This essay was prompted by the frequent denials in the West of freedom of the press in Russia. My findings suggest that in reality the newsprint may be black and white but the objectivity of the news coverage in the print media comes in shades of gray. I would further argue that in today’s Russia George Orwell’s famous novel 1984 – in which “Big Brother” employed all-pervasive monitoring and censorship to control the elite while the passive “proles” were left to their own devices -- has been turned on its head. Politically engaged Russians are not prevented from reading (and expressing) views critical of the Russian government, as the Orwellian analogy would have it. Rather, the Putin administration tolerates a situation in which an activist minority, in and out of government, has access to a small number of independent, alternative print media. On the other hand, the vast majority of Russians (Orwell’s hedonistic “proles”?) seem content to rely on state-dominated television and mass circulation tabloids for entertainment laced with official news.

At the same time, two points must be emphasized at the outset of any discussion of freedom in the contemporary Russian press. The first is that the alternative, or critical, papers and weeklies include both pluralist Western-oriented and ultra nationalist anti-Western media. The second, and more important point, is that overall Russian public opinion toward the outside world has undergone a dramatic shift over the past decade. In the Yeltsin era of the nineties, Russian attitudes toward the United States and Europe were to a considerable extent favorable or ambivalent. But since 1998-1999 public opinion in its majority has shifted decisively against the West, as will be elaborated below. In other words, there is little reason to expect that a lessening of Russian state influence over the large-circulation national newspapers and electronic media would automatically lead to the flourishing of Western norms of journalist diversity, dialogue, and tolerance of differing viewpoints.

Western misperceptions regarding the Russian print media are partly the result of frequent distortions on this account by many Euro-Atlantic journalists. We may speculate that some of the pundits emphasize Russia’s warts to compensate for their discomfort over the U.S. debacle in Iraq and the anti-Americanism provoked by it. But journalists also take their cues from academics. And scholars dealing with Russia often fail to differentiate the issue.
of press freedom from more pronounced flaws in Russia's political and legal system: namely, state control of national TV, constraints on open-ended electoral competition, and the inadequate rule of law, including sins of both commission (the persecution of Khodorkovsky) and omission (the flawed investigation of murdered journalists).

Academic analysts should know better. They themselves often turn to the Russian print media for their own research data. As the noted military expert Dale Herspring remarked in an Internet roundtable discussion of Russian media in June 2006, "I primarily read the Russian military press, ... [and] compared with Soviet times, those who follow the Russian military have hit a gold mine."\(^1\) Herspring's judgment notwithstanding, some scholars\(^2\) place undue emphasis on Russia's very low score in global rankings of press freedom generated by organizations with their own political agendas, such as Freedom House. Leading Freedom House analysts (including its Executive Director) did not hesitate in autumn 2006 to draw an unpersuasive comparison between Russia's Putin and two of the post-Soviet region's most extreme authoritarian leaders, Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov and Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko.\(^3\) They then flatly asserted:

In the months leading up to Anna Politkovskaia's death, the Kremlin lowered the boom on remaining independent news organizations. The acquisition of Kommersant last month by . . . a Kremlin-friendly businessman . . . represented a devastating blow to the country's already enfeebled independent media.\(^4\)

However, even Boris Berezovsky, the virulent self-exiled Putin opponent in London and erstwhile Kommersant owner, described the newspaper's new owner as a "level-headed businessman who 'doesn't let political passions get the better of him.'\(^5\)

The truth of the matter is rather different from that described by Freedom House. While Anna Politkovskaia's gangland-style murder underscored the absence of security guarantees for activist Russian citizens in all walks of life (not only journalists), her life work affirmed the existence of a free and critical press. As Mikhail Gorbachev said during the annual World Association of Newspapers (WAN) congress in Moscow in June 2006 regarding the print media, "[t]he plurality of opinions can be seen, and the same media organiza-

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1. "Untimely Thoughts Weekly Russia Experts Panel: How free is Russia's media?", June 9, 2006; in Johnson's Russia List (henceforth JRL), no. 134, 2006 (June 10, item 8).
2. For example, M. Steven Fish, Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005).
4. Ibid.