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04 Sep 2009 11:52 am

Self-Censorship Went Out With Denim Vests

by Julian Sanchez

NPR reports that management at Conde Nast acted to suppress a *GQ* story on "Vladimir Putin's Dark Rise to Power," seeking to keep it off the Web, prevent print copies of the issue in which it appeared from being sent to Russia, and generally prevent it from getting any traction or publicity. Admirably, in what the NPR story calls an act of "quiet defiance," *GQ* editors nevertheless brought the story to the attention of other news outlets.

In a way, though, what I find more unsettling than the poor judgment of an individual lawyer is what it implies about the media environment. Because the executive who handed down the order must have acted on the assumption that an order, to professional journalists and editors, to bury an important and properly-reported story would be complied with. That is to say, it did not appear cross management's mind that the response would be a very loud, public, and embarrassing "screw you." I'm gratified that the editors were not, in fact, entirely compliant, but I'm not sure what the expectation that they would be says about the state of the profession.

The other somewhat surprising thing is how successful the suppression attempt initially was. Because the article *did* still run in the U.S. print edition of a fairly high-circulation magazine, which hit newsstands over a week ago, and the only Google results for the article's title, as of late morning, were half a dozen references to the NPR story. Nota bene, incidentally, to publishers who think keeping content offline or locked behind paywalls is a winning strategy. (Full disclosure: I used to work for Conde-owned publication—where, for what it's worth, I was never aware of any improper pressure on editorial from corporate.)

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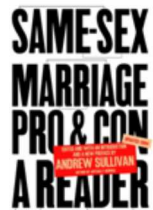
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