

# Journalism in eastern Europe – a virtual reality?

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2006/07/04/journalism-in-eastern-europe-a-virtual-reality/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2006/07/04/journalism-in-eastern-europe-a-virtual-reality/)

2006-7-4


I've watched England's World Cup matches in some funny places over the years, such as small rustic French bars and Italian campsites, so seeing our latest national humiliation in a Gloucestershire retreat for young eastern European leaders was not so remarkable.

Of course, England lost and so did Ukraine, but the important result for me was a new understanding of what influential young people in countries like Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Armenia think is happening to their emerging free media.

The venue was a weekend conference with Fellows of the [John Smith Trust](#) from what used to be called the 'former Soviet Union'. I outlined what I saw as the threats and opportunities offered by the global developments in new media.

These social, political and journalistic young leaders certainly embrace the new technologies and are great entrepreneurs for ideas and news. They really understand that in countries like even in countries like Ukraine, which still only has 20% internet penetration, online news sources have a disproportionately strong influence on social and political change.

And in most eastern European countries there is an emerging media which looks and sounds much like western news outlets. There is competition, variety and debate but behind the surface the John Smith Fellows had doubts. Some complained that while the media does criticise the authorities it only does it after any impact would register, effectively criticism licenced by the authorities themselves. Others complained that as everything was owned by oligarchs, the newspapers and TV stations were simply mouth-pieces for the politicians and businesspeople behind them.

But all the Fellows felt that whatever the current media weaknesses, things are much better than they were before 1989. Polis will be watching to see if the new media technologies encourage a trend towards a truly pluralistic and publicly concerned media or whether it actually enforces the trend towards commercial and political control. 

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