

Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • P.O. Box 18374 • Washington, D.C. 20036

202-676-6392/3

Volume I, Number 4

June, 1987

Back in the U.S.S.R. Covering Glasnost

How open are the media to Soviet "openness"? We analyzed 248 major media stories on Soviet domestic affairs since January.

The outlets: New York Times, Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, and the evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC.

The results:

- * The real thing -- over 2 stories in 3 (69%) concluded that glasnost is genuine (p. 3).
- * The media mirror -- press freedom got the most attention of any reform (p. 3).
- * Down the tube -- TV coverage was more negative than print coverage. TV focused more on protest activities and less on reforms and personnel changes (p. 3).
- * Whose news? -- Soviet sources predominated, as did government officials. Overall, sources produced a balanced portrait of Soviet policy. But positive comments from Soviet officials were balanced by criticism from private citizens (p. 4).
- * You're the Top -- Gorbachev got better press than glasnost did. When stories compared Soviet leaders, 94% put him on top (p. 4).

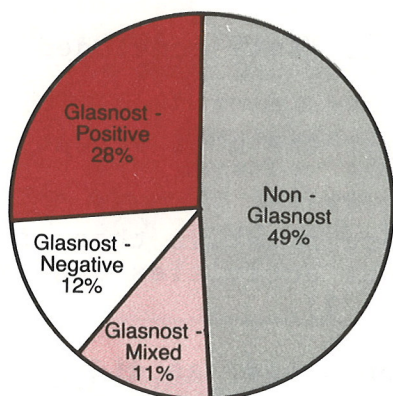
MEDIA, SEX AND POLITICS -- WHAT'S NEXT?

In the wake of the Hart affair, journalists debate the propriety of covering formerly taboo aspects of candidates' private lives. News coverage has been mainly critical of the Miami Herald's techniques, in line with public sentiment. But other evidence suggests there's no going back (p. 6).

SOVIET WATCH

Our monitoring began with the January Central Committee meeting of the Soviet Communist Party, when Gorbachev announced a personnel shakeup and expanded reforms. From then until May 15 we coded 248 stories on Soviet domestic affairs: 95 on TV news, 61 in the New York Times, 78 in the Washington Post, and 14 at the news magazines. They ran the gamut from Chernobyl to space launches, but a majority used glasnost as a hook. This link usually meant good news. Of those glasnost-related stories, 54% put Soviet reform efforts in a positive light, and only 21% stressed their failures or limits, with the rest mixed.

Topics in USSR Coverage



n = 320

THE MEDIA MENU

Seven topics made up a majority of all reports on Soviet domestic affairs. With one exception, all cast a positive light on glasnost. The hottest topic was dissident activity, in the wake of physicist Andrei Sakharov's release. Two-thirds of the dissident stories made no reference to glasnost, but those that did featured predominantly positive portrayals of government openness.

The reform effort that got the most attention was press freedom and openness, sometimes treated as synonymous with glasnost. Three other areas got equal billing: political reforms, including democratization and restraints on the KGB; changes in economic planning or organization; and new freedom of expression in the arts and literature.

All these topics emphasized positive developments, and not a single negative story appeared on the Soviet media. The media's eye focused less often on personnel changes in the Politburo or the bureaucracy, which were also pictured as signs of progress.

The one fly in the ointment was citizen protest against government policies or repression. These stories were usually negative and often portrayed glasnost as more smoke than substance. But they weren't numerous enough to offset the far more prevalent and positive coverage of social, political and economic reforms.

IS THE GLASNOST ...

It's still significant that the Soviets want to change the law that for years turned dissidents into prisoners.

-Wyatt Andrews
CBS, 2/10

... HALF FULL ...

Soviet Jews consider [Iosef] Begun's release...to be a clear signal that a real process of change is under way.

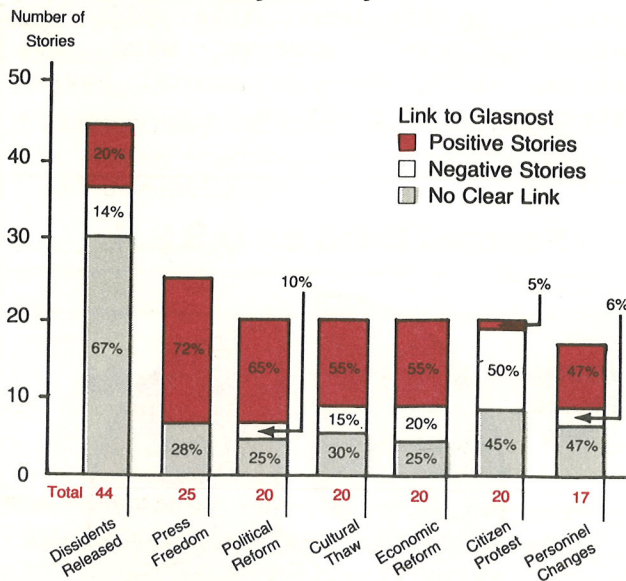
-Wyatt Andrews
CBS, 2/23

... OR HALF EMPTY?

What refuseniks see as cynical is the Soviet government's efforts to paint the new law as evidence of change ...

-Wyatt Andrews
CBS, 3/5

Major Topics



TV. Further, one print story in twelve dealt with personnel changes, a topic TV news never broached. So TV honed in on the more visually compelling "bad news" protest stories and shied away from "good news" about government-sponsored reforms. Ironically, these are the same criticisms conservatives often make about TV coverage of American domestic news!

Objectively, something real is happening...the situation has changed.

-Andrei Sakharov
Time, 2/23

Moscow is still playing the same old KGB jazz.

-Jim Wooten
ABC, 2/17

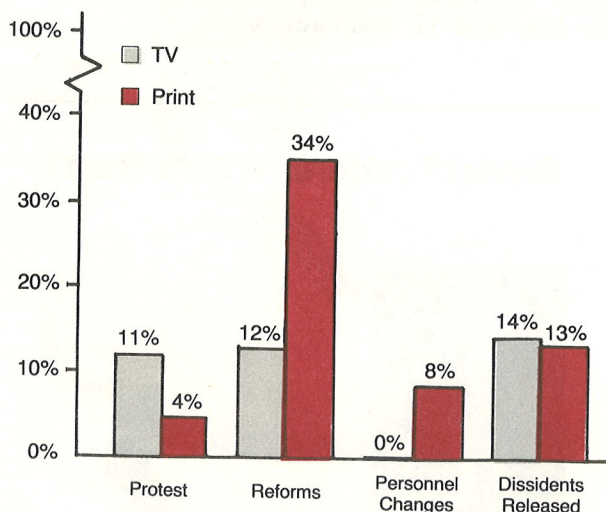
PAGING SPIRO AGNEW ...

TV and print differed sharply in covering the Soviet domestic drama. TV devoted almost three times the coverage to protest activities as did newspapers and magazines. The print outlets covered social, political, and economic reforms almost three times more heavily than

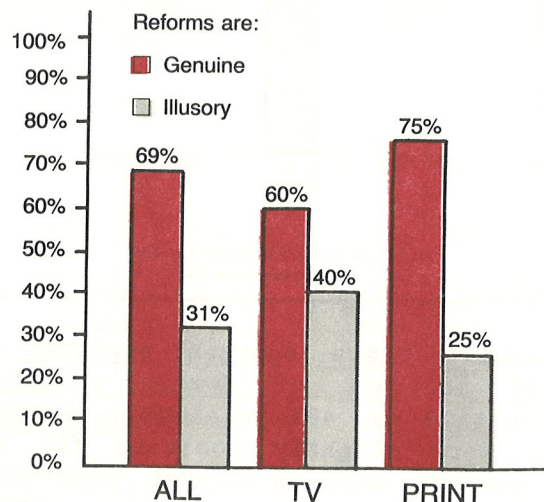
THE REAL THING?

Forty-eight stories, about one in five, stated specifically that glasnost was either the real thing or a false hope. Over two stories in three concluded that glasnost was for real. Optimism was highest at the Times and Post, where 80% of judgments were positive, compared to 60% on TV news. This reflects TV's greater attention to protests, and the papers' heavier coverage of reforms.

Topics: TV vs. Print (%)



Is Glasnost For Real?

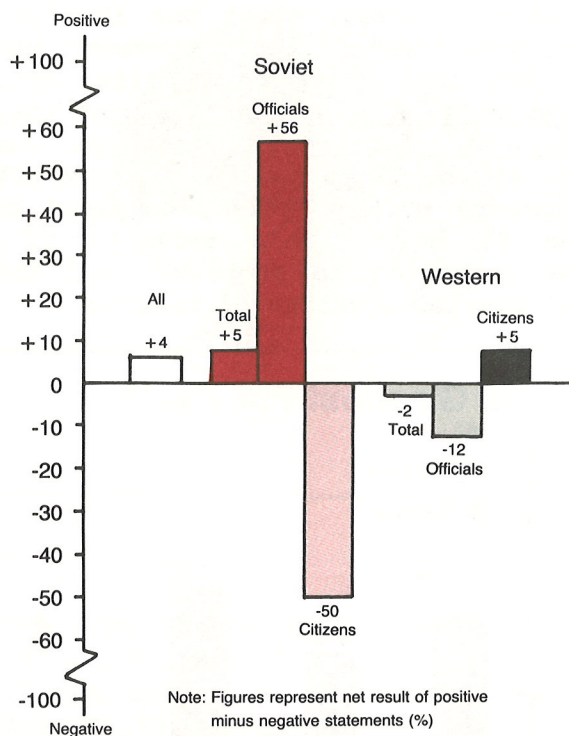


FROM THE SOURCE'S MOUTH

Soviet sources predominated among the 666 who were quoted or cited. Government officials made up majorities of both Soviet and western sources. Gorbachev led the source parade with 50 citations. Other frequent sources: Soviet spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov, (22), and dissident Andrei Sakharov (13). Secretary of State George Shultz led the American contingent with 10 appearances.

Outside the realm of Soviet officialdom, sourcing was split between dissidents and man-on-the-street interviews. In the West, nongovernmental sources included Soviet experts, various intellectuals, and human rights groups.

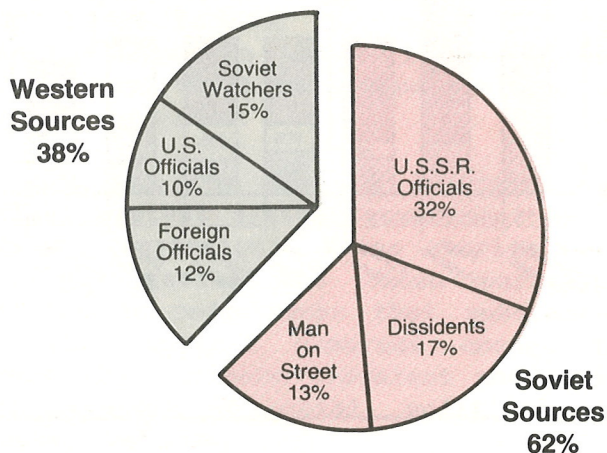
Policy Judgments by Sources



Overall, these sources produced a balanced portrait of Soviet policies (52% positive vs. 48% negative). Soviet sources were slightly positive (55 to 45%), western sources almost perfectly balanced (49 to 51%). In the USSR, mostly supportive government statements

(78% positive) were balanced by heavy criticism (75% negative) from private citizens. In the West, this split was reversed--official sources were 56% negative, while non-governmental Soviet watchers were 55% positive.

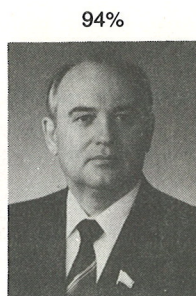
Sources Cited on U.S.S.R.



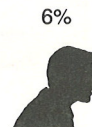
ALL HAIL MIKHAIL

If the media showed glasnost as half full, Gorbachev himself got a better press than his policies. Seventeen stories compared his performance to that of past Soviet leaders. Khrushchev and Brezhnev were the most frequent foils, but some comparisons reached back to Lenin. Ninety-four percent (16 of 17) gave the nod to Gorbachev.

Soviet Leaders: Who's Best?



Gorbachev



Others

94%

6%

Gorbachev is not just continuing the work begun by Khrushchev, he is doing much more.

-Roy Medvedev
N.Y. Times, 3/15

[Gorbachev] is more sophisticated in using the mass media of the West for deception.

-Time, 2/23

After Hart: New Rules?

Have you ever committed adultery?

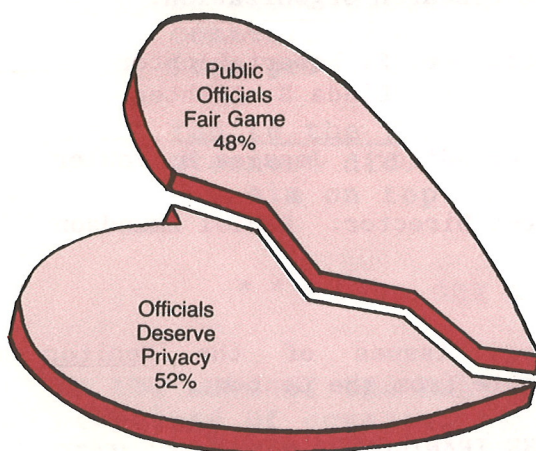
-Paul Taylor
Washington Post

I don't have to answer that question.

-Gary Hart

In the wake of the Hart affair, the media's attention turned from the candidate's propriety to its own. The debate over journalistic practices stretched from the front page to the op-ed page as reporters, editorialists and guest columnists weighed in.

A Right to Privacy?



Even as the story unfolded, the media angle got the most play. From May 3 to May 9, questions of journalistic ethics were raised 61 times (excluding editorials and op-eds) in the New York Times, Washington Post or network news-casts. This outpaced discussion of Hart's character (55 mentions), his prospects (51), and the privacy rights of public figures (20).

There's no question that [is] out of bounds.

-Craig Whitney
New York Times

We cannot claim [the First Amendment] was designed for voyeurs.

-A.M. Rosenthal
New York Times

[Surveillance] is a technique for police, not journalists.

-Bill Kovach
Atlanta Journal

If politicians are going to run our lives, the least we can expect in return is to get some entertainment value out of them.

-Michael Kinsley
The New Republic

THE PUNDITS: FIT TO PRINT?

NO

Anthony Lewis
A.M. Rosenthal
William Safire

-New York Times

YES

David Broder
Meg Greenfield
Michael Kinsley

-Washington Post

The public turned thumbs down on both the miscreant and the messenger. While national polls found a sharp drop-off in support for Hart, they also showed widespread criticism of media coverage as unfair and overly intrusive.

THE PUBLIC: HAVE A HART

Wrong to report candidates' sex lives	67%
Reporters went too far	50%
Media stakeouts improper	80%
Media unfair to Hart	67%
Private lives are off limits	52%
Media's motives in Hart story:	
To inform voters	13%
Competition	12%
To attract audiences	69%

Sources: Time, Newsweek, ABC, USA Today

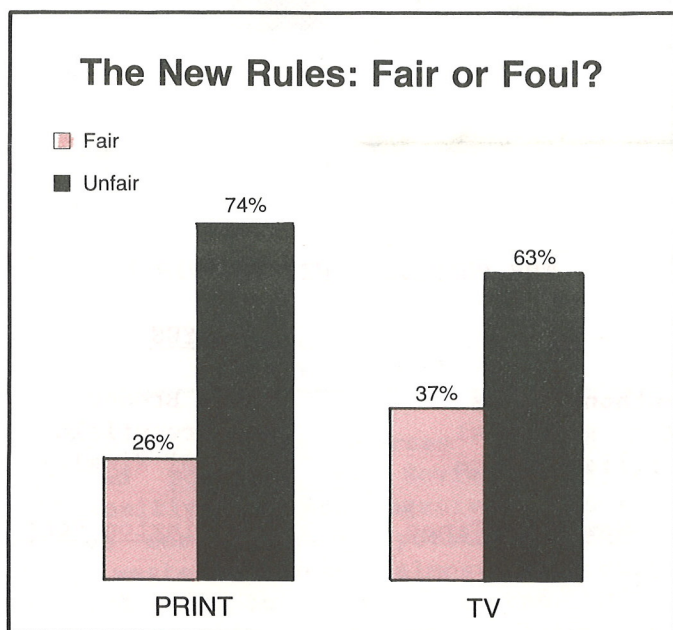
The news columns and airwaves reflected public unease more than professional self-interest. When the question was raised, almost 2 out of 3 TV stories and 3 out of 4 print stories emphasized the impropriety of journalists' behavior. The coverage was balanced at first but turned more negative after Hart attacked the press in his exit speech. By contrast both print and broadcast

media gave balanced coverage to questions of candidates' privacy rights vs. public scrutiny.

As journalists and media organizations began to grope toward establishing new standards, some portents appeared. While the Hart drama unfolded, the Washington Post reported the alleged homosexuality of a congressman whose AIDS-related death had been attributed to a blood transfusion. That same day the Washington Times accused another congressman of living a double life with a wife at home and a mistress in Washington.

Meanwhile, the New York Times distributed a questionnaire that asked presidential candidates for lists of friends and waivers of privacy rights in any police investigations.

Two weeks later the networks ran picture stories on the latest in the Gary Hart-Donna Rice soap opera. Their source--the National Enquirer.



MEDIA MONITOR (Copyright 1987) is a publication of the CENTER FOR MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization.

Editors: Dr. S. Robert Lichter
Dr. Linda S. Lichter

Managing Editor: Jessica M. Fowler

Research Director: Daniel Amundson

* * *

Previous issues of the Monitor are available from the Center:

THE IRAN/CONTRA STORY
THE TOWER REPORT
CHERNOBYL ANNIVERSARY