

INTRODUCTION

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Today, two decades after perestroika began, Russia stands once again at a crossroads on its quest for self-identification. The world continues to watch in suspense as it anticipates which path Russia looks poised to take: western integration, or rebirth as an alternative world power. Recent developments in Russia's media have shown it to be both a victim of Russia's strenuous politics and a reflection of the country's historical path. The media in Russia has been confronted with the same challenges and paradoxes of democracy that plagued the nation as a whole throughout the 1990s and that bear their fruit today. Thus, the aim of this book is to offer an introduction to the Russian media in its struggle to become the Fourth Estate, focusing in particular on its development in the post-Soviet era.

This book will explore the Russian media along two vectors, delving into its 300-year history (time) in order to weigh in on its current landscape (space). It is not a history, but neither is it merely a descriptive almanac of the various Russian media and their roles. Given that readers are acquainted with Russia to some degree through current events, it is inevitable that they have also formed some picture of where its media stands. This book will flesh out that image and give some perspective on the main challenges that the Russian media has struggled with in the past and which continue to shape its present and future.

In its centuries-long legacy of relations with the rest of the world, Russia has taken on the role of a promising, but misguided, and often menacingly boisterous, student. Since the fall of communism, each time the international spotlight falls on Russia, the first question that usually comes to the minds of many westerners is, 'Is Russia reverting back to its totalitarian ways?' Because free speech is the cornerstone of a free nation, that question has been inevitably directed, first and foremost, at Russia's media. Thus, for the last two decades, the question has been framed, 'Is the Russian state once again clamping down on the media and curtailing free speech?'

While the purpose of this book is not political, any honest and sober description of the Russian media cannot avoid that question, simply

because it is the first and frequently the only one that is being asked about the Russian media. Framed in this way, however, it begs one of two answers, both of which would give an equally biased picture of where Russia's media stands.

The first answer would argue that yes, the Russian state is indeed clamping down on the media, here are the myriad ways it is doing so, and here are the dangers this clampdown will bring. Through this prism, the explanation fails to address Russia's media on its own terms, trying instead to assess it based on a rigid, western paradigm that presupposes the media as an inherently free 'adversary' of the state, while the definition of 'free media' also falls under an equally rigid, western understanding of the term.

However, the second answer, that the Russian state is *not* clamping down on its press, would place us in an even trickier position. The arguments in favour of this point of view would inevitably fall into one of two categories: either defending the actions of the state based on its allegedly beleaguered position and a need to act in the interests of the people, or blaming the critics by arguing that Russia's media is being judged according to double standards, since western media, subordinate as it is to advertising and business interests, is actually no 'freer'. Both of these arguments, which have been used both in Soviet Russia's political doctrine (and are being rehashed by today's government) and by critics of the West at home, are logically and historically suspect.

Instead of answering a reductive question and compounding the misconception, a greater and more worthwhile challenge is to formulate the right question. One of the underlying problems of this task is the tendency to define Russia and Russian issues using comparisons to an echelon, in this case, the West, and measuring its media according to the standard, 'western' idea of a 'free' media. Both of these concepts are notoriously hazy, but if we wish to explore the Russian media and its prominent issues head-on, we will not be able to avoid them.

What is the West, and can Russia ever become a part of it? In the purely geographical sense, of course it cannot. For all purposes, however, the West has come to stand for a number of industrialized democracies with high standards of living, chiefly the USA, Europe, Canada, Australia and Japan. Because Russia long ago entered the path to industrialization and has stumbled upon the path of democratization, it has inadvertently measured itself according to those standards. So has the West, with western European nations 200 years ago issuing virtually the same critiques of Russian society as they continue to do today. We will leave that discussion aside, using it only as a comparison to how Russia's media is viewed.

The same applies to Russia's media. However, adequately defining a 'free and independent' media would possibly take up an entire book on its own. For Russia's purposes, we will understand a free and independent media as a system that effectively spreads information through all sectors of society, a system where state involvement, if any, cannot be such that it alters, in any considerable way, the nature of the information that is being

spread. The questions that should be asked are: to what extent has Russia ever had a free and independent media and to what extent does its current, post-1990 media landscape represent a free and independent press? Finally, to what extent is that media capable of representing and impacting on society? These are no trivial questions, and they will underpin our discussion of where the Russian media stands today and how its origins inform its current condition, focusing in particular on its current, post-1990 travails.

First, it is important to examine two reoccurring concerns that, taken together, are unique to the Russian media. The first characteristic is the messianic nature of Russian writing as a whole, and Russian journalism in particular. The second revolves around the absolutist role of the Russian state, not as a force that *dictates to and curtails* the media, but as one that, a priori, *creates and sustains* the media, whether loyal or oppositionist. As we explore the media, we will see that these characteristic concerns not only persist throughout its history, they also re-emerge as challenges to its current development. As we see how the ‘liberation’ of the press in 1990 negated neither the presence nor the effects of these characteristic aspects, we will come to a better understanding of the kinds of questions we should be asking about where the Russian media – and even Russia as a whole – is headed.

Messianic snobbery: towards a populist media?

The Russian intelligentsia likes to welcome guests and foreigners with a self-deprecating saying: ‘A poet in Russia is more than a poet’. In its ever more sardonic variations, this famous phrase has become, ‘The man of letters is bigger than a man of letters’, or even ‘The writer in Russia is bigger than Russia’. The original meme was immortalized in a poem by Yevgeny Yevtushenko,¹ but it easily encompasses Russians’ attitude not just towards their literature, but towards the written word as a whole. This attitude has been particularly vexing for the journalist. Not regarded with quite as much respect as the writer, the vaunted ‘engineer of the human soul’ (an apt but daunting description, considering it came from Joseph Stalin in an address to the nation’s top writers in 1932),² nevertheless the journalist was, by the very nature of his profession, charged with the responsibility of informing the masses. In Russia this task was made even more gargantuan by the vast chasm historically separating the literate elites and the illiterate masses. Aided and abetted by a culture that lauded only its quickest and sharpest pens, not necessarily those who actually got around to *informing* the public of newsworthy events, the Russian journalist developed his share of messianic snobbery.

Perhaps the most apt characterization of the journalist’s role in Russia was given by Vladimir Lenin, who outlined party propaganda as the chief *raison d’être* of the media in an essay published in 1905: ‘Newspapers

must become the organs of the various party organizations, and their writers must by all means become members of these organizations. Publishing and distributing centers, bookshops and reading rooms, libraries and similar establishments — all must be under party control.’³ While this much is probably already known by Russia-watchers, it should not be interpreted as Lenin’s own innovation, as a state of affairs that suddenly came into being at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, Lenin was, to a large extent, describing not so much how things should be under the dictatorship of the proletariat, but how things had been in Russia at least for the past several decades, if not centuries.

Lenin’s call for party-led journalism should not be confused with the partisan journalism that was a feature of the nineteenth-century European press. In many ways, the Russian press of the time would appear similarly ‘partisan’ in the sense that it represented ‘parties’ or camps, and its content swayed heavily towards the didactic. The glaring difference, however, was the lack of a ‘party’ system in Russia. Europe’s partisan newspapers, particularly those of Great Britain, reflected the political processes and debates of existing parties. They were the extension, in other words, of a democratic process. In Russia, meanwhile, there were no legal political ‘parties’, in the western sense of the word, to take advantage of the media by using it as a press organ. Instead, throughout the nineteenth century, there were ‘camps’ (the Russophiles and the westernizers, for example) and various marginalized or outright illegal parties, all of them equally removed from the political process.

Indeed, the primary feature of the printed word in Russian culture was its underlying didactic and messianic principle, and a press need not necessarily be partisan to be didactic. Even at those times when it was purely informative, Russian journalism was still inherently didactic due to the near monopoly that first the Church, then the state, had on the printed word from the very start (we should remember that there were no newspapers in Russia before the eighteenth century). Peter the Great’s efforts to westernize his country were indeed messianic in nature. His launching of the first newspaper, *Vedomosti*,⁴ in 1702 was messianic in the sense that he was building upon an important aspect of his westernizing mission, and he was the one who would deliver Russia from its backwardness: Russia would have a newspaper, like other European countries. With the media founded on this top-down model originating with the state, it was inevitable that adversaries of the state would also be bound by an opposite, but equally messianic, information paradigm.

However, elements of messianic journalism are not unique to Russia; after all, the whole idea of investigative reporting can arguably be called messianic. Still, the messianic nature of Russian journalism in its early years was characterized not by what it had, but by what it lacked: the idea of information as commodity, of facts being valued in and of themselves.

Russian textbooks on the history of journalism and the media say little about mass circulation newspapers and tabloids. One reason is that this particular journalistic medium appeared relatively late, in the end of the

nineteenth century, due in part to low literacy rates and the resultant lack of a mass readership. Another reason, however, is that this mass of written content provided little for media historians and critics to analyse. Whereas a newspaper essay by Chekhov or Chernyshevsky is not only a sample of Russian journalism at its best, but also offers sharp insight into contemporary polemics, the same could hardly be said of a news blurb in a provincial newspaper about the installment of a street lamp at the town's busiest intersection. Since the Russian analytical tradition, grounded in Marxism and Hegelian dialectics, was characterized by a propensity to describe events as a struggle between two adversaries, there was little room for journalists to ponder how two inches of text about a street lamp could also impact society – particularly by helping to get street lamps installed in other places.

The Russian press did include news items from the start; after all, Peter the Great's *Vedomosti* was a newspaper in the classical sense of the word. But news items were rarely a feature in and of themselves. Instead, they were treated by most serious publications either as secondary additions or as platforms for discussion. According to American scholar Louise McReynolds, Russian newspapers eventually did commodify the news, but much later than newspapers did in the West; furthermore, this period of commodified news was short-lived, since it was hijacked by the exclusively political objectives of Bolshevism. In the meantime, the distaste with which the elite treated (and, in many cases, continues to treat) commodified news rubbed off on its treatment of all news circulated by mass print vehicles. This led to a split in the newspaper medium between serious periodicals discussing news that concerned the elite, and cheap tabloids devoted to developments concerning the majority of citizens.

These issues play deeply into how journalists define themselves as herald bearers of a free press and a fourth estate that can impact policy and bring about social change. Reporting on community events, gathering locally-important news and building the kind of information network that could benefit grassroots initiative was valued far less than revealing the misdeeds and cover-ups of those on high, challenging the authorities in their most controversial endeavours, and, indeed, simply *provoking* authority. Thus, instead of fortifying the press as a fourth estate, these issues all had the opposite effect of reinforcing the absolutism that circumscribed the press and highlighting the press's own vulnerability.

Mouthpiece of the state: the challenges of a viable emancipation

In 2004, President Vladimir Putin was asked at a Kremlin press conference about free press in Russia. He responded with one of the cutting *bon mots* for which he had already become notorious in his four years of power: 'There is a phrase in a famous Italian film – "a real man should

always try, while a real woman should always resist”⁵. Interestingly, Putin did not indicate which role the press should take. Nevertheless, the comment was later reprinted by journalists and media scholars with certain interpretive additions: ‘the government, as a man, should try, while the press, as a woman, should resist’.⁶ *Moskovsky Komsomolets* columnist Alexander Minkin even openly accused the president of condoning rape and alluded to the phrase in subsequent columns.⁷

Since we only have the official *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* as the source of the original quote, there is no telling for certain what exactly Putin said, let alone what he could have actually meant. What is noteworthy here is the readiness with which journalists interpreted the phrase to their own disadvantage. After all, it would be equally logical to see the press as trying to uncover information, and the government as resisting leaks. Indeed, according to the official report, Putin later clarified his remark: ‘the government always tries to reduce criticism, while the media finds everything it can to get the government to see its mistakes’. If that was actually what Putin said, then the defensive role appears to fall on the government, not on the press.

Whatever the president was trying to say, the manner in which the phrase was reprinted shows the extent to which journalists have internalized their subordinate role. They can hardly be blamed, for, in the 300 years of the Russian mass media’s existence, that media has been, with few exceptions, directly dependent on the state in terms of funds, means of production and even editorial initiative.

The defining feature of Russian journalism is that it emerged from its start in 1702 as a top-down, government-sponsored endeavour. Whereas private periodicals had already been published for centuries in Europe, Russian society at that time had simply not yet got around to establishing any sort of grassroots, private publications. To a large extent, society was still grounded in feudalism by the government’s grip on all methods of production and its hold on much of the country’s infrastructure. That feudalism, characterized by mass illiteracy among the serfs, prevented the development of any mass readership for newspapers or magazines.

Peter’s *Vedomosti* did not just serve to launch the nation’s media. In effect, the newspaper laid the foundation for an entire journalistic tradition, establishing the newspaper as an extension of the government, with its primary purpose rooted in propaganda. While commercial publications in other countries developed gradually, based on models offered by private periodicals, in Russia they were begun as a result of government efforts, seemingly as an afterthought, not by direct initiative from below. Furthermore, the czar’s government held a monopoly on reformist efforts, which led to a sort of Catch-22 of reform: the good intentions behind the many instances when Russia’s leaders actually did take the task of fostering a viable media and a fourth estate into their own hands were completely negated in practical terms, since the very act of top-down fostering ran counter to the whole purpose of the fourth estate, which was to foster civil society from the *bottom*. Therefore, it was only rarely that the Russian media succeeded in impacting political and

social change without prodding from the government. Two of the most prominent successes are Emperor Alexander II's liberal reforms and Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, or openness, in the media. In both cases, however, journalists succeeded precisely because the country's leaders were open to change and dialogue themselves.

The pivotal point in the history of the Russian media, as we shall see in this book, was Gorbachev's 1990 decree eliminating party control of media outlets and allowing non-party groups and individuals to establish and release their own publications. This was not the only attempt to do away with preliminary censorship, but it was by far the most successful, ushering in an entirely new era when newspapers and television were given unbridled freedom to discuss events and criticize policy. Also, the birth of the new media of the 1990s coincided with the birth of a new nation. In 1991, the Soviet Union fell apart and the Communist Party tumbled from power, leading to the creation of the Russian Federation.

New or not, it was nevertheless a media that spoke and wrote in the same language, and, more importantly, relied on the same Soviet-era broadcasting, printing and distribution infrastructure. Through this language and infrastructure, Russia's post-Soviet media inherited the same cultural traditions and the same dependence on the state that governed the preceding 300 years of journalism. Contemporary media's struggle with that legacy, and its consequences, will be the focus of this book.

The spread of advertising

One important feature of any media system that is absent from this book is advertising and public relations (PR). It is crucial to stress that this absence does not imply a minimal role for advertising in the Russian media; quite the opposite. In fact, it is precisely the importance of the sphere of advertising and PR that convinced me that this book does not offer sufficient space to discuss it as it deserves. A brief numerical overview, however, may be in order. It should also be mentioned that readers may have the misleading impression that Russian advertising and PR were born concomitant to the breakup of the Soviet Union. This is not the case. Rather, these industries flourished in the 1990s, but this development simply reflects the enormous post-collapse influx of capital and so is comparable to similar surges in other media. Another problem that complicates an adequate treatment of the subject is the notoriously murky advertising climate that developed in the 1990s, particularly on television.

One issue related to advertising that warrants mention in this section, however, is consumption. With consumption remaining strong in Russia regardless of market indicators, Russians demonstrate unique consumption patterns that deserve separate research. As a result, their attitudes towards – and, hence, the effectiveness of – advertising is influenced by a legacy of social trends, including the 'shopping deficit' of the Soviet

Union, which, market analysts say, is still being compensated for to this day. In the current economic climate, oil exports finance both a predilection for consumption (fuelled by low taxes and relatively high levels of disposable income) and the introduction of newer brands in a similarly booming retail market. The Russian advertising market, meanwhile, has proved to be the fastest growing in the world.⁸ In September 2008 it was valued at \$7.4 billion, according to the Association of Communication Agencies of Russia. Since 2000, it has been growing at a rate of up to 60 per cent. While this figure was lower than what Gallup forecasted in 2005, that it was ‘only’ up 20 per cent from the previous year indicated that market growth was slowing down for the first time since 2000.

While this book is not the place to lay out a formal causal relationship between the booming advertising market and Russian spending habits, some figures indicating the social standing, net worth and influence of each medium are noteworthy. According to TNS Gallup,⁹ in 2006 Russia occupied the twelfth spot worldwide in advertising expenditure, trailing Canada and Australia (the first and second spot were occupied by the USA and Japan, respectively). In 2005, television accounted for over 46 per cent of advertising, while newspapers held just 5.8 per cent and magazines 11.6 per cent. In contrast, the print media, which witnessed a steady surge of advertising during the 1990s, would see its share of total advertising shrink by 2005 to 4.2 per cent for newspapers and 10 per cent for magazines. By 2010, advertising shares of other media are predicted to shrink, giving way to the expanding presence of television and the internet. By 2010, their advertising shares are forecasted to increase to 56.6 per cent and 4.9 per cent, respectively. In real terms, however, newspaper advertising is growing at a similar rate as television advertising, according to the Russian Association of Communication Agencies.

The bigger realm of PR is an even more serious issue for Russia. Given how its media has for centuries served propaganda, the sudden emergence of commercial PR to a large extent incorporated the know-how of government propaganda, forging a uniquely Russian PR culture. In spite of, or perhaps because of, this, the Russian government’s efforts to form an effective PR policy have also notoriously failed, even though it commissioned the US-based Ketchum Inc. as its chief PR consultant. A policy of secrecy, silence and excessive caution still reigns, where open discussion could easily improve the standing of the Russian government in the West, something that was illustrated during the August 2008 military conflict in Georgia over the pro-Russian separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Russia’s internal propaganda rallied the Russian population and proved a general success on the home front, it quickly began losing the global information war precisely because of its lack of PR, while rival President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, with his fluent English and US advisers, used PR to his full advantage.

Book structure and overview

The purpose of *The Media in Russia* is not to provide a comprehensive history, but rather to acquaint readers with the Russian national media's unique characteristics and to provide an interpretive framework of cultural and historical phenomena affecting each medium's development. The book approaches this subject less from an academic perspective than from the point of view of the needs of a broad general readership. I will weigh in on my own 10 years of experience working in the Russian media as a reporter and journalist, and outline how the population, the media consumer, relates to what is being shown on television, printed in newspapers and broadcast over the radio. The first three chapters give a general overview, while the remainder of the book is devoted to particular mediums: the press, television, cinema, radio and the internet.

Chapter 1 gives readers a sense of the social impact of the media in today's Russia. It sketches out the particular challenges facing the various media and, most importantly, compares their relative audience impact. I will also identify and describe the most prominent television channels, radio stations and newspapers, so that readers will be familiar with them and ready to encounter them in subsequent chapters. Using surveys, ratings and polls, the chapter presents Russia's media playing field not from the point of view of media critics, but from the point of view of the audience, analysing to what extent Russians trust their media, what they prefer to read and watch, and where they get their news. The concept of news will also be introduced in this chapter, highlighting the differences between Russian news and news agencies and their European counterparts. A comparative overview of each media will spell out the chief issues to be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 explores one of the central themes in this book: control, ownership and power in the Russian media. Unlike other chapters, it focuses heavily on the current situation and its development throughout the 1990s. It will define the problem of media independence and analyse how the media's financial dependence on the government impacted on the ability of the Russian media as a whole to reinvent itself as a viable mediator between the government and the public. The turmoil of the 1990s, with President Boris Yeltsin's struggles to build a democracy and implement liberal economic reforms, dealt a serious blow to the nation's free press by plunging media outlets into free market conditions in which many were simply not prepared to survive. Within a few years, media outlets were bought out or taken over by politicized capital. During the second half of the 1990s, the oligarchs used their media assets – which included leading newspaper and television stations – as their primary weapons in vicious muckraking campaigns against each other and against Yeltsin's ailing government. Such media campaigns are no novelty in developing countries. In Russia, however, their sheer intensity and the closeness with which they followed the only brief period of unbridled media freedom that Russia had ever known, served to shatter illusions

among the public – and among journalists themselves – that the media was finally free in Russia and could go on to forge a meaningful and lasting fourth estate. It is in this context that we need to understand the efforts to rein in the most influential media outlets through takeovers by state-affiliated monopolies, efforts which occurred throughout Vladimir Putin's presidential administration. The government's role in these takeovers is undisputed, but their intent and purpose are less clear.

Chapter 3 delves into the historic meaning of freedom for the Russian media. The chapter outlines Russia's status in terms of media freedom, security for journalists and censorship. It will directly address the question of whether Russia has ever had a free press. It will also explore the different meanings of censorship and how they play out in the Russian media, for example, by attempting to differentiate issues of security from direct government clampdowns. An important section of the chapter deals with the history of Russian censorship, based on research presented in a book by Russian media scholar Grigory Zhirkov. This historic context will be presented not as a simple linear development, but as a testament to the inherent journalistic legacy that plays into the Russian media today. Parallels can be drawn from many historical periods to the specific problems that the Russian media continues to deal with to this day. Readers will then be able to identify the origins of some of the current conflicts regarding media freedom in past instances, when the Russian press was given considerable liberties, only to see those liberties taken away.

The chapter will also examine the current security issues facing journalists, pointing to an abundance of threats that reporters continue to face in Russia, not necessarily because of any direct government clampdown, but due to issues of corruption and crime. The chapter will also offer specific examples of the circumstances under which journalists have been harassed. Journalists frequently fall prey to corrupt business and government interests, but they remain doubly vulnerable due to an extremely malleable justice system that protects neither the country's journalists, nor the entire population as a whole, from embedded corruption. Legal aspects of control are also explored as readers are introduced to current media law and what it entails.

Chapter 4 tackles the oldest journalistic traditions by examining the origins of Russia's print media. As the oldest medium, print journalism can be credited with laying out the framework, the ideals and the controversies inevitably inherited by newer media like radio and television. The history of Russian journalism combines the two main paradoxes that form the cornerstone of this book: that the state-led, top-down nature of Russian newspapers hampered their ability to bridge the gap between the government and the people as a whole, while the flourishing of independent, literary journalism, while fostering criticism and dissidence, only widened the gap dividing the people into mass readers and elites. In modern-day Russia, these clashes have created a dilemma already familiar around the world: is it possible to make a newspaper both serious and influential on the one hand, and popular and profitable on the other?

Focusing on several modern newspapers, including the tabloid *Moskovsky Komsomolets* and the once influential *Moskovskie Novosti*, the chapter will explore the origins of this dilemma and how it plays out today. In particular, it will spotlight *The Moscow News*, Russia's oldest running English language newspaper, and will follow its development from a 1930s PR stunt to its de facto status as a translation of *Moskovskie Novosti* in the 1990s, to its renewal in 2007 under the auspices of the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

Chapter 5 devotes itself to film and television. Since much of the conflict over ownership and control of this powerful media resource is discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter will focus more on content. It will identify the origins of modern television, both Russian and foreign, in the early twentieth-century works of avant-garde filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. They transformed filmmaking into a powerful tool, regardless of the format (news or propaganda) in which it was used. The chapter will then track the development of Soviet television programming from the 1930s through to the present day, analysing changing attitudes towards quality. At the heart of Soviet television programming was its propagandistic and educational function, which, during the years when broadcasting was live, established some of the best traditions in television. Older generations, especially, tend to regard 'classic' Soviet television much more favourably than today's programming. Early programming was primarily aimed at educating the public about various professions and the successes of the state, while frequently showcasing role models in a talk-show format that grew immensely popular throughout the 1960s.

With its primary function as a powerful, demonstrative tool of communist propaganda, the use of television as spectacle began emerging early on. The 'spectacle', defined by Ivan Zassoursky, one of the prominent young media experts in Russia today, reached its pinnacle during the 1990s, when even political news was presented in such a way as to entertain and shock rather than inform. The power of television to impact history is evident in the role it played during the 1991 coup and its subsequent use during the first Chechen War, the presidential election and the media wars towards the end of the decade. The chapter closes with a description of contemporary entertainment programming that addresses the questions of quality standards and the absence of an independent regulating body. Since this type of regulation falls on the government, it is often difficult to distinguish between political motivations and quality concerns; tellingly, the job of warning television stations of infraction is carried out by none other than the prosecutor general.

Chapter 6 discusses radio, Russia's most underestimated medium. At once totalitarian and egalitarian, the early Soviet government used it to target the illiterate masses and thus bridge a gap that the printed media had failed to overcome. As a medium that did not require literacy to be effective, radio continued to surpass television in sheer size of audience, even after televisions became common in Soviet homes. Unhampered by the expenses associated with television broadcasting and print media

production and distribution, in the current media landscape radio easily shirks government regulation even as it retains the potential to reach thousands of listeners. The chapter will cover the history of the medium in Soviet Russia, paying special attention to the legacy of Yuri Levitan, the famous announcer from the 1940s and onward. This chapter will juxtapose the central role of radio with the pluralism it helped foster when rock music burst onto the scene during perestroika. While television entertainment was of little or no political value during the 1980s and early 1990s, rock was a political statement in and of itself, arguably as powerful as the newly-liberated newspapers in its potential to criticize the government and rally the like-minded. The sudden launch of FM radio and a variety of music formats quickly allowed Russian radio to catch up with its western counterparts. The re-emergence of talk radio and the staying power of news radio stations like Ekho Moskvyy mean that radio as a medium can be both popular and influential.

The final chapter deals with the internet – perhaps the most promising medium in terms of its ability for creating networks and forging a semblance of civil society. The Russian internet suffers from the same paradox as print media: despite a host of online news sites and magazines, despite a closely-knit, sophisticated web culture and a lively, politicized blogosphere, so far it has little standing in the population as a whole. While the number of internet users has surged and continues growing steadily, it still makes up but a fraction of the population. Meanwhile, among those who use it, very few regard it as a source of news, information or analysis, using it mainly to chat, send email and play games. Chapter 7 will examine this paradox by delving into the roots of the Russian internet, from its beginning in the mid-1990s to the present day. A special section is devoted to the peculiar hold that Livejournal has taken on the country's educated elite, not so much as a social networking tool, but as a source of news analysis and self-expression.

The book concludes with a look at where Russia's media may be headed, and what course the paradoxes outlined here may take: what chances does Russia's media have of forging a lasting civil society, how are those processes playing out, and which media are involved in taking Russian journalism to new heights?

1 THE CURRENT MEDIA PLAYING FIELD

- **The old Russian media vs. the new**
- **Forms of media and their roles**
- **The news in transformation**
- **Beyond authoritarianism and towards a fourth estate**

During the last century, two factors played a determining role in the state of Russian mass media: the authoritarian model that dominated all spheres of life and subverted information for purposes of propaganda, and the parallel rapid rise of electronic media. If censorship and government control have at some point been a feature of media development all over the world, in Russia this legacy had a particularly profound and lasting effect, considering that it was the government itself that frequently played a progressive role in forging its national media, by creating and bolstering outlets that it would then use to control public opinion. If Marshall McLuhan's famous 'the medium is the message' still rings true in Russia, where the surge of electronic media came particularly fast and where its development was particularly dynamic, then another paradigm, 'the government is the message', also applies in a tradition where any halfway successful outlet is either launched by the government or eventually made subservient to it. Combined with the near-sacred status traditionally occupied by the written word, this legacy goes hand in hand with Russian journalism's penchant for ideology and propaganda, regardless of who the organ serves. And while a number of relatively information-oriented newspapers had begun to appear prior to the Bolshevik revolution, it was the legacy of the journalist as an instrument of propaganda that persevered. In this environment, the rise of electronic media like radio, cinema and television – which, due to their very nature, could serve as powerful tools in manipulating mass consciousness – were instrumental in grounding these traditions into an electronic infrastructure. But new media also played a dramatic role in fundamentally transforming the purpose and function of mass media in a place that touted itself as a nation of readers.

Before we can begin exploring the state of mass media today, we must look at what Russians themselves understand by the term 'mass media' and how that term is defined legally. Both definitions – popular and legislative – differ somewhat from the meanings ascribed to this concept in the West.

A pivotal point, as we shall see in later chapters, was President Mikhail Gorbachev's declaration in 1990 that anyone could establish a mass medium. In order to understand what this means, we need to keep in mind how mass media in Russia was stipulated in the law before and after this crucial point in time. Prior to the 1990 law on mass media, only government and party-affiliated organs could start up their own publication. This meant, essentially, that a citizen of the Soviet Union could not start a newspaper. All that changed with Gorbachev's decree, which meant that any citizen could found a newspaper or other publication. But the decree did not change the mindset that was formed of a restrictive legal understanding of what mass media is, and who – and how – it is to be founded by.

Indeed, according to current legislation, not everyone can establish a newspaper. In fact, in order for a media outlet to exist at all, an application for registration, which, among other information, must include sources of financing, must be filed with the Press Ministry. The current law states, for instance, that

A notification about the receipt of an application with the indication of its date shall be sent to the founder or the person authorized by it. The application shall be subject to consideration by the registration body within a month since the said date. A mass medium shall be deemed to be registered upon the issue of a registration certificate.¹

Besides the legal effects that this law has on the state of media ownership, it also inevitably helps define mass media in Russia as a whole. On the surface, there is the linguistic difference. What we refer to as 'mass media' can be expressed in two ways in Russian: the direct transliteration, or mass media, which is less common, and *sredstva massovoi informatsii* (SMI) – literally, 'instruments of mass information'. The latter is more commonly used both in the legal sense and in layman's terms. And while the classic, dictionary definition differs little from that of the western expression, first coined in 1920, SMI is associated with a much narrower scope – possibly reflecting the restrictions laid out in the legislation. In other words, if the English word 'media' encompasses news, entertainment, the internet, video, DVD and even other forms of communication, SMI, while it formally encompasses all those things as well, is more frequently used to pertain to journalists and journalism – whether in print outlets, television, radio or the internet.

The old Russian media vs. the new

In a country where the printed word has traditionally held a revered status, its newly-acquired freedom in 1990 plunged the Russian media into a sea of uncontrolled competition with the new electronic media, this time without the safety net that Soviet control used to provide. When the fall of the communist regime issued Russian newspapers, in effect, a carte

blanche, they had only one direction to go in: reveal everything that had been censored by the Party in the years past. Readership, which was always large in the Soviet years, remained so and even increased in the early 1990s (depending on the publication). But in the following years, with much of the printed press unable to sustain itself in free market conditions and suffering from a crisis of genre and identity, newspaper readerships plummeted. As it did so, it created new ideological and informational vacuums which were quickly becoming filled by newer, more powerful media – television, radio and the internet. In his 2004 assessment of the economic playing field of the Russian media, Semyon Gurevich wrote:

The television market is developing the fastest. Using its unique capabilities of presenting its audience with visual information, television has quickly usurped some of the most important functions of the press and pushed it into the information field where television's capabilities were limited.²

This did not mean, however, that newspapers stopped developing. The 1990 media law caused the number of periodicals to surge dramatically, and it continues to grow to this day. But this growth pertained not so much to a development of each separate publication as to the rise of specialized periodicals – indeed, a niche that was not fully exploited during the years of the Soviet Union.

Russia's identity as a nation of readers peaked during the Soviet Union period, when the communist government achieved virtually 100 per cent literacy nationwide through its education reforms. But with the introduction of the free market in the 1990s this began to change as more and more Russians began to get their news, entertainment and information from television. And while this change had been noticed for decades in the West, in Russia – where it was more pronounced, more sudden, and more drastic – the change occurred virtually overnight. In her look at audience patterns for printed media, Russian media scholar Irina Fomicheva registered the following shift:

The irregularity of contact between the press and its audience led to a shifting of roles in the mass information system. By the beginning of the 1990s newspapers lost their leading status as sources of information in general and in particular as sources of practical information to television and radio. Television became a leader not only in the cities (where this process began earlier) but also in the provinces.³

Before we can begin to explore in depth each of these media and the challenges they face, we must understand what each of them means for the Russian media consumer. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to paint a picture of the information world that the Russian media consumer currently inhabits. Only by understanding how Russians themselves see their media and perceive the information around them – including the prejudices and distrust that they harbour towards the journalistic

profession as a whole and certain media in particular – can we begin to get a clear sense of the nuances and contradictions that set the Russian media apart from that of the rest of the world.

Forms of media and their roles

The printed press

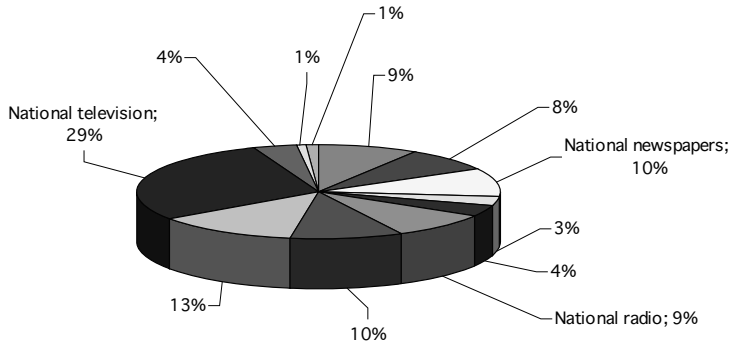


Figure 1.1 Where Russians get their news⁴

The unique power of the printed word in the Russian media has relegated its press – newspapers and printed periodicals – to a special status of traditional influence. It is because of this that some of the most pivotal changes in the Russian media during the 1990s revolved around both the wane of the newspaper and the transformation of the concept of news and journalism.

To understand some of the recent and historical processes that have impacted this transformation, we should look at the types of publications that exist in Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To do this, it is useful to pinpoint two parameters that distinguish publications today – their *scope* and their *genre*.

The scope of a publication refers to the location of its target audience – i.e. whether a newspaper is *national*, *regional* or *district-level*. Polls show that this is a very important factor in terms of readership.

Russian periodicals can be categorized into two genres: the *mass circulation periodical* and what journalism scholar Lyudmila Resnyanskaya calls the *quality publication*. As of 2006, ratings show that national ‘quality’ publications – the ‘serious’ periodicals that are often quoted in the West, such as *Kommersant* and *Izvestia* – are read by very few people nationwide in comparison to national mass circulation periodicals. And while this is a typical situation for newspapers around the world, the difference in readership between mass circulation periodicals and ‘serious’ publications in Russia actually underlines the struggle of the independent

media to make any meaningful impact in politics and society. Resnyanskaya gives the following definition of a mass circulation newspaper:

The standard of a 'mass circulation newspaper' includes a financial model that counts on a large audience with various tastes and interests ... The functions of informing and entertaining become top priority. The aesthetics of a mass circulation, universal newspaper are built on simplification, banalization of political, economic and social issues, heightened interest in pop culture, scandals, and exploiting 'boulevard' themes. Post-Soviet mass publications, having staked on entertainment, sensationalism ... increasing the amount of information on health, family relations, free time, travel, and advice, conform to such 'standards of quality'. As interpreted by mass publication newspapers, the world of the reader is quite comfortable, understandable, not burdened by social and political collisions, not contradictory, while the events are usually fast-paced.⁵

Resnyanskaya identifies the three leading newspapers in this category as the *Argumenty i F акты* weekly, and the tabloid dailies *Moskovsky Komsomolets* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. These publications, with a long Soviet legacy, work as 'attention grabbers'. As for quality publications, this group:

Traditionally includes analytical publications, either universal-themed or specialized. Periodicals of this level have a different quality in comparison to mass publications. The target audience of quality publications primarily includes elite groups that are interested in exchanging information on issues that affect all of society ... This type of publication, being an instrument of information and analysis, plays the role of an uninvolved observer, a rational critic, and an energetic mediator between the government and society ...⁶

Resnyanskaya identifies several Soviet-era newspapers as conforming to this model: *Trud*, *Izvestia* and *Moskovskie Novosti*. During the 1990s, a number of other 'quality newspapers' appeared – the leading titles in this category being *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Kommersant*.

Those familiar with the American press might be tempted to allude to examples of the difference between, for instance, *The New York Times* and *The New York Daily News*. But in Russia's case, this would be very misleading. Take, for instance, *Kommersant* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. Both are national publications, meaning that they are theoretically available all over Russia, and not just in Moscow. However, travelling outside of Moscow or the Moscow region, it is very difficult to find a kiosk that will carry a copy of *Kommersant*.

Ratings underline this problem. As of July 2007, the top 50 newspapers in terms of average issue readership (AIR) did not include a single 'quality' publication as defined by Resnyanskaya. *Argumenty i F акты* scored the highest rating, with 11.3 per cent AIR; *Komsomolskaya Pravda*'s weekly edition scored third place, with 8.7 per cent readership.⁷

TNS Gallup ratings, which PR experts describe as the most reliable gauge of a publication's popularity for advisers, paints a similar picture. By 2008, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* boasted the highest AIR among daily newspapers, with 2.25 million readers across Russia (the only daily to exceed that was *Iz ruk v ruki*, an advertisement catalogue). In contrast, among serious publications, the state-run official organ, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* scored the highest, with 991,700 AIR. It was followed by *Trud* (435,700 AIR), *Izvestia* (424,900 AIR) and *Kommersant* (347,400 AIR).⁸

Television

The dominance of television was already visible soon after perestroika. Given the nature of the average Russian household, which has fewer television sets than in the West, this dominance is even more striking. According to a 1993 survey by the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research, more than twice as many people got their news from television as from newspapers. As a source of information about events in the country, television ranked first, with 86 per cent, followed by radio (43 per cent), then newspapers (28 per cent). Although Russians relied so heavily on television for their news, by the year 2000 only 60 per cent of households owned at least one television set.⁹ We can compare this to the prevalence of television in the nation most notorious for its TV watchers – the USA. There, 99 per cent of households own at least one television set. But a far larger segment of the US population gets its news from newspapers than in Russia. Compared to Russia, just 52 per cent of Americans watch TV news, while 34 per cent of Americans read a newspaper.¹⁰

What is even more significant is that in 1993 most Russians, unlike Americans, did not have access to cable news. Historically, the Soviet era, until the 1980s, provided Russians with four television channels. These were Channel 1 (the 'first programme' or 'first button'), Channel 2 (the all-Union programme), Channel 3 (regional programming) and Channel 4 (educational). Much of the population in the provinces, however, had access only to Channels 1 and 2. Channel 5 was available in St Petersburg.

In the 1990s, this framework remained the same despite the surge of private capital. Today, although there is a larger number of available channels, the first five channels reflect the Soviet model, even in name: the first channel, after being renamed ORT in the early 1990s, is back to being called Channel 1. It is state-owned and still the most watched station nationwide. Channel 2 is now called Rossiya and is also state-owned. Channel 3 is owned by the Moscow government and covers local news, while Channel 4 was bought by Vladimir Gusinsky and, as NTV, became the founding block of his media empire. NTV became the first and most acclaimed independent television station in Russia before it was taken over by the state-owned Gazprom.

Despite the appearance of new channels that are predominantly geared towards entertainment (STS, TNT, REN-TV, DTV), television ratings¹¹ reflect the descending order of the channels themselves, illustrating to what extent tradition and the Soviet legacy still determine popularity (see

Figure 1.2). Another rating,¹² which can serve as a better gauge of trust towards and the pervasiveness of certain television channels, examines the popularity of each television channel separately as opposed to relative to other television channels (see Figure 1.3).

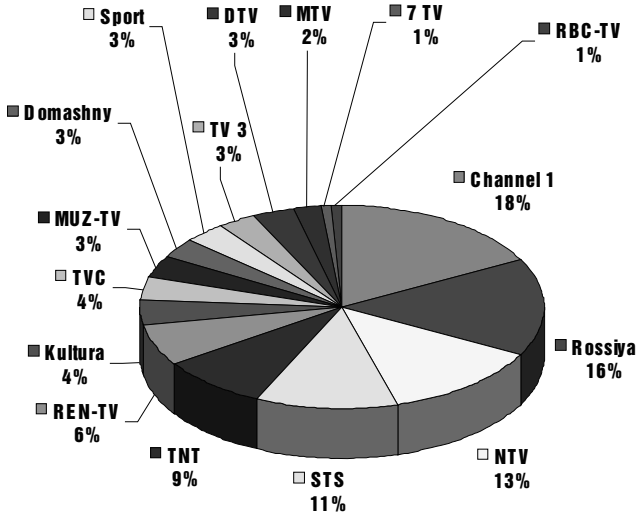


Figure 1.2 Television station ratings: audience share

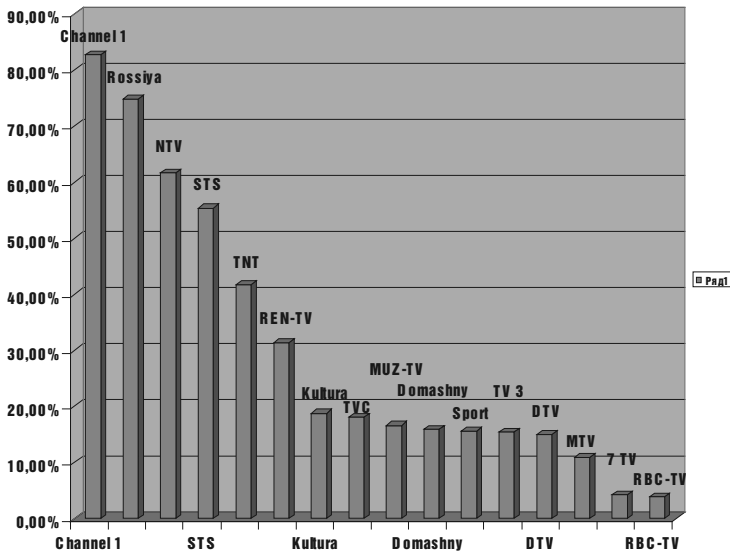


Figure 1.3 Television station ratings: audience preferences

It is difficult to measure how much trust Russians actually have in such a pervasive medium as television. But despite the undisputed preference for television by Russian media consumers, Russians tend to display a condescending attitude towards television content, and do not appear to trust the medium any more than they trust newspapers. What may serve as a gauge of the general distrust is the frequent animosity that can be gleaned from the treatment of television by media analysts and political technologists.

Radio

Combining some of the troubles and advantages of print media and television, radio – a symbolic medium of the twentieth century – remains surprisingly influential across Russia and the former Soviet Union. Partially due to Russia's size and, until recently, to the limited access to television, radio remains the chief source of information for much of the population, particularly in remote regions. It is influential both as a source of political information and in its use for entertainment, particularly for 'background music'. As such, it rivals the influence of television. Indeed, Yassen Zassoursky, Russia's premier journalism scholar and a rector of Moscow State University's journalism department, identifies radio as the most 'open' information source.

While radio fails to rival television in terms of sheer political influence, recent Moscow-based studies suggest that in some cases radio can garner an audience that is even larger than that of television. Moreover, in contrast to television, Russia's radio boasts popular stations that are not only 'independent' politically but sometimes vehemently oppositionist. In Moscow alone, nearly 74 per cent of survey respondents say they listen to the radio during the day.¹³ The political influence of radio, while much less than that of television, can still be deemed considerable. From a political point of view, the data presented in Figure 1.4 is notable.

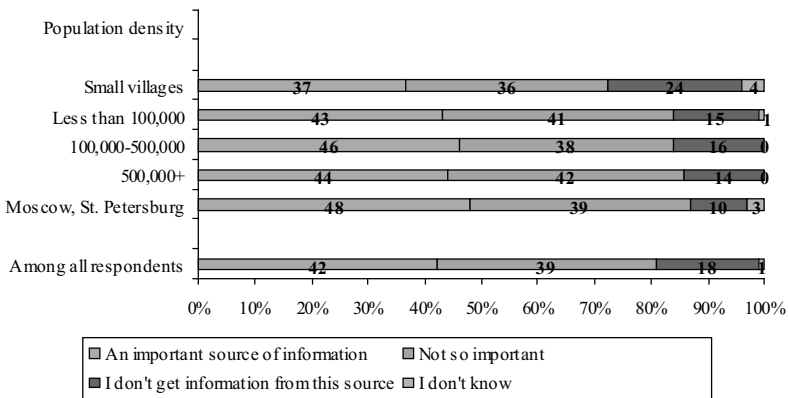


Figure 1.4 Is radio an important or not so important source of political information during election campaigns? Importance of radio as a source of information based on population density¹⁴

Radio in Russia can be classified, much like the print media and television, both according to scope and genre. Musical subgenres, however, are broad and hard to classify on the current radio scene. Like the print media, radio stations in Russia are classified as all-national or federal stations, regional stations and local or municipal stations.

- *National* stations broadcast over the entire population. They include state-run stations like Radio Russia, which has the largest radio audience in the country (41 per cent of men and 49 per cent of women listen to it), and Radio Mayak, which holds third place for audience size.
- *Regional* radio stations broadcast over a region or *oblast*, as well as over a large city.
- *Local* radio stations are broadcast over small towns and residential areas.

Like other media, radio stations are also classified not only by their broadcast scope and audience, but by what they broadcast. Journalism scholar Lyudmila Bolotova identifies *universal* radio stations, *information* radio stations and *musical-entertainment* radio stations.¹⁵

Despite the general popularity of musical entertainment, the nation's historical, state-run universal station, Radio Russia, remains the most popular, echoing a similar situation in television. A typical example of the Soviet legacy of universal broadcasting, Radio Russia, much like the BBC, has traditionally broadcast news, talk shows, music, sociopolitical and analytical programmes, as well as plays. In the words of Bolotova, it has been able to retain the best of national radio broadcasting.

Information radio stations offer frequent and in-depth news broadcasts, featuring talk shows that are more geared to current events than universal radio stations like Radio Russia. The most popular example is the state-run Radio Mayak. Launched in 1964, it still personifies Soviet news radio despite a modern overhaul. Currently it airs news every 15 minutes and offers listeners a wide variety of interviews, benefiting from an extensive network of special correspondents around the country and abroad.

Since its launch in 1990, the independent, commercially-owned Ekho Moskvyy radio station has been another leader in Russian information radio. Bolotova calls it the only real commercial information radio station, and despite its current ownership by the state-owned Gazprom gas giant, it remains one of the few vocal critics of the political regime.

By far the more dynamic segment of national radio has been the music/entertainment category, which burst on the scene in the early 1990s with music that predominantly targeted young audiences. Despite the popularity of Radio Russia, the music/entertainment category still remains the most widely listened to.

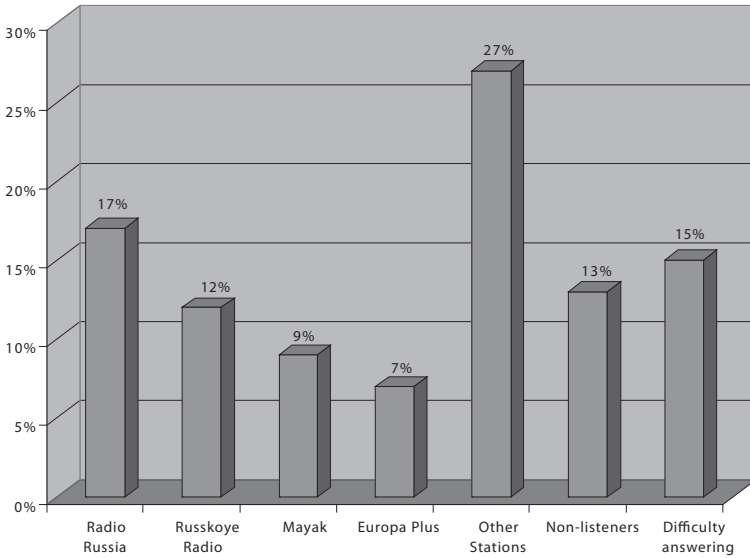


Figure 1.5 Radio station ratings: audience preferences¹⁶

As we can see from Figure 1.5, while Radio Russia is favoured by 17 per cent of respondents, the number two leading radio station was Russkoye Radio, a widely popular musical station launched in 1995. As the first station to broadcast only popular music in Russian, it witnessed phenomenal success, and after over a decade of broadcasting remains the most popular commercial music station in Russia. Europa Plus, the preferred station of 7 per cent of respondents, also broadcasts predominantly in the music/entertainment category, mostly focusing on international adult contemporary entertainment. According to the same poll, music, news and sport make up the most widely listened-to programming in Russian radio broadcasting, explaining both the popularity of Radio Russia and the music/entertainment stations.

In this context, it would be illustrative to return to the significance of Ekho Moskvyy as a unique information radio station, in some sense a beacon that helped launch independent broadcasting in Russia. While Bolotova identifies it as the ‘unchanged leader of information broadcasting’, given the polls cited, this ‘leadership’ is not reflected statistically in terms of audience size. The survey cited above shows that of the information radio stations, radio Mayak leads the way in popularity. This points to a peculiarly Russian dichotomy of popularity versus influence in the media sphere, much like in the printed media. In other words, the most popular outlets are not the most influential, while the most influential frequently have a much smaller audience. In that sense, we cannot measure the extent of Ekho Moskvyy’s leadership in terms of scope – instead, its significance lies in its legacy, credibility and pervasiveness as an oft-quoted source of news.

Launched in August, 1990 by the journalism faculty of the Moscow State University together with the USSR Association of Radio and the *Ogonek* magazine, Ekho Moskvy was, in the words of Yassen Zassoursky, not only the first independent radio station, but the first independent mass medium. As such, it reflected the dominant characteristics of other independent media even as it came under the ownership first of private capital, then the state-owned Gazprom: frequent quotability, particularly in the West, and relatively low ratings nationwide, particularly outside of Moscow and St Petersburg. The same inherent dissonance plagued the so-called ‘quality’ print media and, as we shall see later, the internet.

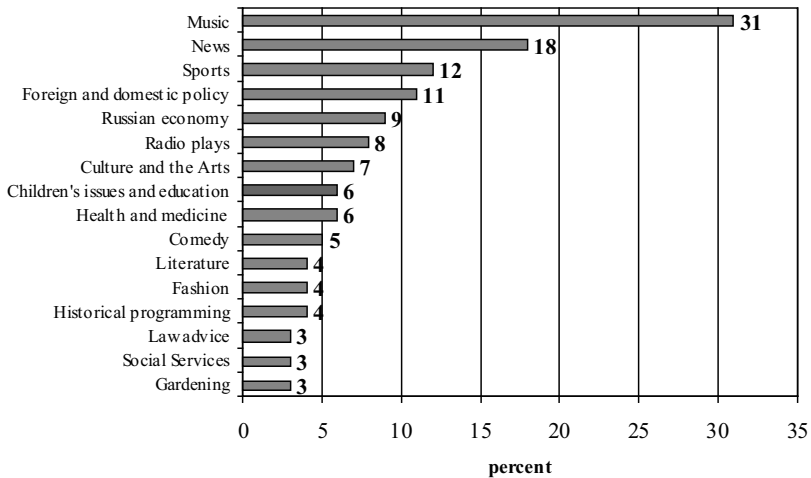


Figure 1.6 Thematic preferences of radio audiences¹⁷

Internet

At the start of the twenty-first century, the internet remains the most paradoxical media phenomenon in Russia. Even though the number of Russians with access to the internet continues to grow rapidly, it is still but a fraction of the population. Despite its impact, often touted in the western media, a strikingly small proportion of the population actually has access to it, let alone uses it as a source of information. The sheer success of online media projects launched in the late 1990s and the liveliness of its often politicized blogosphere were in fact limited to a narrow percentage of the population, predominantly the educated elite.

This paradox can be partially explained by a circumstance practically unique to Russia: the appearance of the internet coincided with unprecedented freedom of the press. Thus, the technology for a fundamentally new medium became available just in time for a new journalistic paradigm to sprout, a paradigm that did not entail control and sustenance from the government. The fact that online media were so cheap to sustain and so difficult to control spurred budding internet journalists into action.

The Russian internet's status as arguably the only true free medium, with a whole slew of successful, exclusive media outlets, is hampered by the fact that for a free medium it is still accessed by a far smaller proportion of the population than in the West. From the start, RuNet, as Russians frequently call their internet, was aggressively populated by primary news content sites with no print analogues, whereas in the West information sites are predominantly online versions of printed newspapers. Very frequently, this meant that the RuNet took over as a source of information where traditional media like print, radio and television lagged behind due to issues of freedom, independence and the logistics of infrastructure. On the one hand, this allowed Russia's internet to develop very rapidly despite a relatively small percentage of the population being able to access it. But on the other hand, it ironically played a role in restraining the development of the print media.

While we will look in depth at these paradoxes and contradictions in Chapter 7, it is helpful here to understand what place the internet actually holds among Russian media consumers, and how it is used in comparison to other sources of information. A comprehensive study by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research in 2006 found that not only did a fraction of the Russian population actually use the internet, but their trust in and understanding of the internet as a medium was limited as well. According to the survey, when respondents were asked whether they used the internet and how often, a striking 76 per cent said that they did not use it at all. Figure 1.7 shows how the internet was used among those who did access it. Even

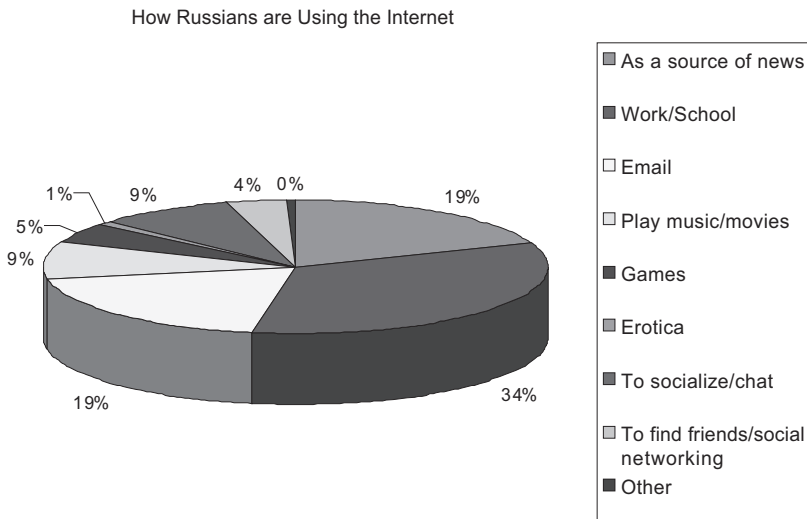


Figure 1.7 How Russians are using the internet

among the more affluent, cosmopolitan and younger respondents – the ones most likely to use the internet – 21 per cent to 27 per cent (depending on the category) characterized the internet as an ‘important source of information during political campaigns’. But among those likeliest categories, between 40 and 53 per cent said they did not use it at all. This points to a perennial problem not just in Russian media but in its politics and civil society – when we do speak of any significant impact or transformation, it more often than not affects the elite exclusively, and only to a small extent the rest of the population. The Russian internet, it seems, is no exception.

The news in transformation

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the appearance of the internet and freedom of the press, Russians became exposed to new concepts of news. And with a surge of independent news agencies, a new style of news presentation was adopted in a strikingly short period of time. The new presentation format frequently led to clashes in style and genre, particularly in the print media, which had to quickly adapt to a new format of news coverage.

At the heart of this new development was the transformation of the news agencies themselves. Before we can begin to explore the impact that independent news agencies had on the media in post-Soviet Russia, we must look at the origins of what made Russian news agencies – and hence, the Russian concept of news – unique.

In the West, news agencies appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century, facilitated by the electric telegraph. The giants of today – Agence France Presse, Associated Press in the USA, and Reuters, all came into being in the nineteenth century, originating with existing newspapers and syndicates. The style in which they presented their hard news was already a reflection of existing news presentation in newspapers, at least in the case of Associated Press, which had its roots in newspaper syndicates. According to Stuart Allan’s *News Culture*, in Britain and the USA, as early as the middle of the nineteenth century,

... journalists were placing a greater emphasis on processing ‘bare facts’ in ‘plain and unadorned English’. Each word of a news account had to be justified in terms of cost, which meant that the more traditional forms of news language were stripped of their more personalized inflections.¹⁸

Hence in the West, the process of carving out the concept of hard news had begun practically with the creation of the telegraph. From the start, hard news presentation was firmly rooted in the commercial aspects of private newspaper syndicates.

In Russia, the news agencies that had begun appearing around the same time floundered, while those that did survive ended up at the mercy

of the government. Some newspapers, such as *Birzhevye Vedomosti*, had their own telegraph bureaus as early as 1862. By 1866, the Russian Telegraph Agency was launched, but pervasive censorship and state control continuously nipped its development. 'The agency had received permission to have its own bureau in various cities, to publish its telegram bulletins and sell them',¹⁹ writes an official history published in 2000 by the Russian Education Ministry, in a testament to the kind of conditions in which news agencies were forced to compete. According to Louise McReynolds, Russia's media infrastructure at the time was no match for the western news system:

In 1870, to avoid competition, Europe's Big Three news agencies – Reuters, Havas, and Wolff – formed a cartel, dividing the world into 'colonial' news territories. Russia came under the Germans' dominion, which effectively meant that the majority of news flowing into and out of Russia would be filtered through the Wolff Bureau. Additional stories came from European periodicals, but only after the time lag of publication and distribution. Russia's small and poorly funded private news agencies, which operated through a succession of twelve-year leases granted by the government, could not compete with the cartel.²⁰

This state of affairs paved the way for the St Petersburg Telegraph Agency, which began to operate on 1 September 1904. As Russia's longest lasting major telegraph news agency, it was launched on direct order of the czar. This is but one example of how efforts at modernization and industrialization in Russia have inevitably come from the top, thus owing their livelihood to, and being controlled by, the government. The St Petersburg Telegraph Agency was the predecessor of what is now the partially state-owned news agency ITAR-TASS.

Characteristically, the origins of the agency did not lie in newspaper services or syndicates – instead it was directly initiated by the Finance Ministry, the Foreign Ministry and, even more tellingly, the Ministry of the Interior. Its champion, the reform-minded finance minister Sergei Witte, was himself a former journalist. Czar Nicholas II approved the agency with the purpose of 'report[ing] within the Empire and abroad on political, financial, economic, trade and other data of public interest'. Historically, however, the purpose of the agency seemed to have been an ill-fated quest by the government to both foster an effective news service and control it. As McReynolds puts it,

The notion that public opinion could be influenced by the circulation of factual information resulted in the establishment of an official telegraph news agency, the St Petersburg Telegraph Agency (PTA). From the time its charter was issued in 1904 until the Bolsheviks took it over as their own in 1917, the PTA led a precarious existence trying to meet the ideal of its founders. It functioned, often unwillingly, as the central institution where

debates raged between advocates of the public's need and right to be informed and those who valued the autocratic ethos of disregarding that public's opinions.²¹

PTA would serve, under several names, as a blueprint for a highly centralized system of providing information during the Soviet period and afterwards. In 1918 the now-Bolshevik government renamed the agency the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA), creating 'the central information agency of the whole Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic ...' In 1925, it spawned the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), the precursor to today's ITAR-TASS.

While news agencies were traditional extensions of the newspaper business in the West, their purpose in the Soviet Union was entirely different. Not only an instrument of propaganda, TASS doubled as an intelligence mechanism for the Supreme Soviet, its controlling founder. Its employees, frequently acting as simultaneous information sources for security and intelligence, obtained information that was destined for the analytical desks of the KGB. Conveniently, some of its unclassified information was distributed to news outlets inside the country.

A slightly different function was served by the Soviet Union's other major news agency, APN. Created by the Foreign Ministry in 1941 as Sovinformburo, it focused initially on issuing reports from the World War II front that were destined for radio, newspapers and magazines. In 1961, it was renamed Agentstvo Pechati 'Novosti' (Print Agency "News"), or APN, and shifted its priorities to foreign propaganda and the dissemination of information abroad. Indeed, according to its official statute, the purpose of the agency was 'spreading truthful information about the USSR abroad and familiarizing Soviet society with the life of people in foreign countries'. It was also involved in obtaining foreign intelligence. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, it transformed into RIA Novosti, a state-run news agency that apparently abandoned gathering intelligence. Its function shifted to news. Committed to the same principles of 'spreading truthful information' about Russia, it would go on to launch Russia's first English-language news channel, Russia Today, in 2005.

The deeply ingrained, pre-Soviet practice of direct government control of news agencies makes the explosion of independent news agencies like Interfax following 1990 all the more revolutionary. Used for so long as a direct instrument of propaganda (and intelligence), first by the Russian Empire and then by the Communist Party, the whole idea of news as hard facts was somewhat askew in the minds of many Russians. When Russia finally did get a free press in 1990, the journalists, severed from a predominantly authoritarian tradition by perestroika, didn't exactly know what to do with their freedom to report on the hard news as it happened. The idea of a *lede* – the first line stating the who, what, when and where of a news item – hardly existed. Hence, the initial concept of objectivity was initially understood to mean printing what had hitherto been suppressed or made taboo. The inevitable fetish for sensationalism that this approach sparked was hardly the best environment for fair and

balanced reporting. Journalists understood, however, the pressing necessity of a new news format if there was to be any semblance of an unbiased exchange of information. In the light of the proliferation of independent news agencies, this need was all the more immediate.

One of the pioneers of the new style of news presentation was the *Kommersant* business daily, which targeted what was emerging as an educated and relatively affluent middle class. The newspaper itself grew out of the Fakt news agency, which was launched in 1987. It is telling to look at *Kommersant's* interpretation of the new news ethic, in a mission statement that it laid out for itself:

In order to understand what kind of revolution *Kommersant* accomplished, one should recall that journalism in the USSR was very different – from the headlines to the way the information was presented. In those times, every intern, even when writing about a fire at a poultry plant, strove to demonstrate the talent of a columnist. That was why news articles so often started off with a lyrical digression, with historical or philosophical allusions.²²

Thus, nearly a century after it had done so in the West, the separation of fact from commentary had begun. This separation would remain, however, as little more than a vulnerable fine line, so superficial that it was frequently crossed, even by *Kommersant's* best journalists.

Beyond authoritarianism and towards a fourth estate

As we explore in depth the history of each medium in Russia, we should keep in mind what the surveys can tell us about how Russians perceive their media world. Despite the country's widespread literacy and the traditional power of the spoken word, we have seen how print media has been floundering in post-Soviet Russia, while the power of electronic media – television and radio – is even more pervasive than in the West. The paradoxes pointed out in each respective medium reflect, on the one hand, the imprint that authoritarianism has left on Russian media, while on the other they reflect the ability of the media to continue to manipulate the masses, despite the population's general distrust of that media.

The legacy of authoritarianism has left a media that struggles with its own internal problems even in the liberated environment that it was given in the early 1990s. In the following chapters we will explore the origins of some of these paradoxes, and try to answer the questions raised in this chapter regarding the habits of Russian media consumers.