A sub-narrative surfaced in Reuters' coverage, presenting Putin's relevance to the conflict as a challenge to Medvedev's public show of authority. Forty percent of the Reuters stories reporting on the conflict's implications for Medvedev's leadership overshadowed Medvedev's presidential stature with reverence for the national influence and political clout of Prime Minister Putin. This discourse was absent from Interfax's reporting, which mostly ignored the public script of this power dynamic.

If Interfax was muffled on the Putin–Medvedev power play, it was more open about the power battle between Medvedev and Luzhkov. Both Interfax and Reuters presented several stories that highlighted Luzhkov's public show of defiance against President Medvedev and the Kremlin. Reuters presented 20% of stories that primarily focused on capturing the duel. This figure was significantly higher than Interfax's 11% (see Table 1). The chief aspects of Luzhkov's public defiance were his threat to sue the Kremlin and his refusal to resign as mayor.

A theme that Reuters never explored, but one to which Interfax gave considerable attention was the public's speculation over Luzhkov's political options. This was especially topical following his sacking, when 11% of Interfax stories focused on Luzhkov's political future while Reuters, although it cautiously made indirect allusions, did not run a story focused on the issue. Interfax reports that examined the issue

contemplated whether or not Luzhkov would join the opposition, create his own party, or exit the political scene.

Contextual and Background Information

Each news agency provided different pieces of background information to help illuminate its perspectives of the conflict. Interfax's most common use of historical data concerned Luzhkov's major achievements as mayor: Five stories credited him with the city's modernization and the development of Moscow's popular pension scheme. Two stories from Reuters did the same. Both agencies also referenced the mismanagement of the toxic peat fires that threatened the city and the resulting public discontent with Moscow's mayoral office and central government.

One conspicuous inconsistency in the tone of the coverage was Reuters' use of the term "abruptly sacked" twice, in separate stories, to define the Moscow mayor's dismissal. Arguably, this narrative misrepresented the political climate, as anyone tracking the conflict's development would have anticipated a Kremlin decision on Luzhkov's political fate.

Portrayal of Major Actors

Four central personalities emerged from the news coverage of the conflict: President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, and Luzhkov's wife, Yelena Baturina. Of the four major actors, Luzhkov was the most frequent recipient of descriptive markers penned by both Reuters and Interfax journalists. Interfax presented a fairly balanced image of Luzhkov: The research noted 14 positive descriptors and 13 negative ones. Interfax was as likely to present Luzhkov as a victim of political infighting as it was to highlight his recalcitrance, perceived dishonesty, and unenviable civil rights reputation.

Reuters' markers were not as balanced. Its coverage focused mainly on framing Luzhkov as a powerful Russian politician, with identifiers such as "heavyweight mayor" and "the last of a generation of heavyweights." This was the case in 7 of its 26 stories. Noticeably, Reuters used linguistic qualifiers to describe the extent of Luzhkov's and Putin's power, but used none when referring to Medvedev. Like Interfax, Reuters simply presented Medvedev as the Russian president.

Interfax consistently presented Yelena Baturina as the "the Mayor of Moscow's wife" and in 26% of these instances conjoined this description of her with the label "billionaire." Together, these labels hinted at a subtle connection between her wealth and the Moscow mayor's office. Only twice did Interfax present her as simply a businesswoman. Reuters' reports on the conflict also frequently referred to Baturina's wealth, and 38% of its stories referenced her exceptional wealth while drawing attention to suspicion over Mayor Luzhkov's allegedly corrupt record, describing her as "Russia's richest woman" and the "billionaire property mogul wife."

Interfax attended to Prime Minister Putin's public profile in just two stories that presented him as a skillful political strategist and a rational, objective leader. In fact, in Interfax's longest story on the

conflict, reference to Putin is conspicuously absent. In vivid contrast, 14 of Reuters' 26 stories incorporated the Russian Prime Minister in their interpretation of the conflict (see Table 1). Reuters overwhelmingly presented Prime Minister Putin as Russia's most powerful and influential leader, pointing to his management of the conflict as something helping pave his way to the 2012 presidential race. In both news agencies' reporting, Putin surfaced as neutral in the conflict, praising Luzhkov for his historic contributions to Moscow's development and rationalizing Medvedev's decision to dismiss Luzhkov.

Both news services' reporting characterized Medvedev least often. The reporting mostly depended on his written public declarations and the pronouncements of his Kremlin staff to mediate his role. In the Reuters stories, depictions of Medvedev were more unflattering than Interfax's; sources twice referred to him as "Putin's junior" and in another instance as "Putin's protégé." Interfax's treatment of Medvedev was more respectful with the balance of eight stories arguably appearing to endorse and legitimize his dismissal of Luzhkov as just and correct. Both news agencies also ran stories profiling Medvedev's leadership style through his actions, frequently using the words "orders," "sacked," and "decree" to mark his authoritative poise.

Although two Interfax stories hinted at a power contest between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, neither denied Medvedev's presidential cachet. However, Interfax's reporting revealed that while Medvedev publicly stated that he would decide who would be the next mayor of Moscow, Putin continued advising journalists that he would have input in a joint decision on the matter.

Numerical Data

Reuters used statistical and numeric data more widely than did Interfax. Thirty-one percent of Reuters' stories relied on this form of information, compared to 11% of Interfax's (see Table 1). Interfax used numbers to present information on the following topics: Bank of Moscow Eurobonds, the size of Moscow's city public budget and population, results of the Moscow city Duma elections, and results of opinion polls on Luzhkov's popularity. In addition to these figures, Reuters provided statistics describing Moscow real estate assets' performance and the size of Yelena Baturina's fortune.

The empirical data invariably functioned to define the narrative, often stealthily nudging readers to a particular reading. For example, the repeated mention of the size of Moscow's city budget—$320 billion, one fifth of the Russian economy—operated to elucidate the extent of Luzhkov's power.

Discussion

Our comparative study revealed that the Thomson Reuters and Interfax news agencies' reports on the 2009–2010 public dispute between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov were similar overall, but contained significant variances that warrant analysis. In this sense, our research extends Koikkalainen's (2008) argument that there are both similarities and differences between Western and Russian journalism by indicating that, at least in coverage of acute political crises, a Russian-based international news agency and a Western-run global news agency can show striking commonalities as well as unpredictable dissimilarities. Although the findings for Interfax are largely positive, they indicate

ongoing tension between its adherence to Western journalistic principles and its navigation of the politically smothered Russian media environment, a struggle that Vartanova (2012) ascribes to the ascending commercialization of the Russian media and the parallel rise in Russian political elites' anxiety over this trend's potential to threaten their stability and power bases.

Perhaps the most enlightening discoveries of the study were the insights into the different ways Interfax and Reuters initiated and treated stories. The data showed that Interfax originated more stories through its own efforts and depended somewhat less on press releases, press statements, and other media. When positioned against Koikkalainen's (2008) observation of the routine nature of press releases in contemporary Russian journalism, this finding serves as particularly convincing evidence for arguments advancing Interfax's investigative credibility.

Interestingly, whenever Interfax took scoops from other news stories, it privileged an anti-Kremlin viewpoint. This strategy may have functioned to allay Kremlin anxiety by modifying Interfax's association with the content, since retaliation from the Russian government would likely have a profound negative impact on both Interfax's news operations and the functionality of its "100 specialized information services" ("Bloomberg Offers Interfax Russian Newswire Service," 2010, para. 7). Considering Koltsova's (2005) and Resnyanskaya's (2007) arguments that Russian elites view the media as invaluable political capital that can facilitate negotiation of myriad political and economic ventures, this is a feasible explanation for Interfax's use of outside scoops.

Our findings on source usage and attribution lent themselves to both admirable and problematic profiles for Interfax. Whereas it was more inclined than Reuters to use opposition sources, it was also more prone to rely on a single source in developing a story. It performed impressively, outshining Reuters with the scale of its access to political insiders and regional public leaders, but its heavy reliance on political insiders raised questions about its susceptibility to manipulation and agenda setting. Reflecting on the conflicts that plagued Russia's political elites in the early 2000s, Roudakova (2008) reveals how the Russian media became preoccupied with facilitating intra-elite agendas rather than efficiently capitalizing on their inherent possibilities as mass communication tools, a phenomenon she describes as "media-political clientelism" (p. 43).

This practice is particularly troublesome, since previous research indicates that although political sources are easily accessed, Russian business journalists do not value them highly (Koikkalainen, 2008). Additionally, Arutunyan (2009), despite highlighting the unavoidability of journalists' dependence on political insiders in the restrictive Russian political tradition, warns that these insiders are often not legitimate sources of information and even when they are, their cooperation with the press usually serves a deliberate political purpose.

Interfax's overreliance on lone sources does not necessarily portend a deliberate institutional agenda and may more aptly reflect a Russian journalistic convention. Pasti's (2010) research suggests that Interfax's use of sources is similar to the practices of Moscow business journalists and typical of the preference of a younger generation of Russian journalists. Interfax may have compensated for its proclivity toward single-source attribution by running a large number of stories on the conflict. However,

although this story count was significantly higher than Reuters', Reuters' articles were on average 110 words longer than Interfax's, suggesting a substantial disparity in the depth of story treatment. Meanwhile, Interfax offered a more comprehensive range of sources—the federal government, regional sources, and in particular activist sources—that Reuters tended not to cite.

Conceivably, the Russian government tolerated Interfax's inquiries on the assumption that its newswire stories might have limited circulation among the Russian general public, given that direct access to its full services requires subscription. Nonetheless, Interfax ranks very high as a news source for "retail" news media (Interfax, 2012). Balzer's (2003) observation that businesspeople, foreign policy officials, and economists from the West generally tend to side with the Russian state suggests that most subscribers to Interfax news services—investors, businesses, media companies—are unlikely to seek an agenda that might threaten the security of the Russian political system. Yet Interfax's business objectives require that it align itself with Western democratic values. Its pursuit of these objectives may have led it to benefit from a temporary fissure in the arbitrary and fluid Russian system of press control, but Balzer's (2003) theory of "managed pluralism" contends that the Kremlin permits such openings only when they do not disrupt its agenda. The frequent changes in the relationship between the Russian state and the Russian media within the last two decades complicate our rationalization of Interfax's openness to oppositional perspectives in its coverage of the conflict (Vartanova, 2012).

From a Western perspective, it matters that Interfax depended less on analysts, pundits, and corporate sources. If Koikkalainen (2008) is right that NGO sources are less important than corporate or governmental sources in Russian journalism, then the gap between Interfax and Reuters on this score appears less significant. Notably, only a quarter of Interfax stories appeared to prioritize Luzhkov's perspective, but this figure was higher than the corresponding percentage for Reuters.

More instructively, both news agencies' use of sources highlights the Russian political system's effectiveness in insulating the Russian president from contentious journalistic inquiries, since neither of the news agencies was able to penetrate Medvedev's profound silence on the media-driven joust. This finding may substantiate Oates' (2006) point on the Russian presidential administration and bureaucracy's increasingly sophisticated management of the public's opinion of privileged Russian political actors.

Interfax focused less than did Reuters on Prime Minister Putin's relevance to the conflict and still less on possible tensions between Putin and Medvedev. While Interfax characterized Luzhkov in both negative and positive terms, Reuters was more disposed to describe Luzhkov positively, frequently reminding readers of his political legacy and sporadically admiring his challenge to Russian autocracy while seeming to overlook his record as one of the most celebrated benefactors of the contemporary Russian political system. Overall, Interfax focused more than Reuters on what was arguably the more central issue, namely, corruption. At the same time, it balanced the issue of corruption with the evidence of Luzhkov's achievements and showed greater interest in Luzhkov's political future.

Through editorial decisions and reporting practices, Interfax and Reuters prioritized certain themes and perspectives while downplaying or ignoring others—in line, we suggest, with their respective market-driven objectives. Our findings demonstrate that the types of sources used and the ways they

were used created unique frames and discourses about the conflict-related event, activity, or issue being covered. For example, Reuters elevated Putin's role and status in the conflict by incorporating his terse but purposeful interjections, while Interfax was less accommodating of Putin's views, relegating him to the sidelines. We argue that Interfax's approach within the Russian context was more responsible, less speculative, more focused on the central issues, and more indicative of a rational convergence of business acumen and journalistic values. Influenced by Batalov's (2002) perception of the paternalistic relations between Russian citizens and their power elites, who often dominate the country's political and media culture, we also find Interfax's mitigation of Putin's overarching and calculating influence on the publicity of the conflict a subtle statement of editorial independence.

More specifically, the study shows that in the coverage of this acute political conflict, the relative absence of quotes from the major players inadvertently redefined the nature of the discourse. Since the news stories rarely quoted President Medvedev and former Mayor Luzhkov, secondary sources dominated the framing of their perspectives. Thus, we infrequently received an undiluted perspective of the reeling tensions between the two major combatants. It remains debatable whether the muteness of the two main actors reflected a deliberate public relations strategy on the part of Luzhkov and a calculated political maneuver by Medvedev. Possibly, this omission resulted inadvertently from the journalistic self-censorship normalized and nurtured by the legacy of state censorship of the Russian media (Vartanova, 2012).

By pointing to the media's multiple framings of the conflict between Medvedev and Luzhkov, our study also endorses the perspective of Russian political scientist Dmitry Oreshkin, who asserts that the Kremlin will increasingly become less effective at suppressing public expositions of political infighting at its core as it struggles to define a convincing democracy and a market-centered liberal ideology (Whitmore, 2011).

This study had limitations. Chief among them were the English-speaking North American and European researchers' linguistic and cultural limitations in mediating sophisticated political and cultural interactions and discourses in contemporary Russian society. The stories taken from Interfax and Reuters principally targeted an English-speaking audience. Since the news agencies did not prepare these publications directly for the average Russian, the news stories in our samples may have differed from Russian-language coverage for the typical Russian reader. This study makes a strong case for future research comparing English- and Russian-language news coverage. Also, different strategies governed the collection of the samples. The Interfax website does not provide free public access to its archive, so the researchers had to secure private access to Interfax's newswire. Unable to secure subscription access to Reuters' news service, they could not operate similarly in the case of Reuters. Thus, while they collected the Interfax data through private access, they had only public access to archived stories from Reuters.

Finally, since the study was limited in scope to examination of news content, and coverage of a single story at that, it may have missed other important factors in the two news agencies' production practices and operations that could further complicate the analysis. One such important factor is editorial routines, which we can better understand by taking a look first at content. Our article, therefore, also offers ideas for future inquiries into the editorial routines of the Russian press.

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