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Revis(it)ing Citizen Journalism: Case Studies from (Soviet) Russia

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Nowe spojrzenie na dziennikarstwo obywatelskie: Studia przypadków z (sowieckiej) Rosji

ABSTRAKT

Dziennikarstwo obywatelskie zazwyczaj kojarzy się z umiejętnością obsługi komputera i wolnością słowa. Czy ten rodzaj dziennikarstwa uprawiany jest w krajach półpiśmiennych i/lub pod (pół)represyjnymi reżimami? Jeśli tak, to w jaki sposób (jeśli w ogóle) wpływa to na standardową definicję dziennikarstwa obywatelskiego J. Rosena ("gdy osoby wcześniej znane jako publiczność wykorzystują narzędzia prasowe, które mają do swojej dyspozycji, aby informować siebie nawzajem")? Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę odpowiedzi na te pytania. Analizowane są trzy przykłady, zarówno pro-, jak i antykremlowskie, z (post)sowieckiej Rosji: tzw. *rabsel'kory* z lat 20. i 30. XX wieku, podziemny biuletyn dysydencki *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* z końca lat 60. i początku lat 80. XX wieku oraz działalność blogowa Aleksieja Nawalnego z końca lat 2000 i początku lat 2020.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: dziennikarstwo obywatelskie, *rabsel'kory*, *Kronika Wydarzeń Bieżących*, Aleksiej Nawalny

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Introduction

Citizen journalism (CJ) has first attracted the attention of media scholars and practitioners at the turn of the 21st century. CJ has “emerged as a practice in search of a theory”². So far, no consensus on a single definition of CJ has been reached³. The oft-cited description of CJ by Jay Rosen – “when people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another”⁴ – is somewhat terse to do this complex phenomenon full justice. An additional limitation has been imposed by the fact that “much research on citizen journalism fails to take into account non-Western political and social settings, leading to a narrow and perhaps distorted view of what citizen journalism is or could be in different parts of the world”⁵. With few exceptions⁶, Russia has been studied in conjunction with CJ less regularly than, for instance, China, Southeast Asia and the Arab states⁷. Can Russian experience with CJ contribute towards a better understanding of CJ ontology, especially when trying to identify CJ phenomena before the appearance of CJ as a term? I will attempt to answer this question by examining several relevant case studies, some of which may receive a fresh explanation themselves, owing to their immersion in the CJ framework.

CJ is usually linked to the rise of the so-called new media that fuse together information technology, communication networks and digitized content, with the Internet being these media’s “most significant manifestation”⁸. The widening availability of, and access to, such media, augmented by the spread of computer literacy, has allowed ordinary citizens (untrained in, and mostly unpaid for⁹, journalistic activities) to “have a multimedia publishing house with a global reach, at their fingertips”¹⁰. These citizens have often been preoccupied with topics and agendas overlooked by mainstream media, yet championed by hyperlocal and marginalized population groups¹¹. Even though such citizens’ intention has normally been

² S.-J. Min, *Conversation through Journalism. Searching for Organizing Principles of Public and Citizen Journalism*, “Journalism”, 2016, vol. 17 (5), p. 570.

³ M. Wall, *Citizen Journalism*, “Digital Journalism”, 2015, vol. 3 (6), p. 797.

⁴ J. Rosen, *A Most Useful Definition of Citizen Journalism*, “PressThink: Ghost of Democracy in the Media Machine”, 2008, July 14, http://archive.pressthink.org/2008/07/14/a_most_useful_d.html (28.06.2024).

⁵ M. Wall, *Citizen Journalism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 804.

⁶ See K. Alexanyan, *Civic Responsibility and Empowerment. Civic Journalism in Russia*, [in:] *Citizen Journalism. Global Perspectives*, vol. 2, S. Allan, E. Thorsen (ed.), Peter Lang, New York 2014, e-book, chapter 18.

⁷ See e.g. X. Xin, The Impact of “Citizen Journalism” on Chinese Media and Society, “Journalism Practice”, 2010, vol. 4 (3), pp. 333–344, doi:10.1080/17512781003642931; X. Zeng et al., *New Perspectives on Citizen Journalism*, “Global Media and China”, 2019, vol. 4 (1), pp. 3–12; and C.C. Radsch, *Arab Bloggers as Citizen Journalists (Transnational)*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, John D. H. Downing (ed.), SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA 2011, pp. 61–64.

⁸ T. Flew, *New Media. An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 10–11.

⁹ Vincent Maher categorizes citizen journalists’ remuneration as “micro-payments”, see V. Maher, *Citizen Journalism Is Dead*, “Media in Transition”, 2005, August 5, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060924125946/http://nml.ru.ac.za/maher/?p=6> (21.06.2024). See also N. Jurrat, *Citizen Journalism and the Internet. An Overview*, “Mapping Digital Media”, 2011, no. 4, p. 7.

¹⁰ L. Witt, *Is Public Journalism Morphing into the Public’s Journalism?*, “National Civic Review”, 2004, vol. 90 (3), p. 49.

¹¹ See S. Miller, *Citizen Journalism*, [in:] “Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication”, Oxford University Press,

to generate their own news, as well as supplement and fact-check the mainstream media news¹², their lack of professional journalistic training would every now and then result in a flawed coverage, marked by insufficient impartiality, unethical conduct and/or factual inaccuracy¹³.

Mobilized and expressed through CJ, civic activism is treated differently in different political environments, depending on how tolerant the country authorities are. In today's Russia, CJ "fosters an emerging sense of civic consciousness and, ultimately, political activism"¹⁴, which the current powers-that-be are predictably unhappy about (unless they can co-opt or engineer such consciousness and activism themselves¹⁵). Sometimes the officialdom goes to considerable lengths to silence a citizen journalist. The plight of Alexei Navalny (1976–2024) is a most recent case in point.

Navalny

Navalny has been briefly mentioned in the above-quoted article by Alexanyan in connection with his online projects RosPil (launched in 2010 to identify corruption in the government procurement process)¹⁶ and RosVybory (2012, to look for electoral fraud). How did he get involved in CJ? A lawyer and economist by training, in March 2006 he started blogging on the Russophone LiveJournal website to try and "spread awareness of issues not readily covered in the Russian media"¹⁷, such as the interests of minority shareholders (a group he belonged to¹⁸), allegedly short-changed by major Russian companies (Rosneft, Surgutneftegaz and Gazprom, among others). In Spring 2010, Navalny claimed that he was spending around "20% of his time on his paid work as a lawyer and the rest on corporate activism [...] because

New York 2019, J.F. Nussbaum (ed.), pp. 3 and 7 of the 25-page version placed on academia.edu.

¹² See M. Glaser, *Your Guide to Citizen Journalism*, "Mediashift", 2006, September 27, <http://mediashift.org/2006/09/your-guide-to-citizen-journalism270/> (21.06.2024). Supplementing the mainstream news includes, for example, eyewitness reporting from a disaster area (this practice is known as "accidental", or "unintentional", journalism, see H. Spyksma, *Unintentional Journalists. The Role of Advocacy Group 350 in Filling a News Gap for Reporting from the Pacific Region*, "Journalism Studies", 2019, vol. 20 (1), pp. 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1351885>). Fact-checking in a broad sense may encompass telltale recordings made by members of the public using hidden digital equipment (this practice is known as "sousveillance", see X. Zeng et al., *New Perspectives...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6).

¹³ See V. Maher, *Citizen Journalism Is...*, *op. cit.*; N. Jurrat, *Citizen Journalism and...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7; and S. Miller, *Citizen Journalism...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–3.

¹⁴ K. Alexanyan, *Civic Responsibility...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5 of Chapter 18 in *Citizen Journalism. Global Perspectives*, vol. 2, S. Allan, E. Thorsen (ed.), Peter Lang, New York 2014.

¹⁵ Suffice it to mention the so-called troll factories (aka troll farms) employing multilingual "keyboard armies" to amplify the anti-Western and pro-Kremlin sentiment via social media (see S. Walker, *The Russian Troll Factory at the Heart of the Meddling Allegations*, "The Guardian", 2015, April 2); and the StopHam initiative, founded in 2010 by the Kremlin-sponsored Nashi youth movement to improve Russia's road traffic culture. StopHam has been placing on Youtube videoed altercations between its activists and the offending motorists (see <https://www.youtube.com/@SADBWorld>).

¹⁶ In the first four months of its existence, RosPil has apparently led to tenders worth 6.6m US dollars to be annulled, see J. Ioffe, *Net Impact. One Man's Cyber-crusade against Russian Corruption*, "The New Yorker", 2011, March 28, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/04/net-impact> (02.07.2024).

¹⁷ J.M. Dollbaum et al., *Navalny. Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, p. 22.

¹⁸ See J. Ioffe, *Net Impact*.

the voice of shareholders in Russia [was] muffled”¹⁹. By the end of 2011, Navalny’s blog attracted 55,000 readers, on a daily basis²⁰.

To keep building upon his success, Navalny took a stand as a corruption fighter – “a winning strategy for somebody looking to broaden their visibility and appeal”²¹. In the same year, he also launched the RosYama initiative (reporting potholes to improve Russia-wide road safety), at the self-declared personal cost of 100,000 roubles (around 3,400 USD at the time) – and hired the first staffers to help him run his projects. Until then, Navalny’s CJ activities had been largely financed by crowdfunding. Thenceforth, he put all his projects under the auspices of his newly established Anti-Corruption Foundation, sponsored not only through relatively modest subventions from regular folk but also by larger contributions from well-heeled individuals²², of whom the entrepreneur Boris Zimin seemed to be the most generous²³.

Meanwhile, Navalny’s audiences kept growing and so did his war chest and team (partly because of his branching out into Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, as well as livestreaming – and utilizing Telegram and TikTok in due course²⁴). By mid-2012, Navalny collected nearly 300,000 US dollars in donations. By the end of the year, the RosPil employees numbered a total of seven²⁵. In 2013, donations brought Navalny over 720,000 US dollars (i.e. more than twice as much as a year and a half previously), while his media team increased to twenty²⁶. In 2014, he established his own personal website *navalny.com*, which boasted 12m monthly visitors in Spring 2017. That very spring, with the help of only four employees, a livestreaming YouTube channel called Navalny LIVE got launched, patronized by a hundred thousand viewers daily²⁷ – as an alternative to propagandized Russian TV, which Navalny got banned from²⁸.

YouTube-screened documentaries investigating corruption in Russia’s highest echelons of power have become trademark Navalny productions, of which two are especially notable. The first is a fifty-minute long *On vam ne Dimon* (‘He’s Not Dimon to You’, 2017) alleging that Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s prime minister at the time, is the secret final beneficiary of a long string of charities and offshore companies owning lucrative businesses and properties from the south of Russia to central Italy. In almost three years since the film’s release, it was watched by 30m viewers²⁹.

¹⁹ N. Vasilyeva, *Activist Takes on Secretive Russian Firms*, “The Seattle Times”, 2010, April 1, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/activist-takes-on-secretive-russian-firms/> (02.07.2024)

²⁰ V. Iurchenko, *Chelovek iz interneta*, “Novaya gazeta”, 2018, February 15, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/15/75520-chelovek-iz-interneta> (02.07.2024).

²¹ J.M. Dollbaum et al., *Navalny...*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²² See V. Iurchenko, *Chelovek iz interneta...*, *op. cit.*

²³ J.M. Dollbaum et al., *Navalny...*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²⁴ In February 2018, three months after Navalny’s Telegram account had been set up, it had 83,000 subscribers (see V. Iurchenko, *Chelovek iz interneta...*, *op. cit.*). In July 2024, Navalny LIVE on TikTok had over 42,000 followers.

²⁵ J.M. Dollbaum et al., *Navalny...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–44.

²⁶ See V. Feshchenko, *Verkhom na khaipe. Chto pod kapotom u mediamashiny Alekseia Naval’nogo*, “Sekret firmy”, undated, <https://secretmag.ru/navalny/> (02.07.2024).

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ V. Iurchenko, *Chelovek iz interneta...*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ “*On Vam ne Dimon*” *radost’ prinosit do sikh por*, 2019, “Fontanka.ru”, December 26, <https://www.fontanka.ru>.

The second is *Dvorets dlia Putina* (Putin's Palace, 2021), about a Black Sea holiday resort apparently being built for President Putin by his affluent well-wishers as his future retirement home, at the cost exceeding 1bn US dollars. Despite this film's length of almost two hours (containing, among other things, a damning assessment of the President's personal *modi operandi*, goals and tastes), it garnered over 60m views in just three days³⁰.

Navalny attempted to capitalize on the anti-corruption surge of his social media miniempire by converting its remarkable popular following, uncommon among virtual communities in Russia, into a broad political support from both the right and the left ends of the spectrum³¹. He did not succeed, in part owing to the authorities' increasingly fierce resistance to his progress as a citizen journalist turning an opposition leader (he even managed to score 27% – coming second – in the Moscow mayoral election in 2013)³². Navalny-related websites were repeatedly blocked by Roskomnadzor (Russia's Federal Service for Communications, IT and Mass Media)³³, while he himself became subjected to a number of court cases and physical assaults, as well as at least one assassination attempt. He died in suspicious circumstances in a remote labour camp in the Russian Arctic when serving a nineteen-year sentence for inciting and financing extremist activity (i.e. trying to bring about a change of regime in Russia). His Anti-Corruption Foundation had been labelled extremist and dissolved in June 2021.

Seeking to diminish Navalny's significance, the Kremlin would invariably refer to him as "just another blogger"³⁴ (while hardly ever deigning to mention his name). Little did it realize that by doing so it has in fact been trumpeting CJ, which "blogging is the after epitome of"³⁵, as an influential if hazardous occupation. Navalny indeed bears all the CJ hallmarks, engaging head over heels with a kind of initially unpaid, amateur online journalism advocating civic causes and reaching international recognition³⁶. On the downside (also typical of CJ), the Anti-Corruption Foundation's exposés have been accused – at times justifiably so – of factual inaccuracies³⁷, perhaps not necessarily

ru/2019/12/26/083/ (03.07.2024).

³⁰ U video Naval'nogo o "dvortse Putina" uzhe bolee 60 millionov prosmotrov, "Khartyia '97%", 2021, January 22, <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2021/1/22/408602/> (03.07.2024)

³¹ Between 2011 and 2021, Navalny's name recognition rate increased from 6% to 75%, see J. M. Dollbaum et al., *Navalny*, p. 117.

³² In 2018, Navalny also campaigned to run for the post of Russia's President but was denied registration as a candidate.

³³ When Navalny's LiveJournal blog was forcibly shut in March 2014, it was seen, on average, by three million unique visitors per month, see Feschenko, *Verkhom na khaipe*.

³⁴ J.M. Dollbaum et al., *Navalny...*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

³⁵ CC. Radsch, *Arab Bloggers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

³⁶ Navalny's top collaborators, for the most, were not professional journalists either: thus, the Anti-Corruption Foundation chairman Leonid Volkov is an IT expert, the Foundation's director Vladimir Ashurkov is a physicist and an MBA degree holder, while Navalny LIVE's chief producer Liubov' Sobol' is a lawyer.

³⁷ See, for example, A. Gatinskii, A. Rudiak, *V fonde Naval'nogo izvinilis' za oshibki v roliske o Koval'chuke*, "RBK", 2017, May 26, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5927fea09a7947d1cbffd7bb> (02.07.2024) and Mironenko P. et al., *Sotsseti vzorvalis' iz-za rassledovaniia Naval'nogo. Pochemu eto vazhno i chto s nim ne tak*, "The Bell", 2019, December 4, <https://thebell.io/sotsseti-vzorvalis-iz-za-rassledovaniya-navalnogo-pochemu-eto-vazhno-i-chto-s-nim-ne-tak> (02.07.2024).

attributable to Navalny personally but falling under his ultimate responsibility anyway. Needless to say, Navalny's endeavours cannot be reduced to CJ alone, yet he would have hardly achieved what he did without CJ as a vehicle. It was his readers and viewers that he relied upon as a potential electorate and protest milieu – not unlike a certain Vladimir Lenin, another lawyer turned journalist-cum-politician, who believed, not without a reason, that a newspaper could and should gather and direct popular support for a regime change³⁸. Had a CJ tradition in Russia already existed well before Navalny was born?

The Chronicle

Consider the case of *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* ('A Chronicle of Current Events', 1968–83), an underground Soviet dissident periodical established in the UN-declared International Year for Human Rights, in an environment that was arguably as oppressive as Putin's rule today. The *Chronicle's* "mission was to keep track of and report on all human rights abuses in the Soviet Union and disseminate this information domestically and internationally"³⁹. Using Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (or UDHR) as its motto⁴⁰, the periodical focused on the issues that the heavily censored Soviet media were only allowed to mention unfavourably, if at all: the migration of Jews, Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans back to their historical domiciles; the persecution of sticklers for the law⁴¹, unorthodox Marxists and religious believers; various protest activities, e.g. demonstrations and written appeals to the authorities; and, for many of those involved, criminal sentences and forced psychiatric treatment (to undermine communist ideology and practice, you must be a saboteur or a lunatic, or a bit of both). In the fifteen years of its clandestine existence, the *Chronicle* produced in excess of 5,000 pages covering the fate of over 1,500 political prisoners and more than a thousand individuals victimized without a trial, across the USSR⁴².

The *Chronicle's* bimonthly (subsequently irregular) bulletins were compiled, edited and typewritten by volunteers, whose identities were kept anonymous for fear of repercussions (which followed nonetheless, see below). These bulletins – sixty-five in total, one of which (no 59) was seized by the KGB before its completion and another

³⁸ Cf. "A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser" (Lenin V., *Where to Begin?* (1901), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/may/04.htm> (03.07.2024))

³⁹ P. Reddaway, *The Dissidents. A Memoir of Working with the Resistance in Russia, 1960–1990*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC 2020, p. 121.

⁴⁰ "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers", The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (08.07.2024). The USSR abstained from signing the UDHR when it was adopted by a UN General Assembly in Paris in 1948.

⁴¹ The Soviet authorities did not fully observe either their own or international legislation that they signed up to, and did not like being reprimanded for this.

⁴² L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat'i*, Vozvrashchenie, Moskva 2006, p. 76.

(no 65) never went into circulation – were disseminated in multiple carbon copies through Samizdat channels.⁴³ The information mostly came via volunteers' extensive contacts among Soviet human rights activists and their relatives, especially in cases when such activists were interned (discussions of prison conditions, as well as surveys of Samizdat publications, sometimes reproducing Samizdat documents in full, also featured in the *Chronicle*). An occasional *Chronicle* collaborator and sometime Soviet prisoner of conscience, Leonard Ternovskii (1933–2006), recalled that one way of transmitting information from penitentiaries to the outside world was by

“small yet long and narrow strips of paper, on which political prisoners would note down their messages, statements and protests. Then such notes would be rolled into little spools, sealed in plastic and swallowed either by the relatives of political prisoners during their jail visits, or by the prisoners about to be freed”⁴⁴,

to remain undetected during a thorough full body search by the guards.

Could the *Chronicle* qualify as CJ, given that its production preceded the digital era? For some academics, the availability of digital technology is not an obligatory prerequisite for categorizing a particular publication as belonging to CJ. Thus, Deutsch Karlekar and Radsch declare: CJ is first and foremost

“an alternative and *activist* form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a repose to shortcoming in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism”⁴⁵.

This definition foregrounds CJ's activist nature and does not mention online media and social networks among CJ's mandatory constituent features. A pioneer of CJ studies, Dan Gillmor, cited what he called historical examples of “personal journalism <...> outside the mainstream of the moment” in the USA in the 18th–20th century as CJ of its time:⁴⁶ Benjamin Franklin and Hugh Meredith's *Pennsylvania Gazette* (1729–90); the 1770s–80s' pamphleteer Thomas Paine; the authors of *The Federalist Papers* (1787–88) aiming to expedite the ratification of the US Constitution; and the so-called muckraker, or watchdog, journalists of the turn of the 20th century striving to root out wrongdoing at various American institutions⁴⁷.

Having said that, the typewriters used in the making of the *Chronicle* could be compared in their enabling significance to desktop publishing tools of today, even though they were not widespread. As a *Chronicle* editor recalled, in the 1960s,

⁴³ The term “Samizdat” refers to alternative, unofficial and uncensored self-publishing in the Soviet Union and East European countries under Communism. In a somewhat more sophisticated technological format, it was known in Poland as “drugí obieg”, see, for example, Bates J., *Drugí obieg (Second Circulation)*, [in:] “Censorship: A World Encyclopedia”, Derek Jones (ed.), Fitzroy Dearborn, London 2001, vol. 1, pp. 695–96.

⁴⁴ L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat'i*, p. 103.

⁴⁵ K. Deutsch, Karlekar, C.C. Radsch, *Adapting Concepts of Media Freedom to a Changing Media Environment: Incorporating New Media and Citizen Journalism into the Freedom of the Press Index*, “ESSACHESS. Journal for Communication Studies”, 2012, vol. 5, no. 1 (9), p. 16.

⁴⁶ D. Gillmor, *We the Media. Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, O'Reilly, Beijing et al. 2004, pp. 1, 3.

⁴⁷ Incidentally, Navalny is likened to one of the muckrakers, Lincoln Steffens (1866–1936), [in:] J. Ioffe, *Net Impact...*, *op. cit.*

typewriters were hardly a standard Soviet household appliance. Yet when her mother bought one for her in 1964 to facilitate work on an undergraduate dissertation, the typewriter was also used to produce Samizdat materials⁴⁸, including piecing together and disseminating the first ten issues of the *Chronicle*. As another Samizdat editor put it, “in those years, s/he who had access to a typewriter, was in charge of the editorial policy”⁴⁹ for DIY periodicals.

Despite its rather pedestrian production mode, the *Chronicle* still “flew to every corner of the world”⁵⁰. Its Russian bulletins were occasionally reprinted by the émigré Possev Verlag and Fond imeni Gertsena in Europe, and Khronika Press in the US⁵¹. The *Chronicle*’s English and Polish translations appeared⁵². According to Ternovskii, “for a decade and a half, the *Chronicle* was telling the whole world about the brutal political repressions in the Soviet Union. Without this testimony, human rights organizations in the West would not have been able to campaign in defense of political prisoners in the USSR”⁵³. The periodical’s transnational dissemination, in contrast to its focus on the local problems (additionally compounded by the language barrier), is also evocative of CJ because of the feature that might be termed “hyperlocal going global”. In the CJ context, the mechanism of a niche news item gaining the attention of the worldwide mass media has been described thus: “The individual stories became part of a larger narrative frame [...] [owing to] second-level brokers such as the journalists and human rights organizations that redeployed and legitimated those frames”⁵⁴.

In his recent memoirs, the editor of the *Chronicle*’s English version Peter Reddaway reveals that in Spring 1968 in London he was given a copy of the *Chronicle*’s first issue by Anatoly Goldberg, a BBC Russian Service commentator, who had originally received it from Denis Blakeley, a BBC Moscow correspondent. The issue was accompanied by a personal note from the dissident Pavel Litvinov⁵⁵ (in whose Moscow flat the *Chronicle* had been first compiled)⁵⁶. Reddaway also names a few other Westerners involved in delivering and disseminating the *Chronicle* (and other Samizdat materials) beyond the Soviet borders⁵⁷, outlining a pattern of interaction (described here with the *Chronicle* as an illustration) between Samizdat-makers and second-hand brokers: from the *Chronicle* contributors and editors via dissidents acquainted with the

⁴⁸ L. Ulitskaia, *Poetka: Kniga o pamiati: Natal’ia Gorbanevskaia*, E. Shubina (ed.), AST, Moskva 2014, pp. 263–264.

⁴⁹ *Gazeta dlia Brodskogo i pankov. Istoriia “Gumanitarnogo fonda”*, “Radio Liberty”, 2024, June 28, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/gazeta-dlya-brodskogo-i-pankov-istoriya-gumanitarnogo-fonda-/32996908.html> (06.07.2024).

⁵⁰ L. Ulitskaia, *Poetka...*, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

⁵¹ See, for example, *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii*, Fond imeni Gertsena, Amsterdam 1979, nos 1–27, and *Arkhiv “Khroniki tekushchikh sobytii”*, https://dissident.memo.ru/ds_arch_tax/periodica/ (12.07.2024).

⁵² See *A Chronicle of Current Events. A Journal of the Soviet Civil Rights Movement*, Amnesty International, London 1968–84, 64 vols, as well as *A Chronicle of Current Events for Human Rights and Freedom in the USSR*, <https://chronicle-of-current-events.com/work-in-progress/> (08.07.2024); and *Kronika bieżących wydarzeń*, translated and edited by Nina Karsov and Szymon Szechter, Polonia Book Fund, London 1972–75, vol. 1–3.

⁵³ L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat’i*, p. 182.

⁵⁴ C.C. Radsch, *Arab Bloggers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁵⁵ P. Reddaway, *The Dissidents...*, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁵⁶ L. Ulitskaia, *Poetka...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 276–277.

⁵⁷ P. Reddaway, *The Dissidents...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 124–127.

USSR-stationed foreign journalists (preferably those who could dispatch the *Chronicle* home via a diplomatic pouch) to selected Russian-speaking academics, translators and human rights activists abroad, who, in collaboration with journalists and diplomats, would render, summarize and annotate the *Chronicle* in(to) other languages to inform those concerned about human rights in the USSR, through the government channels, mass media and human rights organizations, e.g. Amnesty International.

An Amnesty International member gainfully employed at the London School of Economics, Reddaway asked his “sympathetic friends”⁵⁸ to do unpaid Russian into English translations of early *Chronicle* issues. Himself, he edited and glossed those translations for free and forwarded them to the Amnesty, Radio Liberty (a US government-funded counterpropaganda broadcaster, based in Western Europe and aimed at the Soviet Union) and other stakeholders. From issue 12, a modest grant from the Foreign Office’s Information Research Department allowed Reddaway to reimburse the translators for their work. From issue 16, translation and circulation costs were borne by the Amnesty. Reddaway remained “a volunteer editor”⁵⁹. The *Chronicle*’s Soviet editors did not receive any honorarium either (unless “serving time in penal institutions and psychiatric hospitals” counts as one⁶⁰). This fact can be used as a confirmation that working on the *Chronicle* was indeed a CJ activity.

Another CJ characteristic evident in the *Chronicle* is the intention of its contributors and editors to stay unidentified⁶¹. This is understandable in the atmosphere of KGB repressions – but also comes with the genre’s DNA, as, historically speaking, many old annals and chronicles were “anonymous in nature”⁶². Only in May 1974, under intense KGB pressure in the run up to and following the Yakir-Krasin trial (partly instigated as a retribution for the *Chronicle*)⁶³, three dissidents – Tatiana Khodorovich (1921–2015), Tatiana Velikanova (1932–2002) and Sergei Kovalev (1930–2021) – stoically admitted responsibility for distributing the *Chronicle* (but not for editing it, even though they apparently did co-edit bulletins 28–30). At times, editing the *Chronicle* was a joint responsibility⁶⁴. Thus, Kovalev and Velikanova additionally co-edited bulletins 32–34.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

⁶⁰ L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat’i*, p. 96.

⁶¹ Cf. the following trait of the CJ website Backfence.com: “by allowing users to create fake screen names during the registration process, the site virtually invites contributors to be anonymous in their postings”, Grubisich T., *Grassroots Journalism: Actual Content vs Shining Ideal*, “Online Journalism Review”, 2005, October 5, <https://www.ojr.org/p051006/index.html> (08.07.2024). Benjamin Franklin in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Thomas Paine in his pamphlets of the 1770s–1780s and the *Federalist Papers*’ contributors tended not to sign their real names either.

⁶² L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat’i*, p. 92.

⁶³ Neither Petr Yakir (1923–1982) nor Viktor Krasin (1929–2017), two prominent dissidents, first imprisoned under Stalin and rearrested in 1972, “had been essential to the *Chronicle*’s existence. [...] They had neither edited nor written much for the *Chronicle*. Their roles in the publication mostly concerned its distribution and reproduction. Krasin was involved, as many were, in retyping copies. [...] [The two men also] were important conduits to the Western press corps, Yakir in particular” (Hopkins M., *Russia’s Underground Press. The Chronicle of Current Events*, Praeger, New York 1983, s. 76–77). Both were well informed about the covert activities of various Soviet dissidents, and were coerced into betraying much of their knowledge to the KGB investigators. Further interrogations followed encompassing wider dissident circles.

⁶⁴ A subdivision of labour also existed, especially at a later stage in the periodical’s history. One person would

Bulletins 35–53, however, were issued under Velikanova's sole supervision⁶⁵. She organized a great deal of the chroniclers' overall working process, proving to be as efficient as she was conspiratorial⁶⁶.

What used to be concealed has long since become public knowledge. It is no secret anymore that the *Chronicle's* first ten bulletins were edited by Natalia Gorbanevskaya (1936–2013), while the next seventeen, by Anatoly Yakobson (1935–1978), and most of the later ones, by Aleksandr Lavut (1929–2013) and Yurii Shikhanovich (1933–2011)⁶⁷. Curiously enough, yet fully in keeping with the CJ makeup, none of the chief editors was trained as a journalist. Gorbanevskaya was a bibliographer, Yakobson a historian, Khodorovich a dialectologist, Kovalev a biophysicist, and Velikanova, Lavut and Shikhanovich mathematicians. Yet, in the assessment of Andrei Babitskii, they produced "the most professional periodical that the Soviet conditions would allow"⁶⁸. It is impossible not to agree with Babitskii's statement when, for instance, comparing two tendentious official journalistic reports of the Red Square demonstration on 25 August 1968 against the Warsaw pact countries' invasion of Czechoslovakia, as well as the subsequent trial involving some of the demonstration participants (slanderingly described as jobless drunkards), on the one hand, with Gorbanevskaya's own (also imperfect) account of the demonstration (which she attended) in the third *Chronicle*⁶⁹ and the trial's matter-of-fact summary (giving voice to the defence lawyers) in the fourth *Chronicle*, on the other⁷⁰.

As a rule, CJ differs from professional journalism in emphasizing "interpretation over fact-based reporting. [...] Traditional journalists may perform better in the areas of thoroughness and accuracy"⁷¹. However, the *Chronicle* makers were keen to ensure the superior quality of their factual content by comparison with the official Soviet press, to avoid accusations of a deliberate distortion of truth, which could result in a tough prison sentence. Therefore, the *Chronicle* promptly introduced a special Corrigenda section (*Popravki* or *Ispravleniia*), in which its past publications' mistakes were corrected. Still, at Kovalev's trial in December 1975, the prosecution claimed that the

be answerable, say, for the information blocks about Crimean Tatars, another collected material to do with persecution for religious faith, and so on (see Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat'i*, p. 99).

⁶⁵ A. Makarov, *Kto delal "Khroniku tekushchikh sobytii"*, "Kommersant", 2013, April 26, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160302143745/http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2175448> (08.07.2024).

⁶⁶ L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat'i*, pp. 99, 101–102.

⁶⁷ A. Makarov, *Kto delal*.

⁶⁸ A. Babitskii, *Svoboda nevoli*, "Kommersant", 2013, April 26, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160302143745/http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2175448> (04.07.2024). It must have been one of those cases when citizen journalists actually did "a better job than the professionals" (to borrow a phrase from Gillmor, *We The Media*, s. xiv).

⁶⁹ Gorbanevskaya did not mention the presence of the twenty-one-year old protester Tatiana Baeva, to shield her from prosecution. Baeva successfully escaped punishment.

⁷⁰ Cf. N. Bardin, *V raschete na sensatsiiu*, "Moskovskaia pravda", 1968, October 12, <https://history.wikireading.ru/256900> (08.07.2024); Smirnov A. *Po zaslugam*, "Vechniia Moskva", 1968, October 12, <https://history.wikireading.ru/256901> (08.07.2024); and Gorbanevskaya N., *Glavnym redaktorom [...] vsekh gazet, kotorye opublikuiut eto pis'mo* in "Khronika tekushchikh sobytii" 1968 no 3, as well as *Sudebnyj protsess po delu o demonstratsii na Krasnoi ploshchadi 25 avgusta 1968 goda* in "Khronika tekushchikh sobytii" 1968 no 4 (both at <http://old.memo.ru/history/diss/chr/index.htm> (08.07.2024)).

⁷¹ S. Miller, *Citizen Journalism...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 3.

Chronicle under his watch contained 83 libelous statements (Kovalev counterclaimed that there may have been a total of eleven mistakes, made inadvertently)⁷². For “malicious fabrications with the intent to undermine and overthrow the Soviet system”⁷³ he was sentenced to seven years of strict-regime confinement and three years in exile.

Another typical CJ trait is that it tends to produce not impartial but “value-laden, emotional news”⁷⁴. The *Chronicle* was blamed exactly for this in a reader’s feedback, despite the fact that Gorbanevskaya proclaimed unemotionality to be one of the periodical’s grounding principles⁷⁵. In the Appendix to Bulletin 8 (June 1969), a reader from Leningrad says that, “in the opinion of some of his friends, the *Chronicle* has a »hysterical tone«. The reason for this, he thinks, lies in the abundance of value judgments”. The *Chronicle* responds that it

“makes every effort to achieve a calm, restrained tone. Unfortunately the materials with which the *Chronicle* is dealing evoke emotional reactions, and these automatically affect the tone of the text. The *Chronicle* does, and will do, its utmost to ensure that its strictly factual style is maintained to the greatest degree possible, but it cannot guarantee complete success. The *Chronicle* tries to refrain from making value judgments—either by not making them at all, or by referring to judgments made in samizdat documents. In certain cases one is obliged to give an appraisal of the facts, otherwise their true significance might escape the unsophisticated reader”⁷⁶.

In spite of, or perhaps thanks to, the *Chronicle* being a form of CJ, it was “the most important” dissident enterprise undertaken in the USSR⁷⁷. When its team were contemplating the *Chronicle*’s closure (because of the Yakir-Krasin affair) and approached Gorbanevskaya for an opinion, she said:

“While I was [forcibly committed to a lunatic asylum], I knew: everything that happens to me, or at least everything that can be found out, will end up in the *Chronicle*. Now other people are under arrest. To stop the *Chronicle* would mean leaving them to the mercy of fate: [...] anything can be done to them and they will be forgotten”⁷⁸.

So the periodical kept going. With the advent of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, it may have looked to some for a while that the *Chronicle* (crushed in 1983 by the KGB, anyway) outlived its usefulness and only retained a historical significance. However, especially once Putin became Russia’s President, some human rights activists began asking themselves if the time had come to start thinking about reviving the *Chronicle*⁷⁹.

In 2012, while on the run from the Russian law, members of the Pussy Riot punk band, wanted for performing their song “A Punk Prayer” that begged Virgin Mary to banish Putin (who was about to win his third term in the presidential office), were given a temporary shelter by an ex-Soviet dissident. While there, they “read copies

⁷² L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat’i*, p. 99.

⁷³ L. Ulitskaia, *Poetka...*, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

⁷⁴ S.-J. Min, *Conversation through Journalism*, p. 579.

⁷⁵ L. Ulitskaia, *Poetka...*, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

⁷⁶ *Appendix. Reply to a Reader*, “A Chronicle of Current Events for Human Rights and Freedom in the USSR”, 1969, no. 8, <https://chronicle-of-current-events.com/2013/09/21/8-16-appendix-to-no-8-reply-to-a-reader/> (09.07.2024)

⁷⁷ Academician Andrei Sakharov in 1974, as quoted in Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat’i*, p. 78.

⁷⁸ L. Ulitskaia, *Poetka...*, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

⁷⁹ L. Ternovskii, *Vospominaniia i stat’i*, p. 117.

of the *Chronicle of Current Events* until midnight. [...] We joked that, if they caught us, we would be the new dissidents. Which was just what happened”⁸⁰. Three band members were soon apprehended and sentenced to two years in jail for inciting religious hatred. Unsurprisingly for an atmosphere of intolerance towards the critics of Putin’s rule, the *Chronicle* made a comeback in the summer of 2015, in a new (online) format. The website, edited by the former political prisoner (1977–1983) Kirill Podrabinek and three other men, continued to post new material until Autumn 2017. Among its publications were the follow-ups on the Bolotnaya Square case (multiple arrests after a mass protest rally in Russia, 2012), the annexation of Crimea (2014) and the murder of the oppositional politician Boris Nemtsov (2015), as well as a list of individuals persecuted in Russia for their religious beliefs and political and civic activity (217 names in total as of August 2015)⁸¹.

For better or worse, in Putin’s Russia, the *Chronicle’s* agenda and relevance have undergone a renaissance and a digital upgrade. Alas, this did not make the *Chronicle* any more efficient. The prominent dissident Vladimir Bukovsky (1942–2019) held the opinion that if the Internet had existed in Soviet times and the civil rights movement had access to it, the communist regime would have collapsed much sooner⁸². This is doubtful. After all, the Internet has been at people’s disposal for decades now, reaching a 90% penetration rate in Russia in 2022, yet the current Russian regime looks impregnable nonetheless, while human rights in Russia are under threat again.

In any case, outside Russia, as I have tried to demonstrate, the *Chronicle* holds a different kind of relevance. Allowing for a deeper insight into CJ, the *Chronicle’s* example confirms with a considerable degree of certainty that, to qualify as CJ, a publication does not need to be created either in a digital format or in the 21st century.

Rabsel’kory

Another CJ case from Russia should help us shed the light onto the much-debated correlation between citizen (i.e. amateur) and professional journalists, usually referred to as “pro-am”⁸³. On the one hand, CJ “expresses the idea that citizens, not professional journalists, can be the main creator and distributor of news”⁸⁴. On the other, citizen journalists are often considered to be little else but providers of “content for ‘professional-amateur’ (pro-am) sites which integrates the works of professional staff and citizen contributors”⁸⁵.

⁸⁰ M. Alyokhina, *Riot Days*, Allen Lane, London 2017, p. 40.

⁸¹ See *Novaia khronika tekushchikh sobytii*, 2015–2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151021211150/http://ixtc.org/about-project/> (09.07.2024)

⁸² L. Ulitskaia, *Poetka...*, *op. cit.*, *Poetka*, p. 285.

⁸³ Cf. I. Jurrat, *Citizen Journalism and the Internet*, p. 7; S. Miller, *Citizen Journalism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁸⁴ S. J. Min, *Conversation through Journalism*, p. 570.

⁸⁵ L. Friedland, N. Kim, *Citizen journalism*, [in:] “Encyclopedia of Journalism”, Christopher H. Sterling (ed.) SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA 2009, p. 298.

The balance of the respective input by each contributing party, the professionals and the citizen journalists, can differ from site to site and from publication to publication. Thus, a VP for Audience Development at the Bakersfield Californian independent newspaper company producing a free biweekly newspaper, Northwest Voice in Bakersfield, CA, states:

“We are the traditional journalism model turned upside down. Instead of being the gatekeeper, telling people that what’s important to them ‘isn’t news’, we’re just opening up the gates and letting people come on in. We are a better community newspaper for having thousands of readers who serve as the eyes and ears for the Voice, rather than having everything filtered through the views of a small group of reporters and editors”⁸⁶.

Deutsch Karlekar and Radsch observe that, overall, CJ and “professional journalism enjoy an increasingly symbiotic relationship through content partnerships, participatory newsmaking processes, and mutual certification”⁸⁷. However, within this symbiosis, not every pro-am venture acts like the Northwest Voice does. Speaking of the participatory variety of CJ, i.e. “audiences’ work in conjunction with traditional news-media journalists in the production of news content for a traditional news organization”, Serena Miller notes: “the mere presence of a participatory community on a news-organization site does not mean that news organizations [...] have relinquished their role as gatekeepers”⁸⁸.

Moreover, sometimes the traditional news organizations blatantly exploit citizen journalists by treating them as “cheap labour” and “outsourcing salaried work to amateurs [...] for the benefit of the large profit-making multinationals”⁸⁹.

By the same token, gatekeeping occasionally goes as far as denying citizen journalists the right to be called journalists, likely in order to prop up the barriers against what is seen as the amateur-driven competition in the world of mass media:

“There are citizens and there are journalists. Everybody can be one of the former, but to be called a journalist means that you are a professional. [...] We advocate abolishing the term ‘citizen journalist’. These people can call themselves ‘citizen news gatherers’, but it is no more appropriate to call them citizen journalists than it would be to sit before a citizen judge or be operated on by a citizen brain surgeon”⁹⁰.

It appears that professional journalists’ stance towards CJ ranges from condescending and manipulative to rejuvenating and hopeful. In the 1920s’ Soviet Russia, an attempt was made, by the professional Soviet press corps under the instructions

⁸⁶ Mary Lou Fulton as quoted in Glaser M., *The New Voices. Hyperlocal Citizen Media Sites Want You (to Write)*, “Online Journalism Review”, 2004, November 17, <https://web.archive.org/web/20041204141924/http://ojr.org/ojr/glaser/1098833871.php> (21.06.2024).

⁸⁷ K. Deutsch Karlekar and C.C. Radsch, *Adapting Concepts of Media Freedom...*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁸⁸ S. Miller, *Citizen Journalism...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–12.

⁸⁹ T. Witschge, *Street Journalists versus ‘Ailing Journalists’?*, “Open Democracy”, 2009, March 27, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090830120029/http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/street-journalists-as-an-answer-to-ailing-journalism> (11.07.2024).

⁹⁰ Editorial, *Let’s Abolish the Term ‘Citizen Journalists’*, “The Digital Journalist”, 2009, December, <https://digitaljournalist.org/issue0912/lets-abolish-citizen-journalists.html> (21.06.2024).

and supervision from the Bolshevik party, to foster and co-opt on a mass scale the CJ contributors, known as *rabsel'kory* (worker and peasant correspondents), who would inform the authorities about what was going wrong nearby by writing to newspapers at all levels, from local to central ones. Can this century-old Russian experiment make clearer the distinction between different types of the pro-am relationship in a CJ context?

The *rabsel'kory* movement, which began in the early 1920s as “a model of activism”⁹¹ and run out of steam by the early 1930s, “sought to give ‘the voice of the people’ direct access to the pages of the state-run press”⁹² in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Civil War. At this juncture, the ruling Bolsheviks intended to “establish social cohesion and consensus at a time when there was resistance to the state’s agenda of building the country into a modern, industrialized socialist power”⁹³. The authorities used the movement not only for getting feedback from the population and fine-tuning control mechanisms but also for its in-depth ideological indoctrination in the spirit of Marxism, and for identifying and mentoring activists⁹⁴. From the *rabsel'kory*’s viewpoint, the movement “reflected the striving of many people for literacy and education” (as the country’s majority could improve on both counts) “and the voice of protest in society” (as many letters to the editors – a popular genre of communication between *rabsel'kory* and newspapers – were not supportive but downright critical of local and regional officials)⁹⁵.

The movement reportedly grew from some 15,000 members in 1924 to over 380,000 in 1928⁹⁶, and encompassed not only *rabsel'kory* but also *voenkory* (armed forces’ correspondents), *zhenkory* (women correspondents), *iunkory* (youth correspondents), *pikory* (young pioneer correspondents) and *sluzhkory* (public service correspondents),⁹⁷ as well as *aulkory* (Turkic village correspondents), *lagkory* (convict correspondents collaborating with the prison press)⁹⁸, *mil'kory* (police correspondents) and *detkory* (children correspondents), among others.⁹⁹ Nearly all the society strata were involved. For lack of space, in my summary of their journalistic activity, I will concentrate only on *rabsel'kory*.

⁹¹ J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press and Grass-roots Organization. The Rabkor Movement, NEP to the First Five Year Plan*. A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. Graduate Department of History, University of Toronto, Toronto 1993, p. 196.

⁹² M.S. Gorham, *Tongue-Tied Writers. The Rabsel'kor Movement and the Voice of the “New Intelligentsia” in Early Soviet Russia*, “The Russian Review”, 1996, vol. 55, no. 3, p. 415.

⁹³ J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁹⁴ A. Shitova, *Rabsel'korovskoe dvizhenie, stennye i zhivye gazety 1920-kh godov. Organizatsiia i motivatsiia deiatel'nosti*, “Gramota” (Tambov), 2017, no. 11 (85), p. 205.

⁹⁵ J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 62, 197. The official figure of just under 3,000,000, allegedly reached by 1932 (see p. 197), is, in all likelihood, grossly exaggerated.

⁹⁷ See M.S. Gorham, *Tongue-Tied Writers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

⁹⁸ Z. Khuako, Z. Zhade, *Rabsel'korovskoe dvizhenie sovetskogo perioda v rossiiskoi zhurnalistike kak sotsioistoricheskii i sotsiokul'turnyi fenomen*, “Vestnik Adygeiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta”, 2020, no 2 (259), pp. 77–78.

⁹⁹ S.R. Coe, *Peasants, the State and the Languages of NEP. The Rural Correspondents Movement in the Soviet Union, 1924–28*. A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. (History), The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 1993, p. 35.

Their principal form of engagement with the press was writing letters to the editors (or LTE). This genre, used by a publication's readers to contribute to "topics, relevant to [that] publication's audience"¹⁰⁰, has of course existed in the print mass media since at least the early 18th century, outside Russia to begin with. Before the October 1917 revolution, letters to the editor had become an established genre in Russia, too. Even peasant readers at the *Sel'skii vestnik* (Rural Herald) newspaper tried their hand at them¹⁰¹. The chief difference between the genre's classical version and the *rabsel'kory* one was that the original submissions of the latter variety were not only modified by editors as they saw fit but also, to a significant degree, especially at the start of the *rabsel'kory* movement, solicited and guided by professional journalists (and designated party officials) through instructions placed either in periodicals or in separate brochures, and drilled into *rabsel'kory* during special assemblies, workshops and training courses. It goes without saying that LTE were written by not only *rabsel'kory* but members of the general public, too. Yet it was "the *rabsel'kory* movement [that] inspired a trend of mass letter writing to newspapers"¹⁰².

Whether suggested by the editor or raised by a grassroots initiative, LTE topics differed somewhat, depending on the citizen journalist's day job¹⁰³. Thus, *rabkory's* (worker correspondents') LTE dealt primarily with

"trade unions (red circles [political and educational clubs], factory schools, the work of union organs, *sheftsvo* [a regular assistance rendered by one organization or group to another], housing problems, wage reductions, unemployment); industry (production meetings, decreases in industrial production, supply and condition of material and equipment); health care (sanatoriums, sports, social insurance); party department (work among Komsomol [the Young Communist League], political questions and answers); corruption and alcoholism; *rabkory* (the persecution of *rabkory*, wall newspapers) and legal aid"¹⁰⁴.

As for peasant (or rural) correspondents (*sel'kory*), they were encouraged to write about

"the grain harvest, agricultural credit (who was issuing it and for how much), the availability and quality of manufactured goods, peasant youths, cottage industry, the anniversary of the October Revolution, the work of the party cell, the struggle with samogon ("home-brew"), the struggle with inflation, soviet elections, cooperatives, the village cinema, spring sowing, depositing funds in savings accounts, Press Day (May 5), thrift and economizing, autodidacticism, volost [i.e. regional] budgets, state-provided insurance, local industry and factories, activities of the military, the village theater, land surveying, [...] and taxes"¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁰ *Letters to the Editor*, "Writing Studio. Duke University", 2010, June 9, http://uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/documents/letter_to_editor.pdf (14.07.2024).

¹⁰¹ Their "letters were predominantly about the perils of alcoholism", as well as "other peasants' vices, Gypsies and Jews, and youth, their lack of morals and their obsession with fashions from the city" (S.R. Coe, *Peasants...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–48).

¹⁰² J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹⁰³ Insufficient education being a serious handicap, in 1923, at the Moscow-based railway employees' newspaper *Gudok* (The Siren), only 25% of the "amateur correspondents were industrial workers, whereas office workers comprised 38% and trade union workers, another 25%" (*Ibidem*, p. 75). At approximately the same time, in the peasant press, "a *sel'kor* was rarely a 'peasant from the plow', but more often a salaried official (an office manager, feldsher, postmaster), a former worker... and less often, a village teacher" (S.R. Coe, *Peasants...*, *op. cit.*, p. 219).

¹⁰⁴ J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

¹⁰⁵ S.R. Coe, *Peasants...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 299–300.

Yet, at variance with the editorial guidance, what *sel'kory* really wanted to share with their readers was complaining about “abusive officials or [seeking] to rectify some injustice or solve some problem. Letters which were not complaints or petitions most often described progressive changes in the village in general [...] [e.g.] peasants buying a tractor or opening a village library”¹⁰⁶.

Most letters as a rule were deemed unprintable, because they were either too critical or too poorly written. In June 1926, the Gudok newspaper – which a couple of years previously claimed that “rabkor material occupied 50–70% of the space in most of its issues” – published only 16,7% of a total of nearly 7,000 letters received that month alone¹⁰⁷. The published letters, in Gudok and elsewhere, were routinely subjected to “severe editing and rewording”, which ultimately “discouraged correspondence”¹⁰⁸. With the onset of the first Five-Year Plan (1928–1932), when imitating public consent was prioritised by Bolshevik powers-that-be over generating it, the “published rabkor articles appear lifeless, as if not penned by workers at all but rather by anonymous editors. The variety of themes grew more narrow and were mainly about the state’s campaign of increasing industrial production”¹⁰⁹. From that point onwards, the *rabsel'kory* movement of the 1920s lost its impetus¹¹⁰. “Any ‘organic link’ to the masses remained primarily in name, and only tangentially in subject matter”¹¹¹.

The tightening of the editorial filter across the 1920s from “semi-controlled”¹¹² to hardly passable should take a considerable degree of blame for channelling citizens’ civic activism from LTE to outright denunciations of perceived culprits directly to the Soviet authorities, which engulfed the USSR in the 1930s, leading to the Great Purge. *Rabsel'kory* ended up “at the forefront of this hate campaign”,¹¹³ every so often crossing the boundary between whistleblowing and informing. If, in the words of a professional Soviet journalist of the era, in the 1920s *rabsel'kory* had by and large “served society against the abuses of the state”, by the next decade “they served the state against society”¹¹⁴.

Already in the mid-1920s, newspapers forwarded some of the *rabsel'kory* letters to the appropriate authorities for further investigation. Thus, Gudok and Krest'ianskaia gazeta (The Peasant Newspaper) sent them to various branches and

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 345–346.

¹⁰⁷ J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 144, 146. Many letters survived in the archives, such as GARF (the State Archive of the Russian Federation) and RGAE (the Russian State Archive of the Economy), and can be consulted there.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

¹¹⁰ The *rabsel'kory* movement relived a renaissance during Khrushchev’s Thaw (see Khuako and Zhade, *Rabsel'korovskoe dvizhenie sovetskogo perioda*, pp. 80–81) but this period falls outwith the scope of the present article.

¹¹¹ M.S. Gorham, *Tongue-Tied Writers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

¹¹² J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

¹¹⁴ A. Kotlyar., *Newspapers in the USSR: Recollections and Observations of a Soviet Journalist*, transl. by Fred Holling, Research Program on the USSR, New York 1955.

headquarters at the relevant trade unions and people's commissariats, as well as the Bolshevik party organs, prosecutor's offices and state security (OGPU and NKVD, the KGB's predecessors)¹¹⁵. Crucially, many accusations contained in the letters – on average, up to 40% overall¹¹⁶ – proved to be false. When looking at this rather unfortunate matter through the CJ lens, it can be interpreted as a typical CJ trend of insufficient accuracy.

To defend themselves against a revenge for their complaints, just or unjust¹¹⁷, *rabsel'kory* habitually hid themselves behind pseudonyms¹¹⁸, which is another common CJ feature. One more characteristic shared by CJ and the *rabsel'kory* movement was the lack of pay. *Rabsel'kory* were expected to work *pro bono*. The first *rabsel'kory* congress of November 1923, chaired by Maria Ulyanova (Lenin's sister) and Nikolai Bukharin, the then chief editor of Pravda (the Bolshevik party's main newspaper), insisted on *rabsel'kory*'s voluntary status, "to prevent the corruption of the movement by careerists", given that the *rabsel'kory* position was forbidden to be regarded merely as the "first step in the training of a newspaper worker"¹¹⁹. If there was a symbolic remuneration to *rabsel'kory*, it rarely exceeded one rouble per article, as "its purpose was only to cover the expense of writing and mailing the report"¹²⁰.

Where does the *rabsel'kory* movement stand with regard to such an important CJ attribute as pro-am, though? In terms of how professional and amateur journalists interact (if at all), Seong-Jae Min distinguishes among three possible types: the top-down ("where professional journalists set the agenda and disseminate facts and information to citizens"), the bottom-up ("where free but fragmented conversation in citizen journalism is translated into a more cohesive mass by public journalism") and the hybrid (when "citizen and professional/public journalism influence each other")¹²¹.

From what is known about the relationship between *rabsel'kory* and their editors, it looks as if at different stages of the movement's existence it displayed signs of belonging to all three types. In the early 1920s, when *rabsel'kory* (and their followers,

¹¹⁵ J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 93; S.R. Coe, *Peasants...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 365-370.

¹¹⁶ S. Selev, *Glaza i ushi trudovogo naroda. Kak sovetskaia vlast' pooshchriala donositel'stvo*, "Kommersant", 2017, June 15, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3325686> (13.07.2024). Cf.: of the 1,027 LTE, sent to the NKVD by Krest'ianskaia gazeta in 1924, "an investigation had been completed for 731, and the allegations contained therein had been confirmed for 379, or a little over half of them" (S.R. Coe, *Peasants...*, *op. cit.*, p. 370).

¹¹⁷ Cf.: "In 1924 eight amateur correspondents were murdered. A year later there were 25 deaths, and in 1926, 96. While some *rabsel'kory* escaped lynching, many suffered other kinds of abuse at work. They frequently complained that they were the first laid off a job, or that they were assigned to the most disagreeable tasks" (J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 70).

¹¹⁸ Cf.: "Pseudonyms appeared frequently among letters printed in Krest'ianskaia gazeta, though the newspaper insisted throughout the 1920s that letters had to be signed in order to be considered. [...] In March 1924, Krest'ianskaia gazeta began assigning numbers to *sel'kory* as a way of preserving their anonymity while keeping them accountable for what they wrote, and other papers also gradually adopted the practice" (S.R. Coe, *Peasants...*, *op. cit.*, p. 393).

¹¹⁹ J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

¹²¹ S.-J. Min, *Conversation...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 576–77.

the ordinary LTE writers) enjoyed less interference from newspaper editors (although this hardly ever amounted to a full independence), it can be said that the pro-am correlation was of the bottom-up type. Selected examples of the hybrid pro-am relation can also be found, such as the writers Ilya Ilf (1897–1937) and Evgeny Petrov (1902–1942), in the 1920s employed in the LTE section of *Gudok* as style-polishers (*litobrabotchiki*), which undeniably influenced their celebrated satirical output¹²² (the opposite influence, exerted by the editors on *rabsel'kory*, is taken for granted). The top-down relation type, when editors' dominance left hardly any room for *rabsel'kory*'s authentic voices, became conspicuous by the end of the 1920s.

Remarkably, the free press also suffers from the excesses of the top-down model when it is the editor who tells the reader what exactly ought to be newsworthy. In the same decade, the problem was articulated by Walter Lippmann, who defined it thus, with regard to an average human being: "no newspaper reports his environment so that he can grasp it"¹²³. John Dewey believed that the solution to the problem lies in allowing the general public to influence the news agenda to a much greater extent: "The assembling and reporting of news would be a very different thing if the genuine interests of reporters were permitted to work freely"¹²⁴. The *rabsel'kory* movement appears to be, at least in part, a sincere Soviet attempt to find an alternative to the preponderance of the top-down pro-am model but it did not succeed. To use Melissa Wall's explication of CJ pitfalls from almost a century later yet applicable to the plight of the *rabsel'kory* movement, "the citizen effort became increasingly more professionalized and less innovative to meet the expectations of funders and their professional collaborators"¹²⁵. [...] Even when legacy news media claim to be embracing citizen content, they are in fact ensuring that it gets reshaped to follow professional values"¹²⁶.

On a specific point, the *rabsel'kory* story provides a necessary corrective to the following statement: "In Russia, citizen journalism has long been recognized within the country as a means to empower individuals intent on countering the dominance of state-controlled media"¹²⁷. In my opinion, the fact that the *rabsel'kory* movement developed more in collaboration than in confrontation with the state-controlled press does not make it less of a CJ phenomenon.

¹²² See B.E. Galanov, *Il'ia Il'f i Evgenii Petrov. Zhizn'. Tvorchestvo*, Sovetskii pisatel', Moscow 1961 (chapter 2).

¹²³ W. Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, Harcourt, Brace, New York 1925, pp. 13–14.

¹²⁴ J. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Holt, New York 1927, p. 182.

¹²⁵ In the *rabsel'kory* case, this was achieved by recourse to how-to-write manuals and training programmes, e.g. at the *rabsel'kory* clubs and the Moscow Institute of Journalism (see J. Clibbon, *The Soviet Press...*, *op. cit.* p. 246; and Khuako and Zhade, *Rabsel'korovskoe dvizhenie sovetskogo perioda*, p. 80).

¹²⁶ M. Wall, *Citizen Journalism*, pp. 800–801.

¹²⁷ K. Alexanyan, *Civic Responsibility...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

Conclusions

So, what can we learn, first, about CJ from the (Soviet) Russian case studies outlined above? And second, about the case studies themselves when looking at them through the prism of CJ?

First, the case studies show that CJ comprises features of primary and secondary importance. The primary features include non-professional journalistic activism¹²⁸ with such frequent concomitant characteristics as “positive attitudes toward nonprofit volunteering and donations”,¹²⁹ emotionality, insufficient attention to fact-checking (sporadically culminating in spreading fake news), occasional unscrupulous behaviour (such as blaming people for what they have not done) and anonymity/pseudonymity. The secondary (in my view, negligible) features include dating CJ to the turn of the 21st century and linking CJ with the emergence of the new media.

Second, the *rabsel’kory* case amply demonstrates that, historically, CJ in Russia has employed a full spectrum of the pro-am relationship, not limiting it to the bottom-up model alone but also involving the hybrid model, not to speak of the top-down one. Further studies of Russian CJ-related material are desirable, e.g. of the *Chronicle’s* heir apparent from the times of perestroika, the “Ekspress-khronika” newspaper¹³⁰, and a *rabsel’kory* successor, the Internet journal Rabkor (<https://rabkor.ru/about-us/>), founded in 2008¹³¹.

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¹²⁸ Cf.: citizen journalists “are not just advocacy journalists, but activist journalists” (Salter L., *Indymedia and the Law. Issues for Citizen Journalism*, [in:] *Citizen Journalism. Global Perspectives*, vol. 1, Allan S., Thorsen E. (ed.), Peter Lang, New York 2009, p. 179).

¹²⁹ S. Miller, *Citizen Journalism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹³⁰ G. Morev, *Podrabinek. Sovetskaia vlast’ i “Ekspress-khronika” byli nesovmestimy*, “RIA Novosti”, 2013, September 17, <https://ria.ru/20130917/962987903.html> (10.07.2024).

¹³¹ All translations from Russian are mine, unless otherwise stated.

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Revis(it)ing Citizen Journalism: Case Studies from (Soviet) Russia

Summary

The phenomenon of citizen journalism has been mostly associated with computer literacy and the idea of free speech. Does citizen journalism exist in semi-literate countries and/or under (semi-)repressive regimes? If yes, how (if at all) does it affect a standard definition of citizen journalism by J. Rosen (i.e., “when people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another”)? The paper is trying to address these questions using three examples from (post-) Soviet Russia, both pro- and anti-Kremlin: the so-called *rabsel’kory* of the 1920s–30s; the underground dissident bulletin *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* of the late 1960s – early 1980s; and Alexei Naval’nyi’s blogging activities of the late 2000s – early 2020s.

Keywords: citizen journalism, *rabsel’kory*, *A Chronicle of Current Events*, Alexei Navalny