

# Pravda's coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident at the threshold of glasnost

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*This study uses content analysis to examine Pravda's coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident against the background of both Western and Soviet scholarship on the Soviet press in order to understand better the role of Pravda in the early days of glasnost. To provide a basis for comparison of the paper's coverage of Chernobyl, the study also examines Pravda's coverage of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, and The New York Times coverage of both Chernobyl and Three Mile Island.*

*The study found that for four days, despite glasnost, no news of the nuclear accident in Chernobyl was published by Pravda. However, there was also a four-day delay in the paper's coverage of Three Mile Island. Furthermore, the study found that The New York Times gave earlier and greater coverage to the nuclear accidents at both Chernobyl and Three Mile Island.*

**KEY TERMS:** *Chernobyl nuclear accident in the press, Chernobyl and Pravda, Chernobyl and The New York Times, Pravda's coverage of Chernobyl, Pravda and Three Mile Island, The New York Times and Three Mile Island, and The New York Times coverage of Chernobyl.*

**O**n Saturday, April 26, 1986, at 1:23 a.m., an explosion took place in the Soviet nuclear power station in Chernobyl, 80 miles north of the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. The explosion caused a fire in the graphite reactor core. "Fuelled by the white hot graphite core of one of the Chernobyl's four reactors, the runaway blaze burned at temperatures of up to 5,000 degrees,

or twice that of molten steel" (Greenwald, Aikman, Duff, & McGeary, 1986). Two plant workers were killed apparently either by the blast or the ensuing fire. Meanwhile, deadly radioactive particles spewed forth into the atmosphere, threatening lives within the Soviet Union and in neighboring European countries.

Byelarus, the neighboring republic on which 70% of the contamination settled, is still grappling with the health consequences for a fifth of its population: 2.2 million people, including 800,000 children, who became victims of Chernobyl and hostages of the postponed effects of radiation. Pyotr Kravchanka, foreign affairs minister of Byelarus, told the United Nations General Assembly in December 1990 that 37,000 children were being treated for precancerous conditions, adding that there has been a doubling of thyroid ailments among children, a sevenfold increase in anemia cases, and a rise in leukemia cases. The mounting toll of the accident is projected to hit its high point in 1996–1997 (Cornell, 1990).

The first news of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster came from Sweden, which had detected an abnormally high level of radiation near a Swedish nuclear power plant and immediately launched a probe into the source of the atmospheric contamination.

Beyond the accident itself and its impact on human health and safety, this event may have consequences outside the domain of nuclear power. In particular, the implications of the media coverage of the worst nuclear accident in history are far reaching, especially for the Soviet media. *Pravda*, the leading Soviet newspaper at the time of the accident, featured prominently in the ensuing revelations in the mass media.

### ***Pravda's Place in the Soviet Media***

*Pravda*, paragon of the Soviet mass media system before the introduction of glasnost, is the subject of several inquiries examining the role of the Soviet press in contemporary sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and scientific spheres (Bereznoi, 1975, p. 4; Bogdanov & Viazemski, 1971, pp. 13–20; Okorokov, 1974; Ovsepyan, 1975). Several studies suggest that *Pravda* was a major asset to the Kremlin and an inalienable part of the historical, ideological, and cultural development of totalitarianism in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics before 1985 (Merrill & Fisher, 1980, p. 245).

*Pravda* is, according to one observer, "the calmest, most businesslike, most influential and most authoritative daily in [the] USSR" (Merrill & Fisher, 1980, p. 242). In addition, Western leaders and their political analysts often "search *Pravda's* content for clues to the changing direction of Soviet policy" and as "a useful index to Soviet behavior" (Markham, 1967, p. 170). Although the paper lost about 50% of its circulation in 1989 because of limited market forces and prevailing competition induced by glasnost and perestroika, its authoritativeness and influence among Soviet and world elites have not diminished (Eribo, Vaughn, & Oshagan, 1990). Paraschos, in his contribution to Merrill's *Global Journalism* (1991) noted that "glasnost seems to be breathing fresh air . . . on old practices

almost everywhere.” According to Paraschos, “the new spirit exhibited by *Pravda* in the fall of 1989, when it caught the world by surprise by issuing an apology to General Secretary Gorbachev’s most prominent Soviet critic for an article it had run about him two days before,” is reflective of the new aura (p. 118). The paper responded to glasnost by eliminating the communist logo from its masthead in January 1990. Following the abortive coup in August 1991 and the subsequent collapse of the USSR in December of the same year, *Pravda* has become an independent paper, managed by its employees. Its print run has dropped from 11 million copies in 1988 to 1.3 million copies in 1992. Under the new democratic government in Russia, the paper now competes for readership with other dailies, including 20 Moscow-based independent papers, in a free market.

## Overview of the Contemporary Soviet Press

The Soviet media coverage of Chernobyl raises fundamental questions about long-standing Soviet press theory and practice. Coverage of the accident also brings into focus the protracted international debate about freedom of the press and the individual’s right to be informed.

Between 1917 and 1985, the role of the press in a Communist state had been an issue of major concern to many citizens of the free world—and to those within the former Soviet Union now on the path of democratization.

Critics of the Soviet media system agree that before the introduction of glasnost the Soviet system tended to be “hypercautious in the circulation of information that is required” (Inkeles & Bauer, 1961, p. 198). It was Soviet press policy to keep information on many issues and controversies affecting the society at large from the Soviet public.

Merrill noted that before glasnost reporting what people in the West consider newsworthy—major events of the day—played only a small role in the Soviet press. Negative information about the Soviet Union was ignored, including stories about accidents, plane crashes (unless foreigners or Soviet VIPs were involved), drug problems, and epidemics.

## Soviet Theory of the Press

Before major changes in the USSR and the whole of Eastern Europe that began in 1985, Soviet press theory based on Marxist-Leninist philosophy was the norm for journalistic practice in the USSR (Androunas & Zassoursky, 1979, p. 186; Zassoursky & Losev, 1981, pp. 118–121). Marx, the architect of the communist press theory, had conceptualized that “the very function of the press should come from the central function—the perpetuation and expansion of the socialist system” (Martin & Chaudhary, 1983, p. 170). He was supported by Lenin’s view of the press as a collective “propagandist,” “agitator,” and “organizer” (Bogdanov & Viazemski, 1971, p. 21).

The primary functions and principles of the Marxist-Leninist press in the

Soviet Union were party-mindedness (*Partinost*), ideological content (*ideinost*), truthfulness (*pravdivost*), popular character (*narodnost*), mass accessibility (*masovost*), and criticism and self-criticism (*kritika i samokritika*) (Bogdanov & Viazemski, 1971, p. 22). These were commandments to be followed by Soviet editors, all of whom were members of the Communist party. According to Merrill, Bryan, and Alisky (1964), only the most devout communists were "allowed to be journalists, and each must surrender his individuality and conform to the party line." The press was "looked at as an arm of the government and the party, an instrument with which to control the social system" (p. 103).

From a Western vantage point, communist press theory was "based on the premise that the masses are too fickle and too ignorant and unconcerned with government to be entrusted with details of its operation. The fundamental rights of every citizen to know government business are considered unrealistic and simply [a] bourgeois concept by those adhering to the communist press philosophy" (Merrill, 1983, p. 24). Thus, Inkeles and Bauer (1961) noted, the Soviet citizen had to depend "on inference and interpolation and extrapolation to satisfy his information needs" (p. 162). As a result, communication in the Soviet Union was "actually two parallel systems, one the official system, and the other a series of devices which enables the citizen to supplement, correct and replace the official media" (p. 162).

## The Movement Toward Glasnost

In a study of the Soviet media public, Mickiewicz found that opinion polling by Soviet officials showed that "the structure of demands and tastes is quite different from what they had imagined or wished and that blanketing of the public with constant repetitive messages was not producing the desired effects" (Martin & Chaudhary, 1983, p. 181). In 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced *glasnost* into the Soviet media system—a milestone in the history of the Soviet press.

Admittedly, 70 years of censorship policy required some time to change, especially given that Soviet journalists had been trained *not* to challenge the Communist party or to report events that depict the Soviet system in a bad light. Schillinger (1989) reported in her study of Moscow's dailies in 1985 and 1987 that "glasnost appears to be encountering formidable obstacles at the local levels" (p. 828). Paraschos pointed out that during "the introduction of glasnost, the situation became even more delicate. As the institutional limits of tolerance kept enlarging, the uncertainties of those who were testing them kept multiplying" (Merrill, 1991, p. 125). Vladimir Pozner, a Soviet broadcaster and unofficial government spokesman, argued that you cannot order people to be open and candid. "We can say this is what we recommend. But if there's a bureaucrat who doesn't want to be open, you'd have a lot of trouble making him" ("USA vs. USSR," 1986, p. 11A). Soviet press coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident may be a case in point.

## Comparative Analysis

To understand better the initial role of the Soviet press in the age of glasnost, this study examines *Pravda's* reports on the Chernobyl nuclear accident in the USSR. To provide a basis of comparison with a similar event outside the USSR, it also examines *Pravda's* coverage of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania.

Moreover, comparative analysis with a non-Soviet newspaper on the coverage of the same two events is made. *The New York Times* was selected for this purpose because its leadership in reportorial quality, circulation, readership, and agenda setting in the United States makes it somewhat comparable to *Pravda*.

Several basic questions are asked, including: What happened when *Pravda*, at the threshold of glasnost, was faced with covering a negative news event of such global significance as the Chernobyl nuclear accident? Furthermore, what happened when the news event became known from other sources?

## Methodology

Copies of *Pravda* from April 26, 1986, to May 9, 1986, were examined in the original Russian. All news items and articles on the Chernobyl nuclear accident were counted and measured in column inches. Pictures related to the Chernobyl accident also were measured as a separate indicator of the coverage given to the event. Related news items, such as reports on other nuclear accidents during the period, were not measured, but are considered in the discussion of the coverage of Chernobyl.

For the purpose of comparative analysis, the 14 *Pravda* editions from April 26, 1986, to May 9, 1986, are divided into two periods: the cover-up period of 4 days and the exposure period of 10 days. The exposure period is further divided in half; that is, the early exposure period of 5 days and the late exposure period of the last 5 days covered in this study.

For *Pravda's* coverage of the accident at Three Mile Island, 14 editions of *Pravda* are studied. The period covered is from March 28, 1979, the day of the accident, to April 10, 1979. The number of stories published and their measurement in column inches are recorded.

For comparison, *The New York Times* coverage of Chernobyl and Three Mile Island for the same period above is examined via *The New York Times Index*, using both the printed volumes and a computerized search.

## Results

### *Pravda's Coverage*

For the first four days after the nuclear accident in Chernobyl, *Pravda* published no news of it. After the event was reported in other sources, there was a response from *Pravda*. A total of 22 news items, amounting to 487.3 column

inches, were published during the two weeks following the accident. During the early exposure period, seven stories appeared (31.8% of the total number), measuring 34.8 column inches (7% of total measurement of the coverage). During the late exposure period, more stories were published and substantially more space was allotted: 15 news items appeared (68.1% of the total number of stories), amounting to 452.5 column inches (92.8% of the total 487.3 column inches of all stories published in *Pravda* on the Chernobyl nuclear accident).

In comparison, the accident at Three Mile Island was given a total of three news items (16.5 column inches) by *Pravda* during the two weeks following the event. All were news contributions from TASS, the official Soviet news agency. The first item was published on April 1, 1979, four days after the accident occurred—a delay similar to that for Chernobyl. *Pravda's* coverage of Three Mile Island represents 13.6% of the coverage it gave to Chernobyl in number of news items; and, in column inches, only 3.3% of that given the Chernobyl accident.

During the first week following each of the two events, this study found a similar coverage pattern. Four news items totaling 17.5 column inches were given to Chernobyl, compared to three news items of 16.6 column inches given to Three Mile Island.

The magnitudes of the disasters and the modes of their exposure were not, however, similar. Chernobyl was an unprecedented catastrophe hidden from public knowledge until the Swedes found that something was amiss. Three Mile Island was a serious accident promptly reported in the American mass media (the following day, in the case of *The New York Times*), with no clear effort (by the government, at least) to keep information from the public.

### **The New York Times Coverage**

*The New York Times* published a total of 102 stories amounting to 1,573 column inches on the Chernobyl nuclear accident during the period examined in this study. For Three Mile Island, 65 stories amounting to 1,699 column inches were published during the period examined.

Clearly, *The New York Times* gave more coverage to both events. *Pravda's* coverage of Chernobyl was 21.5% of the coverage given it by *The New York Times* in number of stories, and 30.9% of the *Times's* coverage in column inches. By way of comparison, however, for Three Mile Island, *Pravda's* coverage was 4.6% of *The New York Times* coverage in number of news items and only 0.97% in length.

## **Discussion of *Pravda's* Coverage of Chernobyl**

*Pravda's* coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident was, by Western news standards, three or four days late. Even then, *Pravda* gave no prominence to the news when it was first published, placing the six-column-inch story on the bottom right corner of page two. The full text of the announcement published

on April 30, 1986, under the title, "From The Council of Ministers of the USSR," stated:

As the press has already reported, an accident has occurred at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station, located 130 kilometers north of Kiev. A government commission headed by Comrade B. Ye. Shcherbina, Vice Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, is at work at the site. The commission includes heads of ministries and departments, prominent scientists and specialists.

According to preliminary data, the accident occurred in one of the buildings of the fourth power-generating unit and led to the destruction of part of the structural elements, damage to the reactor and some escape of radioactive substances. The three remaining power-generating units have been shut down; they are in good condition and are in operational reserve. Two people died in the accident.

Urgent measures have been taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. At present, the radiation situation at the power station and the adjacent locality has stabilized; the victims are being given necessary medical assistance. The residents of the atomic power station settlement and three nearby communities have been evacuated.

The state of radiation situation at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station and in the surrounding area is being monitored constantly. (*Pravda*, 1986, April 30)

The four-day delay in announcing the accident is unusually long for a modern daily newspaper. For example, *Pravda* published news of the U.S. attack on Libya of April 15 on April 16, 1986, some 24 hours after the event.

Why did *Pravda* not publish within 24 or 48 hours news of the Chernobyl accident, which took place right in the Soviet Union? The official reason for the delay given by Soviet authorities was that they needed time to gather the facts of the accident before going to press. The authorities also said that their first obligation was to evacuate those living in and around Chernobyl. On May 4, *Pravda* explained that authorities were preoccupied with the accident itself and were busy trying to stop the fire in the reactor. Clearly, because whatever was known could have been published, and because journalists were not reported to have been involved in fighting the fire, this official explanation is not very satisfactory.

The delay in reporting the Chernobyl accident generated controversy leading to a severe setback for glasnost at the time. When the news of the nuclear accident eventually was published in *Pravda*, the paper seemed to be responding to an agenda already set by the Western press. Obviously, earlier and greater publicity was given to the event in the Western press, as demonstrated by the analysis of *The New York Times* coverage.

During the two weeks covered by this study, *Pravda's* coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident became a gambit in defense of the USSR and in an attack on Western governments and the Western press. Although details of the accident trickled out in later coverage, *Pravda* devoted much energy to explaining and defending the Soviet mass media's handling of the accident.

On May 1, 1986, *Pravda* accused certain Western press agencies of "spreading a rumor to the effect that thousands of people died in the accident at the atomic power station." It then stated that the "facts are 2 dead, 197 hospitalized,

out of these, 49 have been discharged from the hospital." On May 2, 1986, the paper reported that 18 victims were in serious condition and no foreigners were among the victims of the nuclear accident.

By May 3, 1986, *Pravda* seemed to attempt to divert attention from the still-burning reactor at Chernobyl with publication of a front-page report of an accident involving an American nuclear submarine based at Gibraltar. On the following day, *Pravda* reported on an April 1986 nuclear accident in Nevada and another nuclear accident in Nevada from March 1984 in which 15 people were injured and one person died.

On the same day, *Pravda* accused the U.S. government and the Western press of overreaction to the Chernobyl accident, stating that from 1971 to 1984 there had been 151 accidents at nuclear power stations in 14 countries. The United States, according to *Pravda*, had never reacted to others in the way it had to the Chernobyl accident. The paper said the Western media were trying to divert attention from what it described as "disgraceful American aggression against Libya."

On May 5, 1986, *Pravda* expressed disappointment over "Western propaganda" and condemned an alleged anti-Soviet campaign in the West. It accused the West of being "happy at the misfortune of others." On the same day, however, *Pravda* revisited the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island from March 26, 1979.

**Table 1 Coverage of Chernobyl and Three Mile Island**

Period of Coverage	<i>Pravda</i>				<i>New York Times</i>	
	Chernobyl		Three Mile Island		Chernobyl	Three Mile Island
	No. of Stories	Column Inches	No. of Stories	Column Inches	No. of Stories	No. of Stories
Cover up						
Day 1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Day 2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Day 3	0	0	0	0	0	5
Day 4	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>11</u>
	0	0	0	0	5 (3%)	18 (14%)
Early exposure						
Day 5	1	6	1	6	22	21
Day 6	1	6	1	6	24	19
Day 7	2	6	1	5	22	19
Day 8	0	0	0	0	18	12
Day 9	<u>3</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>5</u>
	7 (32%)	35 (7%)	3 (100%)	17 (100%)	108 (69%)	76 (59%)
Late exposure						
Day 10	2	50	0	0	12	5
Day 11	3	97	0	0	8	6
Day 12	2	102	0	0	8	11
Day 13	3	73	0	0	7	7
Day 14	<u>5</u>	<u>131</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>6</u>
	15 (68%)	453 (92%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	44 (28%)	35 (27%)
Total	22 (100%)	488 (100%)	3 (100%)	17 (100%)	157 (100%)	129 (100%)



In addition, nuclear accidents in Nevada, the Irish Sea, Kent, and other sites were reported.

From May 6 to May 9, 1986, leading Soviet writers were offered the opportunity to defend the USSR on the pages of *Pravda*. Among these writers were academician Georgi Arbatov and the following journalists: Yuri Zhukov, V. Gubarev, and Odinets.

In his article "A Boomerang," Arbatov reiterated that Chernobyl was the 152nd nuclear accident. He conceded that it was a very serious accident that produced higher levels of radiation not only in the Soviet Union but in surrounding countries as well. He noted that the accident was bound to cause some concern and that the Soviet Union would have been concerned had the accident taken place in another country. He went on to say the West had been waiting for just such an occasion, launching a devastating anti-Soviet propaganda attack because the accident was not reported in time. Arbatov, however, gave no explanation for the delay in reporting the nuclear accident, the main bone of contention in the Western press.

From May 6 forward, coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident by *Pravda*, after the initial hesitation, diversions, and defensiveness, became unusually informative and open. Despite this openness, the accident still did not receive the kind of coverage a Western news audience might expect. For example, the first picture related to the accident (a photograph of medical tents outside Chernobyl) was published on May 7, nearly two weeks after the event. Furthermore, during the entire two-week period, there was one single front-page story published about Chernobyl, and this was on May 9, a full two weeks after the fire began. This story reported a statement made by the Politburo on actions being taken as a consequence of the nuclear reactor fire.

### **Soviet Reactions to the Coverage of Chernobyl**

As a result of limited news from the official media, activity of the rumor mill in the Soviet Union intensified following the accident in Chernobyl. *Pravda* reported on May 9, 1986, two weeks after the incident began, that a woman had walked into its offices to complain about a story spreading through Kiev that the city was unsafe. She visited *Pravda's* office to appeal for more information on the developments in Chernobyl and its environs postaccident.

During the Cold War, the Soviet approach seemed clearly superior to Soviet journalists, and all important news had been determined "according to criteria of Marxism-Leninism defined by party leaders" (Martin & Chaudhary, 1983, pp. 171-173). Nevertheless, the Soviet media handling of Chernobyl was not fully endorsed by Pozner, who stated, "we made a mistake in not reporting it quickly enough. Even with the lack of information we had, we still should have gotten it out faster. And this was used politically—to prove that the Soviet Union is a closed, secretive society" ("USA vs. USSR," 1986, p. 11A).

Although Pozner did not discuss official censorship of the press in the USSR, it is possible that censorship was responsible for the delay in reporting Chernobyl to the world. At the time of the nuclear accident, there were a number of

ensorship agencies in USSR, the most important being the Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Communist Party, and the government censorship division, GLAVLIT, the Chief Administrator for the Preservation of State Secrets in the Press.

In an article on Chernobyl, Medvedev (1986), author of *Nuclear Disaster in the Ural* (an account of a Soviet nuclear disaster in the 1950s), said it is well known that "the Soviet Union does not report accidents in the nuclear industry and has not responded to requests about accidents which became known through some unofficial sources" (p. 10). Lingering elements of Soviet censorship may have created a situation in which "the Soviet media was also not in a position to react properly, and for more than two weeks the Soviet public did not know the real picture" (p. 10). Martin and Chaudhary (1983, p. 174) note that in general there has been "no premium on the unusual" in Soviet mass communication and information flow.

The Soviet delay in releasing information on Chernobyl was supported by one American observer after he attended a conference on nuclear power in Yalta, USSR, following the Chernobyl accident. Kulcinski, a professor of nuclear engineering, said that "the Soviet government may have saved lives by stonewalling about the Chernobyl nuclear accident" (Smith, 1986, p. 1) because the dearth of information may have aided in orderly evacuation and absence of panic.

## A Test of Glasnost

Coverage of the Chernobyl disaster was the first real test of the Soviet press principle of glasnost, coming two years after its proclamation. This event was also a check on "official willingness to entrust the Soviet people with unpleasant facts" (Greenwald, Aikman, Duff, & McGeary, 1986, p. 52). The result was, at best, hesitation.

*Time* magazine reported that, at first, the Soviet mass media was as wary as the government about admitting the magnitude of the calamity. For ten days, Soviet TV and newspapers passed along "brief, vague, official statements that raised more questions than they provided answers" (Greenwald et al., 1986, p. 55). This hesitation supported Merrill's (1983, p. 5) view that the path to a libertarian society, advocating the "primacy of the individual's rights over the rights of government," will be too tormenting for regimes that desire "political and social stability and realize that press freedom, or too much of it, endangers this stability and the general status quo." John Milton in *Areopagitica* postulated that "it was more important for individuals to know the truth than for specific governments to survive" (Davis & Baran, 1981, p. 13). The acceptability of such a policy in the USSR is open to debate, both within and without the country.

Soviet press theory, like the Soviet government itself, was less than a century old before the collapse of the USSR. The communist system in the country before 1985 and its communication policies have little precedence in world history. Consequently, the system was a long-term process of experimentation and change. The crusade for a free press in the West started in England in 1538

under Henry VIII and has been a protracted and continuing struggle. It might be argued that the relatively new glasnost media approach needs time to mature. The fledgling glasnost, if fully institutionalized, will constitute a radical and irreversible shift to a new type of media theory.

If coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident constitutes a test of glasnost, *Pravda's* initial delay in publishing the news of the disaster within the USSR for four days is disappointing. However, later coverage of the accident marked a new era of unprecedented timeliness and openness in *Pravda*.

Through the 1985 introduction of glasnost, the USSR acknowledged that its press had not been open and could not serve the people fully if it remains closed and censored. The Soviets have experienced the futility of censorship. The shock waves from the Chernobyl accident and the subsequent press coverage may constitute a watershed in Soviet press policy that brought it closer to a committed policy of glasnost before the fall of communism and the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

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