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## From the Field:

### The State of Environmental Journalism in Germany and Russia

**Angelina Davydova**

In the last few years I have been intensively reporting on all major UN Conferences on climate change/green economy/sustainable development issues both in Russian and German media. This type of reporting, which connects themes about the environment, politics and business might be rather new to a Russian readership, as environmental journalism is just beginning to take root in the Russian media landscape.

The challenges I faced confirm this assumption and include the following issues: the distance and abstractness of global issues, lack of strong political decisions and commitments, problems referring to future issues which might seem less relevant at the moment, turning complex and diverse information into linear stories, contradictory scientific research data, and many others. At the same time, in many ways, environmental journalism in Germany is quite different than in Russia – not only because media landscapes and media markets differentiate (including political and economical prerequisites), but also because the theme of sustainability has a completely different meaning and importance in political, business and social contexts.

In this article I will compare environmental reporting, mostly on UN-related events, in Russian and German media, in an attempt to outline both similarities and differences between the two media markets.

**Keywords:** Environmental journalism, UN, climate change, sustainability, green media, NGO, green economy, UNFCCC, new media

The development of environmental journalism worldwide has gone through a number of stages – from a specialized, science-based reporting to publications on green economy and sustainable development. The spreading of an environmental agenda in almost all spheres of our lives – political, economical, social – obviously requires a stronger media presence of the issue. Environmental reporting, which originally concentrated on more on scientific data and research, has now gradually developed into a truly cross-sectional subject. Nowadays one may find environ-

mental issues almost on all sections of print and online media: from politics to economics, and from culture to lifestyle. Consequently, it makes it quite challenging for many journalists to provide high-quality reporting, grasping all aspects of life.

## Types of environmental journalism

In addition to environmental sections in daily media there are two more types of environmental journalism present at the moment. The first ones are specialized independent environmental media. A good German-language example of this is the print and online magazine *Enorm* (<http://www.enorm-magazin.de/>), specializing in environmental and sustainable economy reporting or the online environmental publication *Klimaretter* ([www.klimaretter.info](http://www.klimaretter.info)), set up by two former *taz*<sup>1</sup> journalists, after publishing a book with the same title (*Klimaretter* – literally meaning « Climate Saver »). In Russia one may find even more examples of specialized environmental media – most of them online and digital native (e.g. <http://ecoportal.su/> and <http://ecoreporter.ru/>). The noticeably stronger digital native presence in Russia is a basic characteristic, not only of environmental media, but of the media landscape as such. There are a few underlying reasons for this:

1) the income structure of most media houses : 80% to 90% of the turnover of most publishers in Russia is generated with advertisement, not sales, while in Germany, until recently, this correlation was from 50/50 to 70% sales /30% advertisements. However, advertisement shares are also rapidly on the rise at the moment.

2) media consumption patterns: vast geography as well as historical customs fail to encourage daily consumption of print media outside of megapolis areas in Russia as opposed to the German model of a ‘newspaper for breakfast’. Therefore, in the Russian media market one meets a far noticeably stronger digital and online presence, with online media and social networks playing a bigger role – both as a primary information source and as a public sphere. Additionally, most new media titles, including those with “new” topics (including environmental journalism), or new types of media business (e.g. crowd-funding) also tend to appear primarily on the Internet, rather than in a print version.

The second type of specialized environmental media is created and largely supported by environmental NGOs or groups. Only few titles of them become highly professional. A good German example is *Greenpeace Magazin* ([www.greenpeace-magazin.de](http://www.greenpeace-magazin.de)), while in Russia an equivalent is *Panda Times* ([www.pandatimes.ru](http://www.pandatimes.ru)) or a magazine (both print and online) *Environment and*

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<sup>1</sup> A daily German newspaper, set up in 1978, with a centre-left position, owned by a cooperative.

*Law*, issued and supported by the Norwegian-Russian environmental NGO *Bellona* ([www.bellona.ru](http://www.bellona.ru)). While originally set up as corporate NGO publications, they both developed into quality media, attracting professional journalists from mainstream media to provide in-depth reporting and analysis on many environmental issues, which are later to be picked up by the general media.

## **Reporting on climate change**

All three types of environmental journalism found in today's media landscape, both in Germany and Russia, are vividly characterized by their cross-sectional approach. Climate change and the UNFCCC<sup>2</sup> negotiation process in particular are media topics which noticeably display this interdisciplinarity. With international politics, internal politics, economic and business aspects, social and lifestyle dimensions, the whole climate change agenda seems to combine most environmental issues of the past (including energy, waste, water, and other issues), adding up a deeper socio-economical layer when spreading out the topic to a more general 'sustainability/green economy' reporting. Even reports on natural disasters or catastrophes come under 'climate change' headline these days, turning the latter into a truly interdisciplinary matter.

Since I have intensively covered the climate change's political and economic agenda (including the UNFCCC negotiations) in the last few years in both Russian and German-language media, and in this article, I will compare them from a practical point of view. In this way, I will focus on the aspects of internal and international climate policy, the importance of economic issues, and tackle border-crossing media challenges such as global vs. local news, and report about present vs. prospective reporting.

To start with, due to the fact that climate change plays a much bigger role in the German internal political agenda than in Russia, a journalist reporting for media in both countries always finds German audiences to be 'more prepared'. It is not that you have to explain to a Russian reader what the Kyoto Protocol is, but I have always found that there is more 'justifying' needed when it comes to writing on climate issues in Russian media – this includes mostly political and economic arguments in order to underline the topic's importance for Russia. On the other hand, media interest towards climate issues in Germany seems to fluctuate depending on international or domestic policy priorities and on whether the climate agenda is top-priority or actively discussed at the moment. In Russia, the interest towards the topic remains at the same level, and mostly the same expert group deals with the issue.

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<sup>2</sup> UNFCC is the United Nations Convention on Climate Change – an international environmental treaty, adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – and a subsequent negotiation process, trying to establish a new global legally binding agreement on greenhouse emission reduction, which has come in power with the Kyoto Protocol.

A case in point is the UN Conference on climate – COP 15 – which took place in December of 2009 in Copenhagen. It turned out to be the peak of media interest towards the subject; after disappointing many hopes and aspirations for a new agreement to be reached there, the media interest in most EU-reporting on the matter in German and English-language publications gradually went down. At the same time, the conference in Copenhagen for the Russian media was in many ways a starting point of growing interest towards the topic – during the last three years we can certainly observe an increase of media publications on climate change, climate policy, low-carbon economy and others, as the topic becomes less « marginal » than before. Another potential reason for a decreased interest in environmental reporting in German media was the EU economic and financial crisis, the consequences of which caused a growing importance of economic and social policy measures over the environmental ones.

Another significant difference between German and Russian climate change reporting stems directly from the first example. Due to a heavier presence of ‘climate’ agenda in politics, it also has a much deeper and wider effect on economic and social spheres – from green business initiatives to city climate programs or civic initiatives. With the whole ‘green’ agenda still less rooted in the Russian context, including media context, it always takes more time to ‘prepare’ your reader and to ‘persuade’ your reader of the importance of an issue.

Persuading an editor or publisher of taking an article tackling the climate change issue might also be a bit more difficult in Russia, than in Germany. Many journalistic colleagues, especially from regional or mainstream media in Russia, complain about difficulties in promoting climate or environmental topics into everyday reporting, mainly because of its « marginality » and low connectedness with the everyday political and social agenda, and general interest topics. One reason, as I gathered through experience, may be since Russia is not writing purely on climate or environmental issue, but taking more of a cross-sectional approach – e.g. integrating climate/green debate into everyday political/business/social/city life/health/science reporting, introducing a strategy where in almost every topic one can find something green. In this context, another interesting observation is how NGO experts and environmental activists are finding their way as « normally accepted » newsmakers, commentators and experts in many media titles. Obviously, this may not apply for every type of media, but the growing number of such examples must be noted in Russia. At the same time, the wide-spread nature of climate debate/climate reporting in German media quite often plays out with opposite effects – it’s becoming more difficult to « sell » your article to the editor or publisher simply because there is too much offer on the supply side. Also, after a media « hype » (like the one around the Copenhagen conference in 2009), the interest towards the topic diminishes and results in lower demand.

Yet, in spite of the differences mentioned above, reporting on climate change both in Germany and Russia comes across a number of very similar challenges. The first

one is yet the abstractness of the matter, and its global character. Being a global problem, climate change...

1) firstly happens somewhere else. In German media reporting, this means a focus on the most vulnerable regions, such as Bangladesh. In Russia, this is still a rather rare case, as readers still mostly concern themselves with internal Russian problems and with regard to international issues – preferring to read mostly ‘success’ stories instead of tragedies. These do not provoke much compassion, mainly due to the problems back home.

2) It is hard to find and define both ‘good’ and ‘evil’ guys, and also ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, making it too complex for newspapers. The interdisciplinary nature of environmental journalism makes it especially difficult to turn complex and diverse blocks of information, research data, contradictory opinions, and multi-layered background information into linear stories, accessible to a wide audience. At times data journalism including infographics comes to help with this issue – especially when reporting about global challenges, which appear differently in different countries, or when writing about big blocks (or databases) of information. Here a good example can be infographics from the environmental desk of the news agency *RIA Novosti* in Russia (probably one of the most advanced and professional in the country) at <http://ria.ru/infografika/>

3) It is rather difficult to keep the readers’ interest on the same level in times of local short-term problems and conflicts coming up like the economic crisis. Despite a few attempts to interlink the current economic and ecological crises, together with deepening social inequality and growing poverty (as it was the case during the UN Summit at Rio+20 in June 2012), only a few media both in Germany and Russia seem to be taking this integrated approach.

And here is where interdisciplinarity comes into question – with the growing importance of interdisciplinary knowledge, complex systems, system theory – traditional linear story-based journalism often falls short of the richness and interconnectedness of many political, economic and social processes – in almost every single one of them the environmental or climate aspect is one of the most crucial ones. A good example could be connecting issues of climate change, water scarcity, food and energy insecurity, growing migration and social tension, possible war threats over resources, depletion of eco-systems, failing states – on one side of the story. Still, another dimension to a cross-sectional story trace back to the history of how products are being made, consumed and utilized – bringing both the global and local agenda together, combining political decisions with economic realities (including the power of big corporations and consumer everyday choices) and also with daily social realities of rural communities in the Global South.

Yet another challenge climate change reporting faces is the short-term vs. long-

term argument and the issue of reporting about the future. Here, even despite different political landscapes of Russia and Germany, we still find a prevalence by both professional media people and the general audience on the issue that future issues seem to be less relevant and, therefore hardly making it into the news. This trend, however, is being overturned more often – both in German and Russian media, with much more research data (also “consumer-oriented” research data)<sup>3</sup> now available and regularly published. At the same time, the issue still remains. Another important challenge is processing scientific (environmental) data, which quite often seems to be contradictory. For example, on occasion not all journalists and even those with formal academic training understand the way science and scientific research works. Basic facts about economic theories, financing behind certain research topics, scientific arguments, peer reviews quite often fall short in the mainstream media, as there is a tendency to generalise almost every scientific research into a common and well-known agenda « the scientists have proven ». In addition, especially in Russia, scientists and experts are quite often incapable and even unwilling to openly go to the press, set up special PR departments, or take the needs of journalists into consideration. Quite often scientists, or a group of scientists, having a few « unsuccessful » cases of communication with the mainstream (especially, popular) media, become disappointed with the way journalists behave and either refuse to work with the media or turn the process into a very long and formal one. My impressions lead me to the following assumption: a lot of work must be done on both sides, especially in Russia, as the need for scientific, environmental and interdisciplinary reporting is necessary to raise its quality and remain interesting, informative, educative, and entertaining for the readership.

Despite the many difficulties mentioned above, my experiences confirm the growing importance of environmental journalism – in most media landscapes, including Germany and Russia. At the same time, the growing significance of the environmental news agenda converge international reporting on the issue. In this context, Germany and Russia prove to be good examples, as similarities between environmental journalism in both of the countries increase as time goes on.

**Author** Angelina Davydova, born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1978. M.A. in Economics from the St. Petersburg State University of Economics and Finance. Since 1999 working in Russian media (including Kommersant newspaper, Expert magazine, The St. Petersburg Times, etc). Reuters Foundation Fellow in 2006 at Green College, Oxford University. From 2006 till now project manager with the NGO “German-Russian Exchange”, head of media trainings and journalistic exchange programs. Since 2008 a leading expert with the Russian-German Office of Environmental Information. From 2011 senior lecturer and postgraduate researcher at the School of Journalism, St. Petersburg State University. June-

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<sup>3</sup> I mean results of research projects which can be potentially interesting to general public and even influence their daily lifestyle, activities, consumer choices.

*July 2012 participation in an Environmental Leadership Program, College of Natural Resources, University of California Berkeley. Takes part in the UNFCCC process since 2008 as an observer and/or journalist.*

*Email: [Davydova.angelina@gmail.com](mailto:Davydova.angelina@gmail.com)*