Beyond the Four Theories: Toward a Discourse Approach to the Comparative Study of Media and Politics

FLORIAN TOEPFL[1]

Free University of Berlin, Germany

Leading communication scholars have recently called for questions of meaning and ideology to be brought back into comparative media research. This article heeds that call by delineating a discourse approach to the comparative study of media and politics. This discourse approach is introduced with reference to a formerly influential but recently stigmatized strand of research in the tradition of *Four Theories of the Press* by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956/1973), although it abandons and goes well beyond this work. To illustrate the benefits of such an approach, a case study of the media-politics discourse dominant in Russia in 2012–2013 is presented. The findings are then marshalled to unravel three seemingly paradoxical observations about the Russian media landscape.

Keywords: political communication, comparative media research, discourse, Russia, nondemocratic regimes

This essay has been prompted, in part, by a flurry of seemingly paradoxical observations made over the past decade during my research into Russia's semiauthoritarian media landscape. A first observation that typically surprises foreign experts is that the Kremlin owns the country's most influential opposition radio station. Among Echo Moscow's journalists are the fiercest castigators of the Kremlin, many of whom have been adorned with international honors. Yulia Latynina, for instance, has been awarded the Freedom Defenders Award by the U.S. Department of State (2008). Yet Echo Moscow is largely owned by the state-owned gas monopolist Gazprom. The Kremlin could thus easily—by drawing on property rights—replace key editorial figures at the recalcitrant radio station. But it has been hesitant to interfere too bluntly with Echo Moscow's journalistic content, even in the tense political climate that followed the 2013 Euromaidan protests in Kiev.

Similarly, one of the country's most influential blogging platforms, LiveJournal, is owned by the company Rambler-Afisha-SUP, a holding deeply penetrated by Kremlin-friendly capital (Kholding "Afisha-Rambler-SUP," 2014). Nonetheless, the blogs of leading opposition figures have continued to operate on

this platform (Toepfl, 2012). Third, not only the media policies of Russia's ruling elites but also the media practices of ordinary citizens are difficult to make sense of within standard Western frameworks of thinking (see also Roudakova, 2009). For instance, in a survey, only 17% of Russian citizens said they believed that TV provided them with a "full and objective picture of events" (Levada Tsentr, 2010). However, 87% continued to use TV as their main source of news, and 71% stated that, among news sources of all types, they "trusted" TV the most (Fond Obshchestvennoye Mneniye, 2010). How can Russians trust their TV channels when they are fully aware that these do not provide a full and objective picture of events?

It was observations such as these that I found difficult to make sense of within the current mainstream theoretical frameworks of international communication research. I realized that, in order to explain these media-related policies and practices, I inevitably had to take into account how the participants in my research assigned meaning to the ways they interacted with their media. I needed to become familiar with the terms and concepts they used to talk and think about these practices. Approaching this type of question in in-depth interviews, I discovered that key concepts of Western media politics such as press freedom, media independence, and the free market of ideas were either not understood at all, understood differently, or derided by the participants in my research (Toepfl, 2013, 2014).

In parallel to these observations, I noted an increasing number of other communication scholars lamenting a lack of attention to questions of meaning and ideology in recent comparative media research (Meng & Rantanen, 2015; Voltmer, 2012; Zhao, 2012). Zhao (2012), for instance, criticizes one of the currently dominant theoretical frameworks in the field—Hallin and Mancini's (2004) *Three Models of Media and Politics*—for its "explicit effort to move beyond [Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's (1956/1973)] *Four Theories*' preoccupation with 'philosophies' or 'ideologies'" (Zhao, 2012, p. 147). This, Zhao claimed, gave the seminal book an "'end of ideology' feeling" (p. 147). Yet, in Zhao's (2012) view, history and ideology had recently returned "in a horrific form" in the "war against terror" and in a "clash of fundamentalisms" (p. 147). In addition, Zhao pointed to the fact that many contemporary communist states, such as Vietnam, Laos, and China, continued to officially claim allegiance to socialism. While one might object that these claims were hollow and put forward by small circles of political elites, they nonetheless reached out to a population larger than that of the 18 Western countries analyzed by Hallin and Mancini. Thus, Zhao (2012) concluded that ideological struggles over "universals" and "truth regimes" in the world's media systems were bound to continue, and that it was "necessary to acknowledge these struggles as we compare the world's different media systems" (p. 147).

The theoretical argument put forward in this article is an attempt to heed these recent calls to bring back questions of meaning to comparative media research. To do so, I delineate a discourse approach to the study of the media and politics. I introduce this approach partly with reference to a formerly highly influential strand of research in the tradition of the classic *Four Theories of the Press* by Siebert et al. (1956/1973). This research has been marginalized over the past two decades, following a series of devastating criticisms beginning in the mid-1990s. One key argument of this article is, however, that, by heavily stigmatizing this tradition, researchers have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. A consequence of this was the virtual abandonment of efforts aimed at systematic comparisons of distinct

worldviews or meaning systems as these underpin media landscapes around the world (Zhao, 2012). Yet, particularly in times when political scientists are observing a global "authoritarian resurgence" and a "world movement against democracy" (Walker, 2015, p. 21), knowledge of this type appears vital for an in-depth understanding of the media-related practices of citizens, journalists, and political elites across the globe.

The key innovation that this article proposes is simple. In the *Four Theories* tradition, different types of relations between the press and politics have typically been discussed as "models," "theories," or "philosophies." I suggest, by contrast, moving forward by comparing "discourses" on the media and politics. Doing so implies a subtle, yet highly consequential, change of theoretical perspective. At the most abstract level, this approach relocates research in the style of the *Four Theories* tradition within the highly elaborate epistemological frameworks of contemporary macro approaches to discourse. One easily accessible definition from such an approach understands discourses as a "shared way of apprehending the world" (Dryzek, 2013, p. 9).

Adopting a discourse perspective has at least three crucial consequences. First, whereas theories or philosophies of the press have typically been understood as timeless constructs (Christians, Glasser, & McQuail, 2009; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Nerone, 1995), discourses are usually investigated as they prevail—and are appropriated, contested, or resisted—within distinct groups or social spaces and at different points in time. This difference also implies a shift in method. Whereas works in the tradition of the *Four Theories* have largely been based on the interpretation of texts of classical philosophers, discourse research can rely on an analysis of everyday talk, media content, or data produced in in-depth interviews, focus groups, or ethnographies. A third key difference is that research within the *Four Theories* paradigm started from the epistemological premise that every "real" media landscape could be matched (more or less accurately) with one single theory, according to which it "actually" operated (see, e.g., de Smaele, 1999; Oates, 2007). By contrast, a discourse approach is rooted in the explicit epistemological assumption that any media landscape will appear in different terms in different discourses.

To flesh out this discourse approach, the remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section details the basic features of a macro approach to discourse such as I suggest adopting. Then, I present an illustrative case study that sketches the dominant media-politics discourse in Russia as disseminated by the country's leading state-controlled TV channel at the turn of 2012/2013. In a subsequent discussion section, I marshal the findings to illustrate the relevance of discourse research by resolving the three paradoxes mentioned above. To conclude, I point out four promising avenues for future research.

A Discourse Approach: Key Epistemological Premises

Over the past three decades, within the discipline of communications, two widely practiced types of discourse analysis can be broadly distinguished (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011). The first type has strong roots in the discipline of linguistics and focuses "primarily on the analysis of linguistic and semiotic detail" (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011, p. 8). Approaches to discourse of this first type include the "critical discourse analysis" developed by Norman Fairclough or the "discourse-historical approach" suggested by Ruth

Wodak (for an overview of this first tradition, consider Gee & Handford, 2012). The second type of approach assumes a "more expansive focus on 'the social' as a horizon of discourse" (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011, p. 8). This second type has strong roots in sociology, critical political theory, and cultural studies. Widely cited proponents include Michel Foucault (1971), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), John Dryzek (2013), and Stuart Hall (1973). Dryzek (2013), for instance, presented an easily accessible discourse analysis of this latter type in his lucidly argued *The Politics of the Earth*. In this monograph, he laid out the "basic structures" of four environmental discourses as these could be identified around the globe in the past 50 years, presenting "their history, conflicts, and transformations" (Dryzek, 2013, p. 11).

It is explicitly this second type of macro approach to discourse that I draw upon for this article. Within this type of approach, however, key epistemological premises of different proponents still differ in important respects. Disparities can be identified in at least three key points concerning the conceptualization of (1) the distinction between discursive and nondiscursive practices, (2) the link between discourses and the material world, and (3) the relations between humans and discourses. For the purposes of this article, I propose to understand discourse—broadly in line with poststructuralist discourse theory (e.g., Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Torfing, 2005)—"as a contingent and partial fixation of meaning that constitutes and organizes social relations (including identities, objects, and practices)" (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011, p. 861). Grounded in this definition, I position my approach in relation to the three key epistemological choices listed above as follows.

First, in sharp contrast to common usage of the term *discourse*, I suggest understanding discourse as not simply a synonym for language but including nonlinguistic social practices that convey meaning. Following Foucault (1971) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), I thus see discursive practices as inextricably linked to social practices. I assume that linguistic and material practices cannot be neatly ontologically separated (Torfing, 2005). Second, concerning the assumed link between discourse and the material world, my definition posits that all meaning is "contingent"—that is, that meaning emerges not from an essence embedded in the material object as such but only in a relational account between different elements within a discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011). This by no means implies that material reality does not exist. Yet, while reality exists, it does not determine the vocabulary that observers will adopt in order to interpret it. In some cases when two observers are not operating within the same vocabulary or discourse, they may not be able to agree on the truth of a specific claim. As Torfing (2005) put it in a nutshell, discourse theory posits that, "while the world exists out there, truth does not" (p. 11). With a view to a discourse approach to the media and politics, this premise has one key consequence: In sharp contrast to the *Four Theories* tradition, empirical research within a discourse paradigm will build upon the explicit premise that any media landscape can appear in different—yet potentially equally true—terms in different discourses.

This abstract thought can be illustrated with a pertinent example. One of the main criticisms that Nerone (1995) leveled against the *Four Theories* was that their authors considered the U.S. media system "libertarian," whereas it was actually "capitalistic." Nerone argued that the latter was "true ipso facto," since the majority of U.S. media outlets were "owned and directed by capital" (Nerone, 1995, p. 29). Consequently, the U.S. media system was capitalistic. Libertarian scholars, of course, fiercely objected. Within a discourse paradigm, the dispute over which of these two claims is true dissolves: The U.S. media

system of the 1950s can simultaneously appear as libertarian (in mainstream U.S. discourse) and capitalist (in a counterdiscourse circulating among leftist U.S. intellectuals). Within a discourse paradigm, these two terms thus do not emerge as inherently contradictory claims to truth but as empirical findings. Consequently, although the *Four Theories* contained only one chapter describing the U.S. media landscape as broadly following the libertarian theory, a similar monograph written within a discourse paradigm could contain a number of chapters on the U.S. media landscape, reconstructing how it appears within various discourses.

The third key epistemological choice highlighted above concerns the conceptualization of humans and their relation to discourse. At one end of the spectrum, theorists here imagine rather passive subjects who are—to a considerable extent—bound to act according to discursive structures (poststructuralist discourse theorists tend toward this stance; e.g., Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Torfing, 2005). At the other end of the spectrum, theorists envision rather self-reflexive individuals with a high degree of freedom to choose which discourses to follow—and which to resist. Hall (1973), for instance, grants humans the ability to "decode" hegemonic media discourses from oppositional positions. In a similar vein, Dryzek (2013) stresses that an "individual may sometimes have to think long and hard" which environmental discourse to subscribe to when different "discourses pull in different directions" (p. 22). Rooted in the adjacent discipline of anthropology, Yurchak (2003) vividly illustrates how "Soviet people . . . creatively reinterpreted the meanings of the ideological symbols . . . rendering communist values meaningful on their own terms" in complex ways that could not easily be "reduced to resistance, opportunism, or dissimulation" (p. 504). Whichever of these epistemological frameworks discourse researchers decide to adopt, I recommend approaching the issue of whether subjects unconsciously follow—or thoughtfully resist—a given media-politics discourse as an empirical question rather than an epistemological premise.

Finally, I will point out two premises that all macro approaches to discourse share. These are (a) that discourses matter, that they have consequences that loom large in political life; and (b) that discourses inevitably reflect unequal power relations. As, for instance, Dryzek (2013) put it, discourses "embody power in the way they condition the perceptions and values of those subject to them" (p. 10). In this article I cannot discuss in detail each of the toolboxes developed by different theorists of macro discourses, grounded in their specific epistemological choices. My central claim, however, is that, by drawing on one of these approaches, comparative research that investigates distinct meaning systems as these underlie media landscapes across the globe can—and should—be reinvigorated.

An Illustrative Case Study: The Dominant Media-Politics Discourse in Russia

The goal of the case study presented here is to illustrate how the discourse approach developed above can be adopted in empirical research. To do so, the case study sketches the contours of the dominant media-politics discourse in Russia at the turn of the years 2012/2013. This specific focus was selected because Russia in the early 2010s represented a high-profile instance of what political scientists widely referred to as a novel type of hybrid political regime, which had arguably only proliferated since the end of the Cold War and combined elements of both democratic and authoritarian rule (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Method

The case study reconstructs the media-politics discourse as propagated on the country's leading First [TV] Channel in its main news program *Vremya*. At the time of this research, media experts typically considered First Channel a straightforward mouthpiece of Russia's ruling elites (Lipman, 2009; Oates, 2006, 2007). Weekly strategy meetings of leading editors and Kremlin staff were reported. In between these meetings, news coverage was obviously fine-tuned via phone calls (Lipman, 2009). The news reporting line of First Channel was broadly followed by the country's other two leading state-controlled TV channels, NTV and Rossiya 1, which maintained similarly close ties with the Kremlin (Lipman, 2009; Mickiewicz, 2008; Oates, 2006, 2007; Roudakova, 2009).

The news content disseminated by these firmly state-controlled TV channels was processed by citizens in extraordinarily complex ways, as revealed in extensive focus group research conducted with Russian TV viewers in the 2000s (Mickiewicz, 2008; Oates, 2006). Mickiewicz (2008), for instance, concluded, grounding her focus group study in an analytical framework from cognitive psychology, that Russian TV viewers had mastered an enormous supply of "mental shortcuts" that allowed them, even in the absence of viewpoint diversity, to develop a profound "sense of what is really happening" (p. 178).

Such complex audience-content interactions notwithstanding, 87% of Russians still stated in a 2011 survey that TV was their main source of news, with 71% saying they trusted TV more than all other types of media (Fond Obshchestvennoye Mneniye, 2011). Among those who trusted TV the most, 57% said they usually followed news on First Channel, 49% on Rossiya 1, 34% on NTV, 11% on local channels, and 9% on Rossiya 2. Against this backdrop and within a discourse paradigm, the media-politics discourse disseminated by Russia's First Channel must thus be clearly considered as the core of the dominant media-politics discourse within Russia. At the time of this research, it was dominant in the sense that the overwhelming majority of the members of the political community were following it and were thus at least familiar with its basic structures. Undoubtedly, this discourse conveyed that repertoire of dominant meanings, which citizens could then react to by "subscribing to," "resisting," "creatively reinterpreting," or "decoding" this dominant discourse from different perspectives (Dryzek, 2013; Hall, 1973; Yurchak, 2003).

The analysis presented here focuses exclusively on the one-year period between April 2012 and March 2013. This time period begins after the Russian parliament and the Russian president had been elected in December 2011 and March 2012, respectively—elections that were accompanied by major protests—and ends shortly before the tightening of the political climate that followed the 2013 Euromaidan protests in Kiev. The case study considers all news items broadcast on First Channel's main news program *Vremya* within this one-year period. Transcripts of these items were readily available from the academic database Integrum. For the 12-month period in question, this database contains transcripts of 22,083 *Vremya* news broadcasts. Each broadcast is dedicated to a specific topic and is typically between 30 seconds and 8 minutes in length.

Siebert et al. (1956/1973) developed their classic *Four Theories* by analyzing the text of key thinkers along four deductively generated categories: "[1] the nature of man, [2] the nature of society

and the state, [3] the relation of man to the state, and [4] the nature of knowledge and truth" (p. 2). These categories may have been, as criticized by Nerone (1995), "the wrong constitutive questions," since they did not address important aspects such as the relationship between the media, economic structures, and political movements; the relationship between individual and group rights; and the question of whether freedom of expression is "about truth" or "about power" (p. 181). Adopting these four categories, the *Four Theories* may have, as Nerone (1995) argued, "necessarily" resulted in a "schema that pivoted on liberal terms" (p. 181).

A simple way to avoid such Western bias in research pursued within a discourse approach would be to develop alternative categories, in an inductive manner, from the material—that is, by adopting an approach loosely structured around key principles of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992). However, doing so would limit the comparability of the findings with those of previous and future studies, because each study would portray media-politics discourses according to fundamentally different categories. Therefore, I illustrate a different approach in this case study. I suggest working with a partly deductively generated, slightly de-Westernized modification of the original four categories of Siebert et al. (1956/1973). To be more specific, I analyze the dominant media-politics discourse in Russia's hybrid regime in terms of how it envisages (1) the members of society, (2) society as a whole and its political system, (3) the relationship between the political power center and members of society, (4) the problem of political decision making, and (5) the role of the Internet and the mass media within this framework of thinking. By comparison with the classic *Four Theories*, I refrain from using terms such as *individual, man*, and *state*, which are arguably more deeply rooted in Western culture. To be sure, future studies in a discourse paradigm can easily modify these five categories or adopt a grounded theory approach to increase the cultural sensitivity of their analysis (Glaser, 1992; Kim, 2007).

In the process of data analysis, I aimed to achieve theoretical saturation of the findings with regard to each of these five predefined categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; see also Glaser, 1992). To work toward this goal, I began the process of data analysis by conducting a series of keyword searches in the database of transcripts. Initially, I used search terms that I deemed closely related to the relationship between the media and politics: *freedom of the press* (*svoboda pressy*, 2 items found), *freedom of expression* (*svoboda slova*, 35 items), *censorship* (*zensura*, 18), *democracy* AND *media* (*demokratiya* AND *smi*, 4 items), *authoritarian* OR *autocracy* (*avtoritarniy* OR *avtokratiya*, 4 items), and *dictatorship* (*diktatura*, 20 items). The goal of these searches was not to explore the meaning attributed to each keyword. Rather, this procedure was deployed to create an initial corpus of texts that conceptualized the relationship between media and politics in Russia (*criterion sampling*) and that contained the full variety of meanings on this issue as these were present within the discourse (*maximum variation sampling*; see Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

After reading and rereading this initial corpus of texts, I identified additional relevant news items by conducting additional keyword searches using terms that appeared to be of specific relevance to the relationship between the media and politics in this discourse (*theoretical sampling*; see Glaser, 1992). Additional keywords searched for included *feedback* (*obratnaya svyaz'*, a standard term used in the broadcasts for citizen input to the political system, 31 items), *media* AND *open government* (*smi* AND *otkrytoye pravitel'stvo*, a government initiative directed at improving governance by encouraging citizen

feedback, 4 items), and *public television* (within the period of analysis, the creation of a "public" TV channel was initiated by the Russian leadership, *obshchestvennoye televideniye*, 20 items). I stopped the process of enlarging the text corpus when I considered my findings with regard to the five categories to be theoretically saturated (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011)—that is, when additional items selected for analysis would add little to the refinement of the narratives I had developed so far. I reached this point after I had considered—that is, repeatedly read and reread—about 200 systematically selected news broadcasts.

The Nature of Members of Society

Within the discourse analyzed, members of Russian society are typically referred to as either *grazhdane* (citizens) or *narod*, a term that can be translated as either "the people" or "the nation" (First Channel, 2012a). Although *narod* referred in pre-Soviet times to "uneducated, uncultured, simple people" and in Soviet times to "subjects of a civilizing mission" (Rajagopalan, 2013, p. 52), the term is clearly embedded in this discourse with a different meaning. The discourse clearly conceives of the political will of ordinary citizens as the principal source of legitimacy of the regime, with the latter being unambiguously referred to as a democracy. These ideas are conveyed, for instance, in the following excerpt from a news broadcast transmitting a speech made by President Vladimir Putin in front of members of the Russian parliament:

> Dear Colleagues! For Russia, there is, and can be, no other political choice but democracy. . . . Yet, Russian democracy is notably the rule of the *Russian* people [*narod*] with its specific traditions of national self-governance. . . . Democracy means not only the opportunity to elect those in power, but also to constantly control those in power, to evaluate the results of their work. (First Channel, 2012a)

As the last sentence of this quote indicates, Russian citizens are considered in the discourse to be endowed with a range of economic and political rights. These include the right to vote and the right to control the powers-that-be. In addition, Russian citizens are entitled to receive high-quality government services and—notably in this context—the right to free access to information (*dostup k informatsii*) and freedom of opinion (*svoboda slova*)*.* Conversely, Russian citizens also have duties—to provide input, expert knowledge, and advice to government. Such input is widely referred to as citizen feedback (*obratnaya svyaz'*). To illustrate these discursive patterns, consider the following excerpt from a broadcast entitled "Citizens Must Have Real Opportunities to Control the Quality of Services of Public Bodies":

> Voiceover: Russian citizens must have the maximum of full access to information about public bodies and the services that they provide. . . .
> Medvedev: Citizen feedback [*obratnaya svyaz'*], monitoring, public control, and ratings— all these mechanisms allow us to identify the best institutions, both in the medical as well as in the education sector. (First Channel, 2013a)

However, the media-politics discourse not only transports normative ideals of how Russian citizens should be, it also circulates a portrayal of how contemporary Russian citizens actually are. This portrayal is deeply ambivalent: At some points, citizens are pictured as highly capable, educated, and

rational (see, for instance, the quotes of Medvedev and Putin above). At other points, they are portrayed as uncivilized, emotional, and vulnerable. At the most abstract level, the assumption is that the Russian citizenry as a whole is (still) not as well educated or civilized as that of Western democracies. Most importantly, for the time being, some citizens can easily be misled by provocateurs—for example, right-wing activists, nationalists, or agents of foreign powers:

> Putin: The constitutional right to freedom of opinion is untouchable. . . . Yet, no one has the right to sow hatred, stir up society . . . and thereby threaten the life, the welfare, and peace of millions of our citizens. . . . This holds particularly true for organizations who are steered and financed from abroad. (First Channel, 2013b)

The Nature of Society and the Political System

In the discourse, the history of Russian society is constructed as perpetually oscillating between times of ineffectiveness/stagnation (*zastoy*) and times of anarchy/chaos (*khaos*; see, e.g., First Channel, 2012c). In past centuries, only the most capable Russian leaders are seen as having managed to balance these two forces and keep Russia on the golden middle path of stability (*stabil'nost'*). Most recently, the 1990s, as the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is cast as a time of democratic chaos. President Vladimir Putin is viewed as having managed in the 2000s to stabilize Russia again, ushering in a period of relative prosperity. By the end of the 2000s, however, the first signs of stagnation were visible in Russian society. Hence, political competition again needed to be carefully unleashed and democracy reinvigorated. The gist of this narrative is formulated in the following extract of a speech by President Medvedev, transmitted by First Channel (2012c):

> Medvedev: In 2004, . . . the direct elections of governors were abolished. In that phase, those were absolutely justified measures. The unstable political system which we inherited from the anarchy and oligarchy of the 1990s needed readjustment and enhancement. . . . But, as it always is, according to philosophical laws, after a period of stabilization of the system, signs of stagnation appeared. . . . I am sure that, at this point in our history, political diversity . . . will not lead to the return of chaos but, on the contrary, will make our state stronger, and also more effective.

Yet, for the time being, Russian society is still clearly different from that of Western states, with the latter being typically referred to as "developed countries" (*razvityye strany*). Interestingly, Russian society is not described in the discourse as underdeveloped or undeveloped, but simply with no adjective. It is portrayed as (still) in flux and needing to follow a path of modernization (*modernizatsiya*). In a similar vein, Russian democracy is viewed as (still) by no means perfect, as needing to be developed, but without Russian society falling too far toward one of the two dangerous extremes of stagnation or chaos, carefully navigating the prosperous middle path of stability.

The Relationship Between Political Elites and Members of Society

Russia's political elites are typically cast in the discourse as servants of citizens, with a duty to govern openly and effectively in order to provide citizens with high-quality services. Specifically, the discourse carves out a clear qualitative difference between two types of political elites: (1) the highest echelons—most importantly, President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and a few close allies; and (2) all lower-level officials. Typically, political conflict is reported as occurring between the highest levels of political elites (portrayed as advocates of citizens' interests) on the one side and lower-level officials on the other. This pattern of conflict is institutionalized to such a degree that it has morphed into a standard news format in the news program *Vremya.* In this common format, Vladimir Putin (sometimes assisted by representatives of civil society) harshly questions a lower-level official, such as a regional governor. The lower-level officials usually promise, rather submissively, to improve their performance for the good of the citizens.

This format can be illustrated with a newscast that aired on September 4, 2012 (First Channel, 2012b). In this news item, President Putin tells off the governor of the Mari El Republic, Leonid Markelov. As the voiceover notes, this meeting is being held in the "traditional format, with participation of representatives of society" (First Channel, 2012b). A local doctor, Anna Demina, complains to the president about delays in the reconstruction of a local medical policlinic. Governor Markelov explains that the project is already under way. Yet President Putin is dissatisfied with the governor's efforts. To speed up the undertaking, he briskly draws up a different way of raising and structuring the necessary loans:

> Putin: There are different variants. Give me a sheet of paper. I will issue the corresponding orders to the Ministries of Finance and Health. Just keep in mind that you need to finish the building, and that it will collapse if it is left standing around unfinished. (First Channel, 2012b)

It is not only lower-level officials who need to work more efficiently to improve the political and economic situation in the country. Ordinary citizens also have to contribute. First, they need to provide vibrant feedback to their rulers (see previous section). Second, they must be empowered to monitor and control the performance of lower-level officials, with *transparency* (*prozrachnost'*; First Channel, 2012c) being the technical term promoted here. Third, citizens are entitled to select their political leaders in regular, free, and fair elections (see quotes above).

The Nature of Political Decision Making

Within the discourse, political decision making is widely understood as a merely technical and administrative issue. If authorities work efficiently and transparently, and if all relevant information is available to them, they are capable of identifying the best decisions to further the common good. This fundamental approach is, to cite but one example here, explicitly formulated in the following statement by Putin: "I am speaking here to the heads of our federal states. . . . You need to work with people. You need to work every day. You need to plan this work, and you need to do it effectively" (First Channel, 2012a).

Thus, in the Russian discourse, political decision making is not cast—as it frequently is in Western democracies—as a matter of balancing competing social forces or finding compromises between social groups with competing interests. Neither is political decision making portrayed as a matter of agreeing upon an—inherently controversial—distribution of scarce public goods. By contrast, political decisions emerge exclusively as a result of the efficient work of officials, in close cooperation with citizens. Within this framework, neither citizens' right to freedom of opinion (*svoboda slova*), nor their right to participate in opposition movements are cast as able to increase the quality of decision making.

The Role of Internet-Mediated Communication and the Mass Media

By contrast, Internet-mediated communication between political elites and individual citizens is very much welcomed in the discourse. The Internet is seen as an excellent tool for citizens to provide feedback, to "participate more directly in government," and to monitor officials (First Channel, 2012d). To fulfil these tasks, the Internet needs to be a free, uncensored communicative space. Any limitation on this free space needs to be justified with reference to competing values, such as curbing child pornography, terrorism, intergroup violence, or the dissemination of extremist ideas.

With regard to the role of the mass media, the discourse circulates a complex set of ideas. A first task of the mass media is to facilitate diversity of opinion. In the period analyzed, Russia's ruling elites even initiated the creation of a "public" television channel—an endeavor that was covered in 20 news items. This channel was founded to increase diversity of opinion—that is, to foster a dialogue between citizens and the state—and facilitate political competition to thwart stagnation. Hovering above all political competition, however, are the highest echelons of Russia's political elites. This discursive configuration is most visibly institutionalized in the newly founded public TV channel, whose editor-in-chief is—despite all claims to diversity—appointed by the president. A second goal of the mass media is to socialize and educate citizens. This is what, in Soviet discourse, would have been referred to—with a positive connotation—as *propaganda*. However, the term in this positive meaning has disappeared from the dominant media-politics discourse.

While the discourse thus draws widely on a vocabulary that is common also in dominant media-politics discourses in Western democracies (e.g., diversity of opinion, free access to information, democracy), it is instructive to point out concepts that are notably absent. First, the concepts of media freedom (*svoboda smi*) and press freedom (*svoboda pressy*) are eschewed. Of 22,083 news items, only two contain the keyword *press freedom*, and these are reports on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* publishing cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. The absence of these concepts is all the more notable since alone 18 stories within the period analyzed discuss the creation of the new public TV channel. However, although the new channel is expected to report independently, to reflect a diversity of views, and to facilitate a vibrant dialogue between citizens and state, it is not expected to be free.

Other common Western concepts and metaphors absent from the media-politics discourse include the idea that the media can or should control political power; metaphors similar to that of the media as a watchdog, a fourth estate, or a free market of ideas; and the idea that public debate (let alone deliberation) in the media could be helpful in generating solutions to social problems. Furthermore, unlike

in Western media-politics discourses, private ownership of the mass media is not linked to a positive notion of media independence; on the contrary, it emerges as a highly problematic threat to independent reporting. Private ownership is widely seen as resulting in the instrumentalization of the mass media by rich individuals with low moral standards (oligarchs). Conversely, media controlled by the highest political elites, such as the new public TV channel, are cast as independent in the sense that they are not controlled by any of the oligarchic groups.

Discussion

Russian Rationales: Libertarian Vocabulary, Authoritarian Meanings

The case study presented here reveals, first, a discourse that heavily draws on a vocabulary similar to that of media-politics discourses in many contemporary Western democracies. Cases in point are widely used terms such as *democracy*, *media independence*, and *free access to information*. Second, however, the analysis also provides evidence of how these libertarian terms emerge in the Russian discourse with fundamentally different meanings. For instance, whereas in Western discourses, media independence is typically seen as being achieved by means of private media ownership, it is cast in Russian discourse as being guaranteed by the highest echelons of political elites. This very specific meaning of media independence can only be properly understood within the horizon of the entire media-politics discourse—that is, within the nexus of meaningful terms that the Russian discourse draws up. In other words, the meaning of media independence cannot be expressed without also introducing specific notions of private ownership, democracy, citizen feedback, and political decision making. This necessity illustrates one of the premises of the discourse approach proposed in this article, which is that meaning is contingent and emerges only in relational accounts within the discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011).

Third, the findings reveal how the Russian media-politics discourse eschews several concepts that are central to libertarian discourses, such as press freedom or the media's role in controlling government. Fourth, the analysis shows how the Russian discourse creates a series of alternative concepts and metaphors that appear to be unique to this discourse. These concepts are neither found in the classic *Four Theories* (Siebert et al., 1956/1973), nor do they appear to loom large in media-politics discourses in contemporary Western democracies. Examples include the idea of press regulation as a matter of balancing the two societal threats of stagnation and chaos and the specific concept of citizen feedback. Fifth, it is obvious from the analysis that Russian media-politics discourse has broken with its Soviet legacy. Completely absent were key terms of Soviet media discourse such as *communism* and *class struggle* (see also the account by Siebert et al. (1956/1973) of the "Soviet model"). Other common Soviet terms such as *propaganda* and *narod* emerge with fundamentally different meanings in the discourse analyzed here.

To summarize, Russian discourse partly adopts a libertarian vocabulary that emerges with meanings that Western observers would "deconstruct" (Hall, 1973) as authoritarian. However, this does not mean that the logic of the Russian discourse as such is contradictory. By contrast, it draws up a complex, highly coherent nexus of meaning. Within this logically coherent discourse, many of the

seemingly paradoxical media practices that can be observed in contemporary Russia make perfect sense. I explain this below by reinterpreting the three paradoxes cited in the introduction.

The Relevance of Discourse: Resolving Paradoxes

To recall, the first paradox was that the Kremlin owns the most powerful opposition radio station. This policy makes sense within the discourse outlined above. First of all, Echo Moscow can be seen as a valuable channel for citizen feedback. Second, shutting down or censoring the station or its Internet site would severely curb the strongly emphasized rights of citizens to free access to information and to the Internet as a free communicative space. Third, Echo Moscow can be seen as contributing to diversity of opinion within the Russian media landscape. There is an urgent need for a specific type of political competition to be upheld, since Russian society at the time of this research was threatened with falling into stagnation. Fourth, however, the extent and shape of this political competition can be fine-tuned by the Kremlin through its property rights. In times of street protest or heightened political instability, for instance, the composition of the editorial team of Echo Moscow can be easily reshuffled to prevent Russian society from plunging into chaos. On the basis of a similar rationale, it makes complete sense for Russian political elites to control one of the country's leading blogging platforms, LiveJournal, but to allow the blogs of opposition figures to operate freely on it (paradox 2).

Critics may object at this point that the discourse on state-controlled TV does not reflect the true beliefs of the Russian leadership (see Yurchak, 2003). Yet, within a discourse approach, the true beliefs of actors are not considered of central importance. Rather, as Schmidt (2008) argued from a political science perspective, discourses can be likened to "institutions": They not only commit "the speakers themselves to action" but also constrain "the ideas, discourse, and actions of their successors" (p. 312; see also Christians et al., 2009). In line with this understanding, Schmidt (2008) demonstrated in a case study how contemporary French political leaders were constrained in their policies toward the European Union by discursive patterns introduced by their predecessors—in particular, by de Gaulle's initial ideas legitimating European integration. Similarly, we can assume that some particularly deeply entrenched elements of the Russian media-politics discourse (i.e., that have been reproduced over long periods of time on state-controlled TV) may, to a certain degree, even constrain the policies of the country's current and future leadership.

This latter claim is certainly provocative. Of course, on a day-to-day basis, the reporting from Russia's First Channel must be considered as meticulously directed by the country's ruling elites. As noted earlier, First Channel's coverage is even constantly fine-tuned via phone calls from the Kremlin. Yet, at a deeper level, even for the Russian leadership, introducing fundamental changes to the discourse may be associated with negative consequences. For instance, Russia's elites will most likely be hesitant to explicitly abolish cornerstones of the hegemonic discourse, such as the guarantee of political competition, elections, democracy, or free access to information. Crossing these limits would, most likely, irritate citizens who operate within the hegemonic discourse as well as considerably damage those citizens' belief in the legitimacy of the current regime. Against this backdrop, it could be argued, for instance, that the introduction of a Chinese-style censorship policy is an unlikely scenario for Russia's near future, because its introduction would irritate ordinary Russian citizens. For more than a decade, the right to free access to

information has been a highly visible and firmly entrenched element of Russia's hegemonic media-politics discourse.

This type of reasoning highlights one of the key analytical strengths of discourse research: It can generate a deeper understanding of how individuals operating within distinct media-politics discourses make sense of their media-related behavior and of which paths of action appear appropriate to these individuals and why. For instance, discourse research can help scholars to understand why some type of media-related event or policy will outrage individuals operating within a specific discourse and why others will not. Along these lines, even though not explicitly grounding her study in a discourse paradigm, Roudakova (2009), for instance, has pointed to the "widespread discourse of journalism as 'prostitution'" (p. 424) in Russia in the 2000s as one explanation for the "delayed, lukewarm, or nonexistent" (p. 412) reaction of citizens, journalists, and officials to the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006.

Consider, as another illustrative example, the third paradox highlighted in the introduction. It, too, disappears within the logic of the hegemonic Russian media-politics discourse sketched above. How can Russian citizens trust state-controlled TV even though they do not believe in its independence? Russian citizens subscribing to the dominant media-politics discourse may be fully aware that their leading TV channels are tightly controlled by the highest political elites. However, they may trust media outlets that are dependent on their highly respected political leader (Vladimir Putin) more than those that are dependent on shady private owners (oligarchs). They may also value highly the role of state-controlled media in stabilizing their country and averting chaos.

Here, again, critics may object that few Russians take the official discourse at face value—that is, to speak in the terms of Hall's (1973) classic encoding/decoding model, few decode the hegemonic media-politics discourse from the perspective of the encoders (the Russian leadership). And yet a recent explorative study drawing on Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding approach revealed that, even among young, urban, and educated Russians, many decoded the official discourses propagated on state television affirmatively, largely following the meanings as intended by Russia's ruling elites (Toepfl, 2013). In addition, a range of survey data containing seemingly paradoxical findings, such as the ones quoted above, can scarcely be explained without taking into account the fact that large swathes of the Russian population subscribe to the official discourse.

Conclusion

The discourse approach delineated in this article should not be read as a general critique of existing approaches to comparative media research. Discourse research is conceived here not as a substitute for, but rather as a complement to, other traditions. Its central added value may be, as Torfing (2005) put it, that it "poses other kinds of research questions than those generated by behaviorist, institutionalist, and rational choice perspectives" (p. 22). Most importantly, it rejects the taking of pregiven social structures or interests as starting points for an analysis, presupposing that these structures need to be understood and explained by the analyst (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011). Knowledge produced in discourse research is therefore often considered an indispensable basis and backdrop for other types of empirical research (Dryzek, 2013; Torfing, 2005). The case study presented in this article,

for instance, illustrates how key terms in media politics, such as *independence* and *freedom of opinion*, emerge with fundamentally different meanings in dominant Russian discourse. Consequently, it will scarcely be possible to design, let alone interpret, a media-related survey of citizens or journalists in this cultural context without a well-founded awareness of how respondents may—or may not—understand survey items constructed around these keywords. Similarly, as the paradoxes cited at the beginning of this article illustrate, the media policies of Russian leaders may be difficult to comprehend for observers who are not familiar with the nexus of meanings within which Russian leaders "construct, interpret, discuss, and analyze" problems (Dryzek, 2013, p. 11).

Although this article puts forward a largely theoretical argument based on one illustrative case study, it opens up at least four promising avenues for future research. First, the case study of the dominant media-politics discourse in Russia presented here could be extended, tracing changes over time from the Soviet Union of the 1980s to the tightening of the political climate that followed the Russian expansion into the Crimea in 2014. Second, an extended analysis could map counterdiscourses on Russian media and politics, both within and outside Russia, as disseminated by opposition groups, the Russian media, or international human rights organizations. Third, future research could investigate the complex ways by which, and the degree to which, Russian citizens, journalists, and political elites "subscribe to" (Dryzek, 2013), "decode" (Hall, 1973), or "creatively reinterpret" (Yurchak, 2003) these various media-politics discourses in making sense of their media-related practices. Fourth, and perhaps most crucially, these various types of discourse research could be adopted in comparative studies. Researchers could, for instance, juxtapose dominant media-politics discourses within different (semi)authoritarian regimes such as those of China, Venezuela, or Iran. By embarking on these and related paths of research, a discourse approach could thus reinvigorate comparative research on the distinct meaning systems underpinning media landscapes across the globe. And, as I have argued here, it could thus regenerate a currently marginalized type of knowledge that is, particularly in times of a global "authoritarian resurgence" (Walker, 2015), vital to any in-depth understanding of media-related practices of citizens, journalists, and political elites worldwide.

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