

“If It Bleeds, It Sells”: How Western Media Reproduced Russian Propaganda Against Konstantin Rudnev

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the contemporary state of journalism in relation to the sensationalist treatment of religious groups labeled as “cults.” Focusing on the case of Konstantin Rudnev, a Russian citizen, it analyzes how media reports on his case have reproduced, across different national contexts, narratives originally developed by hostile, ideologized Russian media sources. The essay further investigates the emergence and circulation of these narratives, with particular attention to their connection to Hugues Cascan, Alban Bourdy, and French anti-cult groups. Through an examination of selected Western media outlets, the essay explores patterns of repetition and transmission in reporting on Rudnev, who has been imprisoned for years following accusations he contests and whose current health conditions have raised further concerns. The analysis contributes to the broader discussion on media practices, source verification, and the representation of minority religious groups in contemporary journalism. It also raises questions about the integrity of the journalistic profession and the harm that biased and distorted reporting can cause to people who should always be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

KEYWORDS: Ashram Shambhala, Alban Bourdy, Hugues Cascan, Groupe d’étude du phénomène sectaire (GéPS), Konstantin Rudnev, Yellow Journalism, Media and Cults.

Yellow Journalism

One of the most celebrated rivalries in the history of modern journalism was that between two publishers of the stature of Joseph Pulitzer (1847–1911, Hungarian by birth and originally named József) and William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951), particularly during the 1890s. Both were entrepreneurs (and later politicians), and both quite legitimately sought to make a profit. Yet doubts arise when one considers that, in pursuing that goal, they employed journalism, whose primary purpose is not profit but to inform, perhaps even to explain, theoretically to hold power accountable, and surely to preserve—or at least not to distort—the historical record.

As implied by the very language of communication, the term “media,” the plural of the Latin “medium” (“means”), designates the vehicles through which facts are conveyed to the public. Here lie the roots of the principle, commonly regarded as a hallmark of quality English-language journalism, that facts should be kept separate from opinions. In reality, journalism devoid of opinion is merely an illusion, and perhaps not even a desirable ideal. A journalist’s duty is, in fact, to report facts while at the same time enabling readers to develop a critical, reasoned and documented interpretative framework. That framework should ideally correspond to what civil-law jurisdictions refer to as an “amicus brief”: a systematic presentation of the facts, organized with the utmost logical and argumentative rigor by somebody who acts as a “friend (amicus, in Latin) of the court,” as distinguished from preconceptual advocacy or mere speculation. Thus, the principle of presenting facts separately from opinions should be understood as publishing articles that are neither arbitrary, nor unsubstantiated, nor unverified.

Pulitzer and Hearst, however, held that a swashbuckling approach to news was the easiest way to generate revenue, thus the most desirable. They then pioneered sensationalist, if not outright scandal-mongering, journalism, competing for readers and earnings through screaming headlines, forays into popular culture, and, not infrequently, outright falsehoods. This style came to be known as “yellow journalism” after the character “The Yellow Kid,” also known as Mickey Dugan, the protagonist of the comic strip “Hogan’s Alley” (later published under other titles), created by Richard F. Outcault (1863–1928). A shaven-headed, gap-toothed street urchin who tried to sell newspapers clad in a distinctive yellow nightshirt, the Yellow Kid became so popular that, between 1895 and 1898, both the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*, the rival newspapers owned respectively by Pulitzer and Hearst, published versions of the strip.

To claim that “yellow journalism” established the standard for subsequent media would itself be an exercise in “yellow journalism.” Yet, it is difficult to deny the lasting and growing influence of that model of news-making—and money-making—especially given the skyrocketing costs of the news industry. The driving idea that Hearst cynically popularized in the form “If it bleeds, it leads,” or “it sells,” has in fact remained remarkably persistent, albeit in subtler forms, even among less outspoken publishers. Meanwhile, the fact that the most coveted prize for excellence in journalism bears the name of the unscrupulous

Pulitzer, who established it in his own will (it was first awarded by Columbia University in New York in 1917), is a particularly bitter irony.

Enter "Cults"

Scandals bleed, and they sell best. If serialized, they may even earn prizes for the reporters who expose them. The most scandalous of all bleeding-and-selling scandals are invariably those involving sex, or gossip of a para-, pseudo-, crypto-, or quasi-sexual nature. It is becoming increasingly common, in every country, for mainstream media to rely on sexually suggestive images, headlines, or situations, whether explicit or merely implied. Advertisements employ the same language. And when the two combine, the result is an oversexualized hybrid in the genre now commonly known as "infotainment." Not infrequently, online media also feature side content or advertisements that border on open pornography.

Now, scandals and sex sell best when they bleed from "obscure," "mysterious" and, why not, even "conspiratorial" circles and cabals. "Cults" offer the best examples of this, and for a simple reason: according to the common narrative, a "cult" is associated per se with unorthodox or abusive sexual activities.

In fact, regularly showing little imagination, the stereotypical accusations levelled against "cults" invariably include secretive practices, socially deviant behavior, and public harm disguised as religious or spiritual customs; enticement and perhaps even grooming; the unlawful accumulation and management of substantial financial assets, said to have been acquired through donation schemes involving coercion, psychological manipulation, or other forms of undue pressure; fiscal crimes; manipulation; substance abuses; and, increasingly, human trafficking. It should also be added here that the latter thrives in a context in which laws intended to punish such crimes are increasingly invoked to resurrect discredited theories of psychological coercion (Palmer 2023; Introvigne and Vardé 2025; Vardé 2024, 2025; Introvigne 2026c). What is said to bind together all these unacceptable forms of conduct is "brainwashing" (Introvigne 2022), the quintessential "cultic" catch-all term, invoked to explain every kind of misconduct and, of course, the alleged procurement of illicit sexual favors.

It does not matter whether it is true. Readers are fed the notion that, of course, "cults" engage in such horrible acts precisely because they are "cults"; therefore,

if a group is a “cult,” it must engage in those horrible acts. The need to prove such allegations before accepting them is relegated to the background.

This form of “yellow journalism,” whether found in shabby tabloids, more serious broadsheets or online, begins downstream from the very notion of “cult,” the rule being that a “cult” sells at least as much as hypersexualized content. It, in fact, calls for frenzied consumption, not plain reasoning; it reassures readers in the protected environment of conformist tastes and mass attitudes; it is easy to digest and requires no effort.

Inclusion—with Exceptions

In the media, the words “cult” and “brainwashing” constantly recur in reports concerning religious groups regarded as somehow alternative to mainline religions—whatever “mainline” may actually mean. They also recur in accusations made against “mainline” religions themselves for practices, internal movements, and doctrines considered, in one way or another, excessively “intense” and therefore “extreme.”

But neutral journalists need not sympathize with so-called “cults” to recognize the grave abuse committed by their profession when it abandons its primary responsibility: reporting facts without distortion and providing accurate information. Professional ethics alone should, in fact, suffice. As scholars have abundantly demonstrated in a large number of scientific publications over the last decades, terms such as “cults” and “brainwashing” are, in fact, devoid of any scientific value. They contain no truth. So-called “brainwashing,” or its cognate concept of “mental manipulation,” perceived by its advocates as a kind of super-law capable of explaining human behavior, has been rejected by U.S. jurisprudence and the European Court of Human Rights as inconsistent with established legal principles (Introvigne 2022). When dealing with crimes such as rape, assault, child abuse, or fraud—often attributed to “brainwashing” or “mental manipulation” in cases involving “cults”—ordinary laws already exist and function effectively.

How, then, is it possible that mass media, which by definition address a broad non-specialist public, can use these terms without challenge and arbitrarily weaponize them? This is one of the great mysteries of

contemporary communication. In a world that claims to be increasingly tolerant and inclusive, linguistic guidelines and manuals proliferate, instructing journalists to avoid any word, adjective, or verb that might be considered offensive or disparaging toward groups or individuals, thereby promoting discrimination, stereotyping, body shaming, ridicule, bullying, or hate speech on the grounds of sexual orientation, ethnic background, or skin color. Yet the same standard does not apply in the religious sphere, where empty or even false expressions such as “cults” and “brainwashing” continue to be used routinely, without scandal, to the detriment of the victims—members of religious groups and scholars who demonstrate the inconsistency of such terms.

It seems as though the only convictions and practices that remain legitimately open to attack are religious beliefs and observances. It is as if the last acceptable prejudice were—and remains—a prejudice against religiosity. It is as if a “cult” of communication professionals and journalists committed to the maxim of seeing published only what bleeds aimed to “brainwash” their own readers and consumers by instilling caricatured narratives in their minds. Corruption—moral and otherwise—lies at the foundation of this degenerate approach to information. Some collusions and complicities explain certain improbable secularist wars against religions, both large and small, but in these cases, the profit is ideological.

Western Media A.D. 2026

An insult to the intelligence of readers, who in this way grow more and more uneducated, and a shame to the profession, yellow journalism finds a textbook case in the story of Konstantin Rudnev, which contains all that bleeds and sells: cultism, brainwashing, and sex.

The facts and details of the matter are known (Introvigne and Vardé 2026; Respinti 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e; Introvigne 2026a, 2026b; Di Marzio 2026; Amicarelli 2026a). Many other valuable findings and contributions are contained in the essays collected in the present issue of “The Journal of CESNUR.” And, given the seriousness of Rudnev’s health condition, due in relevant part to ill-treatment during detention, denunciations and pleas for a more humane approach have also been made (*Bitter Winter* 2026; Respinti 2026f, 2026g, 2026h, 2026i).

Research indicates that Rudnev's teachings came to be perceived as a threat by the Russian structures of power, namely the Orthodox Church and the government, operating in close alliance. At the same time, anti-cult activists further contributed to the escalation of the controversy, in a country such as the Russian Federation, where freedom of the press is severely restricted. Anti-cult campaigns targeting religious groups perceived as non-Russian continue to flourish, finding a receptive audience within the aforementioned power structures. The animosity toward Rudnev led to a series of heavily biased journalistic reports that have collectively shaped the public narrative and profoundly influenced readers' perceptions.

When Rudnev was arrested in Argentina in 2025, Western media reacted with a speed and intensity that surprised even seasoned observers of religious-freedom controversies. Within a few days, more than one hundred articles appeared across Europe, North America, and Latin America. Newspapers, television networks, online platforms, and wire services all rushed to cover the case. The tone was uniform: alarmist, sensationalist, and uncritically aligned with the Argentine prosecutors' narrative. It was the largest wave of Western coverage ever devoted to "Ashram Shambhala" (allegedly Rudnev's group) or to Rudnev personally. The contrast with the muted reaction to his first arrest in Russia in 2010 and conviction in 2013 could not have been sharper.

The 2025 arrest created a perfect media storm. A Russian spiritual teacher, a 22-year-old pregnant woman, a group of Russians detained together, and a prosecution eager to present the case as a dramatic victory against human trafficking—these elements were irresistible to Western journalists.

The scale of the coverage was unprecedented. In addition to Latin America, major outlets in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Finland, Belgium, and Australia published stories. Many of these articles were nearly identical, repeating the same claims in the same order, often using the same vocabulary.

The core narrative came directly from the Argentine prosecutors, who presented Rudnev as the mastermind of a transnational criminal organization. The most dramatic claim was that a young pregnant Russian woman, E., had been "trafficked" by Rudnev from Russia to Argentina for sexual exploitation and "cultic" abuse. The allegation was repeated everywhere, even though no evidence

was ever presented to support it, and the woman herself denied it (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 31–9).

Another claim repeated across Western media was that the Russians arrested with Rudnev were found in possession of drugs. This assertion was based on a single prosecutorial statement. It was later denied by forensic examination (what was originally described as drugs and hallucinogenic mushrooms was, in fact, sleeping pills and ordinary mushrooms for cooking: Introvigne 2026a). Yet it appeared in dozens of articles, often framed as proof of a “criminal network.”

A third allegation, even more bizarre, was that Rudnev was wanted in Montenegro for organizing the filming of pornographic movies. This claim originated in sensationalist Montenegrin tabloids that had recycled Russian propaganda and invented a connection between Rudnev and an unrelated police operation in Žabljak against a group of Russian tourists, none of whom was prosecuted. Western media repeated it without verification (Amicarelli, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

These three claims—trafficking, drugs, pornography—became the pillars of Western coverage. None of them was true.

Copycat Press

The most influential Western report was a CNN service published on April 11, 2025 (Fernández Martino and Humayan 2025). CNN quoted Argentine prosecutor Fernando Arrigo, a man widely criticized for his cavalier handling of evidence and his almost pathological hostility toward Rudnev (Amicarelli 2026b, Amicarelli 2026c; Di Marzio 2026; Introvigne 2026b). Arrigo claimed that the pregnant woman had been brought to Argentina “[...] for sex trafficking and slavery.” CNN published the quote without questioning it, without seeking independent verification, and without interviewing the woman herself.

CNN also acknowledged that its background information on the Rudnev case in Russia came from official Russian media, particularly the governmental press agency RIA Novosti. This admission was extraordinary. RIA Novosti was not an independent source. It was a state propaganda outlet. Yet CNN treated it as authoritative, repeating its claims about Rudnev’s past without noting that Russian

courts have repeatedly been criticized for fabricating cases against minority religious movements.

If CNN provided the authoritative tone, the Spanish newspaper *El País* provided the sensationalism. In a particularly vicious article, *El País* reported inter alia that Rudnev had been shooting movies of “ritual pornography” in Montenegro, a claim demonstrably false (Rivas Molina 2025).

The most damaging allegation—that Rudnev trafficked a pregnant woman—was also the easiest to disprove. Scholars, including María Vardé (Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 31–9), located the woman, who had returned to Moscow after giving birth in Argentina. She explained that she had traveled to Argentina for the same reason thousands of Russian women do every year: to give birth so that their children can acquire Argentine citizenship. She denied being part of any “cult.” She denied being trafficked. She denied being a victim. She stated that she had never met Rudnev personally. A single interview would have demolished the narrative. Western media did not conduct it.

The contrast with the first wave of Western coverage in 2013 is instructive. When Rudnev was arrested in Russia, Western media paid little attention. The most important article was published in *The Telegraph* (Parfitt 2013), a respected British newspaper, but known for an anti-cult bias, when Rudnev was sentenced in 2013. It limited itself to reproducing official Russian sources. There was no investigation, no interviews, no independent verification. The article was forgotten until Rudnev’s arrest in Argentina in 2025.

Hugues Gascan and Alban Bourdy

One exception to the Western media’s limited interest in Rudnev before the 2025 arrest in Argentina comes from a cluster of French-language publications, all dependent on two figures working together against “cults”: Hugues Gascan and Alban Bourdy (Introvigne 2024; Šorytė 2026, 68–73; Introvigne and Vardé 2026, 2). Their influence was disproportionate to their credibility.

Gascan, a former medical researcher, had reinvented himself as an anti-cult crusader after a personal and professional conflict inside a research laboratory in Angers, France. His accusations against colleagues, his fixation on “cultic infiltration,” and his harassment conviction for stalking a female colleague he

falsely accused of being part of a “cult” connected with “Ashram Shambhala”—upheld by the Court of Cassation (Cour de cassation 2013)—are well documented (Šorytė 2026). His hostility toward anything Tantric became a personal obsession. He later founded Groupe d'étude du phénomène sectaire (GéPS, Study Group of the Cult Phenomenon), a tiny anti-cult group that presented itself as a major investigative force.

Bourdy, who presented himself as a former leader of a French offshoot of “Ashram Shambhala,” reinvented himself as an anti-cult activist after falling in love with the Chilean spiritual teacher María Soledad Domec Espinoza. In his autobiographical 2018 book *Un Bisounours au pays des se(x)ctes* (Bourdy 2018b), he claimed that he had been appointed leader of Ashram Shambhala in France with Rudnev’s approval. He also claimed that Rudnev had issued death threats against Domec, speaking to her from his Siberian prison, when she was trying to separate from him and form her independent group. For anyone familiar with Russian prisons, the story is fantastical. Rudnev was allowed to speak by phone rarely, only with his wife, and calls were monitored. He had disbanded any organization before his arrest and could not have managed or organized a group from jail.

What actually happened is somewhat different: Rudnev taught thousands of students, and while he was in jail, several developed independent teachings, sometimes using the name “Ashram Shambhala” and sometimes hiding references to him while using his books. He was not responsible for their activities and knew nothing about them during the eleven years he was imprisoned. Bourdy also wrote three novelized accounts of evil Tantric groups, his love for Domec, and his horrific experiences in the “cult Ashram Shambhala,” admittedly works of fiction, although “based on a real story” (Bourdy 2014, 2016, 2018a). He never offered any evidence of contact with Rudnev, and his comments about the Russian teacher are based on Russian media and accounts by disgruntled ex-members rather than on direct experience.

Despite this, French anti-cult journalist Olivier Hertel presented Bourdy’s story as credible, even testifying in the French Senate (Sénat 2013). Bourdy also spoke at an anti-cult conference in 2026 in Salamanca (Bourdy 2026), presenting a paper originally prepared for another conference held almost 10 years before and referring to Rudnev as his leader at the time Bourdy was a “cultist,” even though he had never met the Russian spiritual teacher. The French anti-cult organization

Union nationale des associations de défense des familles et de l'individu (UNADFI, National Union of Associations Defending Families and Individuals) cites several articles on its website, unadfi.org, that rely on Gascan and Bourdy, creating an echo chamber that Western media later mistook for independent reporting.

The Western misreading of the Rudnev case can thus be traced to three sources:

1. Early Russian official reports, which framed Ashram Shambhala as a dangerous “cult” and portrayed Rudnev as a criminal.
2. The French cluster centered on Gascan and Bourdy, whose personal grievances and fantasies were mistaken for investigative journalism.
3. The Argentine prosecutors, who in turn relied on Russian sources and provided Western media with sensationalist allegations.

The Religious Illiteracy of the “Free Press”

Originating in Russia, the anti-cult narrative against Rudnev followed him to Montenegro, where no one knew him before the local press began recycling old Russian information and even outdated pictures. In Montenegro, he had no organization, collected no followers, and gave no spiritual teachings. From Montenegro, the same narrative resurfaced in Western media as a perfectly timed ticking time bomb when Rudnev relocated to Argentina. In all cases and countries, the conventional narrative triggered or accompanied police raids, arrests, detention, and inhumane treatment. For sure, the free press in what still claims to be identified as the free world can do better.

The so-called free press in the free world showed such a poverty of creativity that it merely repeated the false claim that Rudnev had escaped from Russia, where his “Ashram Shambhala” had been banned, only to rebuild that allegedly dangerous “cult” elsewhere. The supposedly free press was so eager to follow the Russian cliché that it portrayed Rudnev as the leader of a poisonous “cult” bearing a name that was itself old and spurious (the groups registered by Rudnev in Russia had different designations), a name usable only once it had been properly understood what it actually refers to. Moreover, after his detention in Russia, Rudnev never established any organized group under that name or any other name, either in Montenegro or in Argentina. Most probably, the “exotic” sound of “Ashram Shambhala” (two common terms in East Asian religious and mythological

traditions) was considered perfectly suited to the stereotype of the toxic “cult” and was consequently misused, further offending readers.

Doesn’t the so-called free press feel the weight of the fact that its derivative and formulaic yet calumnious reports may have played, and may perhaps still be playing, an important negative role in the continued denial of transforming Rudnev’s detention in Rawson Prison, Chubut Province, Argentina, into house arrest? Prosecutors have filed repeated appeals against judges who ruled in favor of a man who is in a highly critical health condition and has suffered intolerable treatment after a delicate surgical operation. He is now being requested to be sent back to prison after a short period of house arrest granted for medical reasons.

Why is the so-called free press so vulgar as to repeat falsehoods such as the claim that, in Montenegro, the police raided the place where Rudnev was staying in September 2021 and found a “cult” operating there? (Rudnev debunked this allegation in the interview Respinti 2026b, clarifying an important detail reported in Respinti 2026a; documents support his version; see Amicarelli, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). In fact, it was merely a routine document check that local media distorted by reproducing Russian propaganda, thereby fueling the narrative of the dangerous “cultic” leader being pursued by law enforcement.

Why is the so-called free press doubly vulgar in disseminating lies, such as the claim that the house where Rudnev could enjoy a brief period of house arrest in the Spring and Summer of 2026, while preparing for a delicate surgical intervention with his wife, Tamara Siburova, is a fancy villa with a swimming pool, well-kept gardens, and recreational areas spread over a considerable piece of land? These media are subtly suggesting that they live in luxury and are not a persecuted couple whose human rights and religious liberty are systematically denied with arrogance. In fact, the place itself (as a video reveals: Respinti 2026d) is neglected, damp, and surrounded by swampy ground. Can journalists accurately describe places they have never visited, merely copying information from the internet, as in this case, relying on an advertising description used to rent the property?

Western media, including respected outlets, parroted what tainted sources said. They did not investigate or verify. They did not consult scholars. They did not question the narrative.

The result was a cascade of misinformation that shaped international perceptions and contributed to the persecution of a man whose case deserved scrutiny rather than sensationalism.

The Rudnev case is not only a legal scandal. It is a media scandal. It reveals how easily misinformation can become international, how quickly narratives can solidify, and how difficult it is to correct them once they have spread. It also reveals the anti-cult bias of Western media, which treats any accusation involving a “cult” as inherently credible, even when a quick fact-check would expose it as false.

Western journalism must do better. And Konstantin Rudnev deserves better than to be judged by headlines written thousands of kilometers away, based on rumors, propaganda, and prosecutorial rhetoric.

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