

Library Award for Undergraduate Research Essay
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In a world with so many problems and disillusion, it is increasingly difficult to determine that which can be considered most important and most interesting to researchers and readers alike. For my Russian Independent Study course, I was required to culminate the semester with a final research paper, exploring in-depth a topic of my choice. I clearly wanted to stay within the field of Russian languages, literature, and culture, but also intertwine my passion for politics and international relations. In an overly ambitious manner, I settled on the paramount task of comparing media interpretation and media coverage of Russian and American politics. I quickly realized that this topic would unfortunately take years of research, significantly longer than my allotted semester.

Under the direction of Dr. Cynthia Martin, I narrowed down my research topic to the pertinent issue of human rights in Russia, specifically those of the homosexual community. This topic is actual and current, especially with the upcoming Olympic Games in Sochi and recent criticism of Russian human rights abuses. The most unique and challenging aspect of this research was the compilation of credible, informative, and insightful sources in not one, but two languages.

I heavily relied on the assistance of the University of Maryland libraries, in both print and online resources. My research began with exploration of Research Port and the possible databases available to me. The Slavic and East European Studies listing within Research Port enumerated various sources relating to my topic. Sources such as the Encyclopedia of Human Rights and e-Library Russia provided me with a solid foundation for the questions and relationships that my research were to address. What are human rights? What is the history of homosexual culture in Russia and America? How has media evolved in both countries? I then turned to my personal favorite database for academic sources, JSTOR, among others. There, I conducted exhaustive searches of scholarly articles regarding media and homosexuality in America and Russia.

To discover new information, the best technique was to branch out from the information I already had. If I would find an article about the development of media conglomerates in America, I would instantly search for other articles relating to the individual media sources. I found this to be a slightly time-consuming, but extremely effective way to cover all possible bases. Much information would have been lost had I not branched out my research, working my way from large topics, like media, to more focused streams, such as censorship and regulation.

Evaluating the sources was simple with the assistance of the University of Maryland Libraries and its affiliated resources, but proved much more daunting with the introduction of Russian media sources. Evaluating foreign language sources is more difficult because many of them cannot be held to the same standards as their English-language counterparts. For example, I can immediately identify certain sources as credible if they are located on a .gov URL. However, many Russian websites, including official government sites, end with .ru. This significantly limits credibility and demanded a different tactic on my part. Primarily, for Russian sources, I employed only those, which were from an official news media source, typically governmentally

censored. I omitted the use of blogs and YouTube channels. Although interesting, these sources can often prove futile and lacking in credible information.

Looking back on this project, I wish I had an opportunity to interact with somebody who has been on the forefront, somebody who has personal knowledge. Speaking with classmates, professors, and even my personal friends in Russia can only do so much. I wholeheartedly believe that the introduction of a lecture series would both inspire and inform students. The Russian Department recently hosted Dmitry Bykov, a well-known Putin critic and Russian opposition leader. The experience to interact with an actual dissident inspired me greatly and influenced the intensity of my research. If students get the opportunity to meet people who actually work on the front lines of current issues, they will be more cultured, inquisitive, and motivated to at least research the issue, if not incite change.

This research assignment definitely tested my ability as a researcher, student, and political analyst. I specifically chose a topic about which I had little to no previous knowledge. I learned about the structure of media sources in America and Russia, about the history of homosexuality, and, most importantly, the intersection of the two in the arena of human rights preservation and abuse. This topic is pressing and difficult, but I have concluded that my research only scathed the tip of the iceberg, as the majority of information is yet to come. My future goal to work in international relations has only become stronger after conducting this research. My project has shown me the importance of analyzing an issue from the ground up, not simply based on current events. The future persistence of human rights abuses is indubitable and I hope future research will shed light on the reasons behind it to strive for international cooperation.