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## Faculty teach about U.S. media in Siberia

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

The notion of a free press often is taken for granted by many Americans. But for the citizens of the former Soviet Union, democratic communication is a new concept. Embracing this notion and creating a new media system within a new democracy are issues they struggle with daily.

To help forge such a system, faculty from Oakland University provided a series of lectures and seminars on democratic communication for Russian press secretaries and journalists as well as students attending the **Novosibirsk School for a Civil Society** in Siberia. Professor of Communication and Rhetoric, Communication and Journalism Chair Shea Howell, Visiting Instructor of Journalism Mike Lewis and Lecturer in Communication Bernard Brock teamed with faculty from Wayne State University and traveled to Siberia last September to speak on foundational skills in democratic press relations.

"The communication professionals and students we spoke to loved it," Howell said. "Their energy was astounding. They were so engaged in wrestling with new ideas. Most of the political communicators are idealistic and young. And they live in a region of great potential, directly in the crosshairs of Europe and Asia. They really feel that they're creating their country in key areas that will influence how democracy unfolds."

The initiative, dubbed "**Demcomm**," began three years ago when Andrei Nikolaev, director of the Novosibirsk School, met with Wayne State faculty on a media tour. His discussions on democratic and political communications issues led to Demcomm's formation, which was funded in part by a U.S. Department of State grant.

A group of Russian journalists and press secretaries began the cultural exchange by visiting Detroit for a two-week series of workshops during the summer of 2001 and 2002. Besides learning about crisis communication and agenda setting, other activities included spending time with the communications staff of local politicians such as Governor Engler and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, public relations professionals at a number of corporations, and tours of local television and print media outlets. Lewis, who is a weekend news anchor on WDIV-TV, took the visiting contingent on a tour of the Channel 4 studios where they learned how a newscast comes together.

"They watched our newscast in the studio and attended a seminar on video news releases," Lewis said. "They were impressed with the fast pace and the high level of technical presentation, things like our graphic and video technology. In Russia, a lot of their newscasts are like ours from 20 years ago. You'll see an anchor sitting behind a desk reading the news, mostly about politics, with maybe one still photo."

When the trip to Siberia was being organized, Lewis didn't have to be asked twice about going.

"I jumped at the chance to go to Siberia," Lewis said. "It's a land of legend. I lived and worked in Russia for several months as an AP radio correspondent, and I speak the language, but had not previously been to Siberia. With the budding democracies, new government systems and new media systems, I felt we could have an impact on them."

Howell, Lewis and Brock traveled with Wayne State faculty to the Novosibirsk School, where they presented seminars on topics such as crisis decision-making, public policy, and independent mass media and public opinion to students, journalists and press secretaries from local cities and regions. Translators helped facilitate the sessions.

"My contribution was to try to further the relationship between the government and political communicators," Howell said. "The content dealt with organizing a political campaign, creating an image, creating themes and translating an ideology into a meaningful message."

"These were completely new ideas to them. Part of the appeal of going to Novosibirsk is the fact that it's far from a more sophisticated city like Moscow. The area is remote, but the city of Novosibirsk itself is the fourth largest in Russia with more than 2 million people. It's a top research center with many scientists and intellectuals. The people were very well educated and had a strong historical and philosophical background. They were very much wrestling with how to create a new media system without any prior infrastructure. As for the students, they just loved us. They never saw teachers interact and invite discussion. It was foreign to them."

Lewis met with a group of about 25 enthusiastic students from Novosibirsk's 7-month-old journalism program.

"I spoke about TV news in particular, and the nuts and bolts of putting a TV news story together. I was really impressed with the students – they asked wonderful questions. The students wanted to talk about the role of TV journalism. There was a lot of discussion about why American TV covers so much crime. They're interested in political news, not crime news, which makes sense given the new political world around them."

Howell said the five days she and the other faculty members spent in Siberia gave her a greater appreciation for the American media.

"The biggest thing for me was seeing people create the basic institutions of democracy. I previously had very little appreciation for the ethical dimensions of our media – in Russia the press release that has the most money attached to it is the one that gets printed. I came back with more respect for the ethics of our news world. There's an ethical standard about what constitutes civil behavior that allows us a kind of freedom and action that is foreign to them."

Before leaving Novosibirsk, the faculty were able to tour the city, which is filled with ancient cathedrals and industrial buildings. The city itself is surrounded by large birch forests, which displayed spectacular golden leaves in the cool fall weather.

Though the Demcomm project has ended, Lewis hopes Oakland University can continue to maintain ties to the Novosibirsk School and promote further cultural exchange.

"They would like us to come back and present a one-week seminar course," Lewis said. "We're all gung-ho to go back, but not sure when we could schedule that. They were excited beyond belief to consider the possibility of sending a student or two to study here. It would be a great opportunity."

"Before traveling to Siberia, I thought it was a cold, forbidding and a sinister place. It's actually a warm, beautiful place full of warm people. I hope we can find a way to keep some kind of relationship with Novosibirsk."

For more information about the democratic communication project's programs and participants, visit the [Demcomm](#) Web site.

#### **SUMMARY**

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