Routledge Handbook of Environmental Journalism

David B. Sachsman, JoAnn Myer Valenti

Environmental journalism in Russia

Publication details
Angelina Davydova
Published online on: 24 Apr 2020

How to cite: Angelina Davydova. 24 Apr 2020, Environmental journalism in Russia from: Routledge Handbook of Environmental Journalism Routledge
Accessed on: 29 Dec 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
21
ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM IN RUSSIA

Angelina Davydova

Angelina Davydova is an environmental journalist from St. Petersburg, Russia, regularly contributing to Russian and international media, including the Kommersant, the Thomson Reuters Foundation, and Science magazine. She specializes in covering economic and political aspects of global and Russian climate policies, including the UN climate negotiations, which she has been attending since 2008. She teaches at the School of Journalism, St. Petersburg State University and the Saint Petersburg National Research University of Information Technologies, Mechanics and Optics. She is also a director of the Office of Environmental Information in St. Petersburg, Russia (a nonprofit organization focusing on developing environmental journalism in Russia and neighboring countries and also developing international cooperation in environmental and climate areas). She was a Reuters Foundation Fellow at Oxford University in 2006, a participant of the Beahrs Environmental Leadership Program (ELP) at UC Berkeley in 2012, and a Humphrey Fellow at UC Davis for 2018–2019.

Environmental journalism is a relatively new field in the post-Soviet media landscape in Russia, a sector which is still being shaped by a number of global and domestic trends, including political, economic, scientific, and social influences. It has been rapidly expanding over the last few years in the country in its many forms: from mainstream media enlarging their coverage of environmental topics, up till the appearance of specialized media or new formats, like eco-bloggers and the specialized “green” channels on Telegram, the online messaging app. The audience for environmental stories is growing, along with the influence of the coverage, thus attracting attempts of various powers to put environmental journalism under control or to produce counter narratives (sometimes also in the form of fake news). Still, environmental and urban movements and their reflection in the old and new media can be seen as a base for the new civil society in Russia, with both issues attracting most of the interest, actions, and involvement of the urban population in the country.

Environmental journalism in today’s Russia is present in a number of formats and types. On one hand, we witness environmental journalism found in traditional media (print, online, broadcasting), e.g. media not specializing in environmental or climate issues. Here I would argue that we have observed a steady growth of environmental coverage for the last 10 years with the last three years standing out in particular. That growth, in many ways, is connected to the fact that 2017 was declared to be a Year of Ecology in Russia, which brought many “green” topics to
Environmental journalism in Russia

the limelight, but also was part of a larger and longer trend of growing environmental awareness observed for the last eight to 10 years. There has also been an ongoing reform of environmental legislation, involving the municipal waste system, attempts at improving air and water quality in Russia’s urban centers, energy efficiency regulations, and some modest renewable energy developments. All these topics now get regular coverage from traditional and new media, with politicians, experts from public administration, companies, business associations, environmental NGOs and activists, and scientists being regularly quoted.

A poll by the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (published in early November 2018) mentioned the right for a healthy environment as one of the most often violated rights. The chairman of the council, Mikhail Fedotov, said that environmental rights have come up high in the polls for the first time ever, outdistancing social and labor rights.

Stories about environmental problems, policies, and campaigns are to be found in general interest, business, and science media more often these days. Some media outlets are also allocating a special position for an environmental journalist or are even opening up a dedicated department. General media tend to specialize in news-related environmental coverage, with reforms of environmental legislation, environmental catastrophes or accidents, and environmental protests being the most popular topics covered.

The latest years also saw a surge in the number of specialized environmental media (appearing predominantly online). For example, Recyclemag.ru is dedicated to recycling, zero waste, and environmentally friendly lifestyles. Look Bio (http://lookbio.ru/) covers mostly organic products, including organic farming and agriculture, as well as healthy and “green” lifestyles. Activatica (http://activatica.org/) reports about environmental protests and campaigns (also mapping them) across Russia. RenEn (http://renen.ru/) reports news and provides analysis about renewable energy developments worldwide and in Russia. Many new specialized online media function as mini-editorial offices with just a few (mostly dedicated people) working for them. These new media also encourage environmental activists or experts to write for them. Another case in point is Plus One (https://plus-one.ru/), the online medium launched in 2016 that covers both international and Russian sustainability issues, along with following what the business sector is doing in the area. The financial model behind this medium is regular contributions from companies, which function not as an advertisement model, but more as a sponsor/grantee model.

Then, finally, a number of environmental media outlets are supported by “green” groups. For example, the Russian/Norwegian environmental NGO Bellona supports the online medium Bellona (bellona.ru), which reports both news and analysis from various regions across Russia, Norway, and globally. Greenpeace Russia has recently launched a number of blogs and online multimedia reporting on their website, also inviting well-known journalists to write for them.

Speaking about particular topics these new specialized media are covering, over the last few years we observed a steady growth in the number (and quality) of stories about environmental protests and campaigns, grassroots initiatives (for example, recycle initiatives sustained by environmental activists in big urban centers of Russia where the state-run trash collection and recycling system is still not in place), environmental policies at the federal or local level, air/water pollution and illegal discharges, polluting enterprises, green zones in cities, sustainable (or unsustainable) urban development, and forest fires. Specialized media tend to cover both problems and solutions for environmental issues, paving the way for solution journalism in Russia.

The particular environmental challenges getting the most attention across media formats are usually either the ones that are the most visible or traceable (for instance, an issue of waste or air/water pollution), or the ones highlighted by the regional/federal authorities. Most stories seem to have a very strong urban aspect (e.g. set in urban areas rather than rural). This is both where
the majority of the readership is and where growing environmental awareness (and activism) is to be noticed over the last few years.

The ongoing reform of the environmental legislation (including the introduction of Best Available Control Technologies as a method for limiting pollutant discharges or the reform of municipal waste management) have also influenced the growth of environment-related publications.

New media coverage of environmental issues, including that to be found in social media networks (Facebook, its Russian equivalent Vk.ru, Twitter, etc.) and blogs on various blog platforms, is also on the rise. It often performs a function of civic journalism, bringing a particular problem or violation to the limelight, so that it can be later picked up for research or investigation by the general media. Blogs (by young scientists or environmental experts) often create platforms for expert discussions or provide alternative points of view and data (for instance, their own analysis of the air quality data in cities). A case in point is the blog platform of the head of the Greenpeace Russia forestry program, which gathers leading stakeholders and regional actors.

There are more thematic groups being formed and overall more attention of the users to environmental posts. Most popular are posts about “consumer” ecology questions (e.g. how to track the environmental footprints of a particular product, how to see if a product is organic, which organic/bio certification can be trusted, how to recycle, how to reduce consumption of plastic, etc.). Also popular are themed groups dedicated to local environmental protests. A new trend has been the growing importance of Telegram channels as anonymous news channels in Russia, which specialize either in whistle-blowing (including publishing of official acts, state documents, and draft bills before they become publicly accessible), analysis of the state environmental policies and companies’ actions in their sustainability, or information about environmental protests and campaigns.

Overall, regional media are often either directly owned or financed by the regional authorities, which makes it hard for critical and independent reporting, including environmental reporting, to appear. There are a few cases that contradict this trend, including a network of independent regional online media (7X7 – Horizontal Russia, https://7x7-journal.ru/). That is why it is mostly federal print/online media that run critical stories (also sometimes of regional importance). So, for a local protest group, the only way to get their voices heard is often to reach out to federal media with their cause and get the story heard on a national level.

It should be added that federal/national media outlets also often come under pressure (including direct or indirect censorship and self-censorship), but the environmental agenda up until recently has been considered to be unimportant and somewhat marginal, which prevented any serious administrative pressure or interference into environmental reporting. In addition to this, one can argue that there’s no one single-line pro-government “green” agenda, which leaves “room for play” for both national and, to a lesser extent, regional media. So that even a pro-government television channel, which might stick to the Kremlin agenda on foreign or domestic policy issues, might still do independent and critical coverage of the waste problem in a particular region or all across Russia. However, the state-run or state or pro-government corporation-controlled media from time to time also run stories about environmentalists being the “agents of Western influence,” explaining how foreign states and governments are trying to affect and frame Russia’s political agenda through the work of international and domestic environmental NGO groups.

Speaking about the personal safety of environmental journalists, most of the reporters (along with environmental bloggers or activists) who experienced issues with security (threatened, beaten up, or even killed) were working for regional media, often in a situation where there was just one center of power in a particular region and no room for political competition or
Environmental journalism in Russia

free speech. The last few years have also shown a trend where fewer journalists or activists have been physically abused, while a growing number of reporters (and bloggers) have faced legal investigations (often on false grounds).

Access to environmental data remains a tricky issue for many journalists (along with environmentalists and citizens as a whole), with not all regions having publicly accessible information or databases of real-time pollution. So, in a way, the absence of such data often hinders the work of the media reporting environmental stories. Overall, polluters also remain unwilling to provide any data or comments on stories that can potentially harm them. In certain cases of pollution, it is indeed very challenging to find an actual source of pollution, so a journalistic investigation might fail. However, with the growing public interest in the topic and the development of new monitoring methods and tools (publicly accessible or those used by the “green” civil society groups), environmental reporting is receiving further help with data and sources.

In addition to that, as the environmental agenda is becoming more important for larger groups of the Russian population, it is also becoming more “politicized” by local and federal politicians, who are eager to use it in their election campaigns or against their political opponents. Meanwhile, companies or industries blame their competitors for environmental violations, trying to distract potential criticism from their activities. Both local administrations and polluting industries sometimes also create or support civil society groups, including government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and business-friendly NGOs (BINGOs), that criticize their opponents or competitors. In this way, they try to take charge of environmental protest and activists by setting up "artificial" protest groups whose function is to re-direct public opinion from particular environmental issues to other issues, or to overshadow a particular problem with activities about another cause.

Environmental journalism is on the rise in Russia. It is represented in a number of forms and media formats. It experiences a number of challenges and is currently working out ways to overcome them. Growing environmental awareness, more easily accessible environmental data, new technologies, political interest towards the topic (both on national and regional levels), and the global environmental agenda – all contribute to more environmental stories appearing both in traditional media and in social networks, blogs, and other media platforms.

One can argue that the development of environmental journalism in all its forms in some ways preceded the development of a “green” agenda in Russia, including environmental regulation, companies’ actions in the area of sustainability, and general public environmental awareness – and helped form all of them. This is similar to the role played by “new” business journalism in Russia, which emerged in the 1990s and preceded and formed a new “economic” agenda and business culture in the country. It is also similar to the way that the new lifestyle publications of the early 2000s introduced and, in a way, created a number of urban trends, including interest towards urban development topics, appearance of a new eating/bar/restaurant culture, contemporary design, new fashion trends, music, etc. It can also be argued that environmental journalism and blogging might have caught the “green” trend at the very beginning, and has continued developing it, and – as a feedback effect – keeps reinforcing and expanding the agenda it covers.

I am strongly convinced that over the next years, we will see further growth and expansion of the sector. And this is where potential international cooperation can be useful and mutually beneficial on the level of journalists, media outlets, journalistic associations, and bloggers from other countries.