

Global Media and Communication

<http://gmc.sagepub.com>

Covering Eastern European and Russian elections: the US media's double standard

Gerald Sussman

Global Media and Communication 2007; 3; 356

DOI: 10.1177/17427665070030030504

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://gmc.sagepub.com>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Global Media and Communication* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://gmc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://gmc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://gmc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/3/3/356>

Covering Eastern European and Russian elections: the US media's double standard

■ **Gerald Sussman**

Portland State University, Portland, USA

sussmang@pdx.edu

The study of American media coverage of foreign affairs is of distinct importance for at least three reasons. As a world superpower, US foreign policy initiatives and the way they are represented in America's major media outlets reverberate throughout the world via such powerful news organizations as Associated Press, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *International Herald Tribune*, the dominant television networks and newsweeklies, and CNN. In recognizing the reality of these groups' powerful influence at home and abroad, critical observers and organizations continually need to scrutinize news reporting in order to assist the public in resisting acquiescence to the objectives of state hegemony. And inasmuch as the mainstream media are now organized into powerful worldwide interlocking conglomerates, independent media scholars and activists all the more need to share with public interest groups, such as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting and *Nation* magazine in the United States and their in-print and online counterparts in Europe, alternative interpretations of world affairs and news events.

A number of well-known communication scholars, particularly on the left, contend that American mass media have long been handmaidens of US foreign policy. Indeed, well into the 1970s, mainstream American broadcasters and newspaper and newsweekly publishers and reporters worked undercover for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Bernstein, 1977), and only after deep schisms began to appear within the country's governing circles did the media begin to take a more critical (albeit momentarily) stance toward the US invasion of Vietnam. More recently, when the United States helped bring down the Milosevic, Shevardnadze, and Yanukovich governments in Eastern Europe, the American media, almost without exception, cast these events as triumphs for Western civilization. Largely absent in the coverage was the involvement of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which played a significant role in fomenting the street demonstrations and extra-constitutional means by which these elected governments were forced out of power.

The National Endowment for Democracy is a congressionally funded organization that operates in so-called 'transition democracies'

throughout the world. A very small fraction of Americans are even remotely aware of its existence or the parallel organizations that work with the State Department and CIA in efforts to restructure former Soviet allied states toward open market economies. Created by the Reagan administration in 1983, NED supports programs in over 80 countries and is designed to channel money, equipment, and political consultants and other expertise to countries in order 'to strengthen democratic electoral processes ... through timely measures in cooperation with indigenous democratic forces' (Damrosch, 1989: 19). That is, NED's *raison d'être* is supposedly to encourage free electoral activity in states undergoing a transition to popular democracy and support others where elections have already been instituted.

Through its funded affiliates, the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute (associated with the two political parties), the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, and the American Chamber of Commerce, NED has been described as 'a full-service infrastructure-building clearinghouse' that 'provides money, technical support, supplies, training programs, media know-how, public relations assistance, and state-of-the-art equipment to select political groups, civic organizations, labor unions, dissident movements, student groups, book publishers, newspapers, and other media'. Referring to itself, somewhat ironically, as a 'non-governmental organization', its overriding purpose has been to 'destabilize progressive movements, particularly those with a socialist or democratic-socialist bent' (Berkowitz, 2004).

Western efforts to consolidate neoliberal economic control over Eastern Europe ultimately require supervision of its electoral processes. This objective is one that even the CIA was not able to achieve in that theater of Cold War conflict. And even after the collapse of Communist party rule in the region, the rollback strategy persisted. According to one of the NED founders, Allen Weinstein, 'A lot of what we [NED] do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA' (cited in Blum, 2000: 180). Unlike the CIA, NED's extensive operations abroad create ample opportunities for political operatives who need not assume underground lives and identities. Despite its greater transparency, the camouflaging of its imperial purposes while maintaining a benevolent image makes NED, by one estimate, a far more effective instrument of state policy than the CIA ever was (Robinson, 1996: 110–11) – a soft imperialism.

Led by the United States, Western governments and private organizations provide so-called democracy assistance in several institutional areas, including the establishing of legal procedures, writing constitutions, and instigating civic organizations. Here I wish to confine my

discussion to electoral activities. United States' management of foreign elections takes three different forms. First, parties and candidates have hired American consultants, especially pollsters and political advertising specialists. The second form is through government agencies, such as the US Agency for International Development, the State Department, and the CIA. The third is by way of non-government, non-profit organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the International Foundation for Election Systems, and the foundation money supplied by billionaire and political activist George Soros. Their combined resources present a formidable challenge to any head of state designated by the State Department as undemocratic, which is to say less than adequately accommodating of US transnational market interests.

The uncritical support the United States gave to the Yeltsin government in the 1990s despite his corruption, alcoholism, the war in Chechnya, and his authoritarian style of governing, was consistent only with the larger 'shock therapy' objectives the State Department encouraged in efforts to rapidly force Russia into the fold of neoliberal capitalism. The results are quite universally recognized as disastrous for average Russian citizens. Yet, with the exception of the British newspaper the *Guardian* and a few fairly obscure informational websites, false assumptions about political and economic assistance to Russia and its neighboring countries have rarely been challenged in the American media, as if it were seditious to do so. Thus, as observed by Professor of Russian studies, Stephen Cohen, even the 'liberal' press, such as the *Washington Post*, saw a 'massive and malign Russian intervention in Ukraine' during the latter's 2004 presidential campaign, and was joined by a chorus of other liberal (and of course conservative) pundits, including *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, in one-sided criticisms of Russia and in singularly assigning Cold War motives to the Kremlin. Russian security and other national interests were ignored by the American press, and no parallel Cold War ambitions were attributed to US behavior in the region (Cohen, 2005).

As others have noted, the US government did not show any similar outrage about the massive manipulations that took place during the Russian election in 1996 or the Azerbaijan presidential poll in 2003, the unconstitutional ousting of Shevardnadze in Georgia, the 2002 attempted military coup in Venezuela against popular president Hugo Chávez, or the machinations of the PAN conservatives in the 2006 Mexican presidential election (Almond, 2006; Steele, 2004) – not to mention the suspicious inconsistencies between exit polls and voting

tallies in Ohio and Florida in the 2000 and 2004 US presidential campaigns. Republicans, at least those of the neoconservative persuasion, have been actively engaged in repeating such miraculous outcomes overseas. It is known, at least in the British press, that in advance of the most recent elections in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, the International Republican Institute helped instigate and choreograph large street demonstrations as well as design branded symbols of resistance, such as clenched fists, which mobilized student and popular sentiment against the incumbent rulers (Traynor, 2004).

These uprisings and symbols were compliantly reported by the uncritical mainstream American media as indicators of a sweeping, popular, pro-Western tide. The same media, frequently criticizing Russia for its alleged interference in Ukrainian politics, failed to find controversial the visits of high powered American delegations to Kiev, including those of former President George H.W. Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Madeline Albright, NATO commander General Wesley Clark, and incumbent US senators John McCain and Richard Lugar, during the heat of that Eastern European state's presidential campaign (Cohen, 2005). If the subsequent March 2006 parliamentary elections in Ukraine provided any measure of actual voter sentiments, they did not support the Bush government's position, as the US-favored Viktor Yushchenko's WTO-oriented 'Our Ukraine' party came in third place, and the party of Viktor Yanukovych, the State Department's *bête noire*, came in first. By the summer of 2006, amidst an intensifying governing crisis, Yushchenko was forced to ask Yanukovych to serve as prime minister.

Often as submissive as the press in dictatorial regimes, the American media earlier ignored the massive protests in the United States, Britain, and many other countries on the eve of another 'democracy assistance' project, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Have the American media given up on their 'fourth estate' obligations? Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) made a strong, empirical argument in the foreign policy arena that this is indeed the case. In recent years, with the media's conspicuous failure to investigate domestic government scandals, including the presence of paid journalists on the Bush administration's payroll, the covert use of news propaganda through government-produced video news releases, the accreditation of at least one fake journalist in the White House press corps, the incestuous relations between the oil/energy industry and the President's cabinet entourage, and the *de facto* existence of a government broadcast propaganda network, Fox News, suggest that the traditional separation of press and state is now history.

In the broadcast sector, where in fact most Americans get their national and international news and ideas, the prevailing US pattern of ownership is controlled by major banking and financial institutions. The major stockholders and board members of leading broadcasting networks include such banks as BankAmerica, Citigroup, Chase Manhattan, Bankers Trust, Washington Mutual, and Morgan Guaranty Trust, which interlock not only with the media and other major industries but also among themselves and are thereby able to exercise significant conservative influence over fiduciary functions and management hiring in the media and undoubtedly a self-interested corporate imprint over foreign policy coverage. Large media organizations, including major newspapers and newspaper chains, also interlock with Fortune 500 corporations, including the airlines, energy, nuclear power, insurance, telecommunications and weapons industries. Ford Motor Company has enjoyed interlocking directorships on the boards of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. In 2005, the Sony Corporation, which is widely diversified in product lines and ownership and has a number of foreign stockholders, appointed an American, Harry Stringer, to be its first foreign chairman and CEO.

Consistent with neoliberal state deregulation imperatives, the main characteristic of media ownership today, both in the United States and other Western countries, is industry concentration. This is a particularly contentious free speech concern in the United States, where ownership of media and communication systems historically has been private and commercially driven, but, until a wave of consolidation began to accelerate during the past 25 years, more competitive. Many non-US observers complain that these monopolistic tendencies have intensified American media and cultural hegemony in their societies. Indeed, media content in most countries bears a heavy stamp of 'Hollywood' and 'Madison Avenue' styles. Robert McChesney (1999) found that eight global corporations owned 79 per cent of the American mass media: television, newspapers, magazines, radio, satellite systems, cable, book publishing, film production and distribution, movie theater chains, the core elements of the internet, billboards and theme parks. Two bookstore chains, Borders/Walden and Barnes & Noble accounted for one-third of all retail book sales in the country. Worldwide, McChesney found that the mass media are controlled by between 70 and 80 first- and second tier corporations. When the transnational media form a consensus on foreign policy issues, it is hard for publics in the West or East to resist the collective impact of their propaganda.

While there is not necessarily a direct correspondence between the

foreign presence of American or American-style media abroad and host country world views, the reality of media conglomeration, whether domestic or imported, has to be taken seriously as a matter of great interest and concern. Electoral events in Eastern European countries and how they are represented in the Western and domestic media will set the course of East–West relations, decide the survivability of political and cultural sovereignty, and, in the not too distant future, could set in motion a new Cold War.

References

- Almond, Mark (2006) 'People Power is a Global Brand Owned by America', *Guardian* 15 August. URL (consulted August 2007): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1844618,00.html>.
- Berkowitz, Bill (2004) 'NED targets Venezuela', *Z Magazine Online*. URL (consulted May 2004): www.zmagsite.zmag.org/May2004/berkowitzpr0504.html.
- Bernstein, Carl (1977) 'The CIA and the Media', *Rolling Stone* 20 October. URL (consulted August 2007): http://tmh.floonet.net/articles/cia_press.html.
- Blum, William (2000) *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.
- Cohen, Stephen F. (2005) 'The Media's New Cold War', *The Nation* 31 January. URL (consulted August 2007): www.thenation.com/doc/20050131/cohen.
- Damrosch, Lori F. (1989) 'Politics Across Borders: Nonintervention and Nonforcible Influence Over Domestic Affairs', *American Journal of International Law* 83(1): 1–50.
- Herman, E.S. and Chomsky, N. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.
- McChesney, R.W. (1999) *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Robinson, William I. (1996) *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Steele, Jonathan (2004) 'Ukraine's Postmodern Coup d'Etat', *Guardian* 26 November. URL (consulted August 2007): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/ukraine/story/0,15569,1360297,00.html>.
- Traynor, Ian (2004) 'US Campaign Behind the Turmoil in Kiev', *Guardian* 26 November. URL (consulted August 2007): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/ukraine/story/0,15569,1360236,00.html>.