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Structure and Exposure: Dilemmas of Democracy in Russia's Television Market

Ellen Mickiewicz

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The *Donald W. Treadgold Papers* publication series was created to honor a great teacher and great scholar. Donald W. Treadgold was professor of history and international studies at the University of Washington from 1949 to 1993. During that time, he wrote seven books, one of which — *Twentieth Century Russia* — went into eight editions. He was twice editor of *Slavic Review*, the organ of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, and received the AAASS Award for Distinguished Contributions to Slavic Studies, as well as the AAASS Award for Distinguished Service. Professor Treadgold molded several generations of Russian historians and contributed enormously to the field of Russian history. He was, in other ways as well, an inspiration to all who knew him.

The *Treadgold Papers* series was created in 1993 on the occasion of Professor Treadgold's retirement, on the initiative of Professor Daniel Waugh. Professor Treadgold passed away in December 1994. The series is dedicated to the memory of a great man, publishing papers in those areas which were close to his heart.

Sabrina P. Ramet
Editor

About the author of this issue

Ellen Mickiewicz is the James R. Shepley Professor of Public Policy Studies, Professor of Political Science, and Director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Communications and Journalism of the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy at Duke University. A specialist on media and politics, especially in the former Soviet Union and Eastern/Central Europe, she is also a fellow of the Carter Center. Dr. Mickiewicz was the first American to be honored by the 120,000-member Journalists' Union of Russia for her contribution to the development of democratic media in the region. She is the author or editor of numerous journal articles and of seven books, including her most recent, *Changing Channels* (published by Oxford University Press in 1997 and in an expanded paperback edition by Duke University Press in 1999), which is a study of the role and impact of television from 1985-1999. An earlier book, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (Oxford University Press), was designated the Electronic Media Book of the Year by the National Association of Broadcasters and the Broadcast Education Association. In 1997, Dr. Mickiewicz received the Murray Edelman Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Political Communication by the American Political Science Association. A former Guggenheim fellow, she has also served on the advisory boards of the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars and the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center. She is currently a member of the advisory boards of *The International Journal of Press and Politics* (Harvard University) and *Political Communication*, a trustee of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and a member of the Board of Directors of the International Research & Exchanges Board. A graduate of Wellesley College, Dr. Mickiewicz received her doctorate from Yale University.

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The relationship between the mass media and democracy has become increasingly important as a field of study and as an item on the public agenda. The various effects of the coverage of political campaigns, war, and other national security issues; of political advertising; of the portrayal of violence; of the concentration of media ownership; and of participation in civic life are all matters of interest to policy makers, commentators, and scholars in the United States. Elsewhere, too, these issues arise more and more frequently, and the center of most of the debate is television. Whether or not the widening circle of the perceived effects of television is a function of an "Americanization" of content and style, or rather of a deeply globalized "modernization" and "specialization" (of image consultants, political "spinmeisters", and public relations firms) is less important than the spread of a new way in which leaders, including democratic leaders, approach television.¹

Post-Soviet Russia is home to a complex and turbulent political system in which television, more than any other mass medium, commands center stage. A vast territory of eleven time zones, Russia has a widely dispersed population, virtually all of whom have television at home. In a media market in which buying a newspaper may strain the limited disposable income of many, in which printing and distribution costs are rarely subsidized, and in which equipment is aging, newspaper publishers have seen their circulation crash from millions to thousands. At the end of 1999, for example, *Izvestiia* claimed a circulation of 260,000 — quite a change from the 10.4 million in 1988.² Yet broadcast television is still free, and two channels are universally available, while two others are received by slightly over one-half to two-thirds of the population, respectively. I discuss below other features of the television landscape; here I wish only to say that the centrality of television is a fact of political life in Russia, a country in which financial constraints limit the broad consumption of relatively costly alternatives and in which constant crises keep the public interested in news and public affairs.

In 1993, the old-style state-operated and state-owned television system became a market. True, it was by no means a market with low-cost access or great diversity. But, for the first time, the state competed with commercially run networks. How a frankly commercial network, geared to profit-making and modeling itself on foreign organizations, could gain legitimacy for its news programs was a non-trivial phenomenon. News as the product of the profit motive was, quite reasonably, received with caution or distrust by Russians, who were indeed aware that privately owned stations did not claim, as did the state stations, to be run for the public good. It would be a difficult process for a commercial network (though it called itself “independent” instead of the more typical industry term “commercial”) to acquire legitimacy as a trusted and credible news operation. Thus, to enter the news business credibly, a commercial news organization had to be perceived as bringing a new set of values and techniques to the Russian public. NTV, the largest commercial network in post-Soviet Russia, achieved this branding during the first Chechen war. Competition led the new commercial network to differentiate itself in terms of sophistication, balance, accuracy, and production values. The introduction of a genuine choice of news and public affairs programming also set in sharp relief the different norms and practices of journalists, some of whom retained elements of the old approach and some of whom appeared to follow other — sometimes quite foreign — examples.

The media are central to questions of generational change and cultural identity. Control over media, in turn, is seen as control over the fundamental shaping of Russian values and identity in the post-Soviet period, when the very definition of the country has been at issue. It is for this reason that channels of communication — especially those with the greatest penetration — have a particularly important status. The externalities associated with television — the capacity to “spill over” and affect the very shaping of the values of the polity, its sense of citizenship, and its cultural commonalities — put this medium, as no other, in the political spotlight.

In Russia, a host of basic issues remains unresolved precisely because the wrenching shift from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era required time and resources to develop shared values and institutions. Resolution was attempted frequently through national elections and referenda; in the *eight* years from 1989 through 1996, there were *nine* of them. Two more fol-

lowed, in 1999 and 2000, making the score *eleven* critical national elections in *twelve* years. Russians went to the polls repeatedly and with relatively large turnouts to effect system-wide change, but the electoral process was not sufficient to create institutions; it would take time, even under the best of circumstances, to forge patterns of shared interests and interactions. The frequency of elections, which purported to alter the very nature of the political system and solve the continuing constitutional crisis, put enormous pressure on television, a medium which was accorded near magical powers of persuasion from the days of the Soviet rulers on into the post-Soviet period. Thus, election time was a time of particularly great pressure on the fragile pluralism of the industry, and sometimes — as in the presidential election of 1996 — the result was collusion among the main television channels and a drastic reduction of differing points of view.

The capacity of the television sector to provide structural diversity — a diversity of station owners — is directly related to the health of the economy in which the industry is embedded. Television is an expensive business. Even though new technology has significantly lowered the cost of newsgathering and production, mounting a convincing television operation still requires an impressive financial commitment. For Russia, the new technology must be purchased with hard currency, since virtually none of the equipment is domestically produced. In addition, many costs are unnecessarily high because the infrastructure is rapidly obsolescing or already obsolete. For example, because Russia is so large, the use of communications satellites is absolutely essential, and the monopoly supplier has been the state. Stations depending on state-owned communications satellites and transmitters are forced to pay a much higher price than they would have to if more modern facilities were widely available in Russia.

During the years of Soviet rule, television was a prized asset and funded lavishly. The medium was not held to account through cost-effectiveness or productivity measures. The ability of the government to pay for its expensive television empire was declining, however, and costs were high. The staffs of Soviet television stations were enormous compared to Western organizations.

Overall, the Soviet economy was badly suited to reform. Its state-owned production infrastructure was generally obsolete and uncompetitive in the world market. Its skewed depen-

dence on military production had created numerous communities in which no other employment was possible. As this sector declined in the post-Soviet world, available safety nets were not even remotely adequate, and the effects of this dislocation on the health and welfare of the population went largely unmitigated. The break-up of the Soviet Union meant, too, that the regional specialization and division of labor necessary for much of the production and distribution now took place in foreign countries. The crash of the economy in 1998 exacerbated political and economic tensions in an already fragile society.

The failure of the economy and the legacy of the Soviet era fostered the growth of certain illegal or semi-legal practices in the media. The television industry — especially its music and entertainment components — as part of this economy was vulnerable to corruption. In some cases, the result of corruption was the “sale” of “news” stories favoring the political or economic interests of the buyer. In other cases, investigative journalists who came too close to uncovering corruption were simply murdered. And in even other cases, corruption resembled more the payola schemes so familiar to the music and entertainment industries elsewhere in the world. In these trying circumstances, the question was to what extent, if at all, could a news operation with professional and ethical journalistic norms take root in this environment?

For the media to function effectively as producers of news and public affairs, legal protections and the legal culture that supports them should be in place. Speech protections are, in fact, included in Russia's laws governing the press. However, they exist in a nascent, uneven legal culture in which enforcement is neither predictable nor uniform, and in which interpretation is far more variable than desirable. Thus, the media sector can depend neither on the weak judiciary nor on effective governmental regulatory structures, and the media market is left without rules which are applied impartially across the country. This weakness affects the granting of broadcast licenses, reporters' access to information, war reporters' access to war zones, slander and libel cases, and the protection of investigative journalists and their work.

Politics, economics, and law all affect the health of the news media. But, not least in the developing information market of Russia, it is the public which negotiates not only the product of its choice, but also the meaning of the message. Soviet and then Russian leaders often underestimated the pub-

lic. In Soviet times, official theory dictated that the public was the target, not the co-creator of media messages; furthermore, the public was also presumed to be fully malleable. It is true that the public's choice of information sources was severely restricted and that most media consumers — unlike their leaders and the privileged — had fairly limited knowledge of Western political, economic, and social alternatives. They could compare what they saw and read with what they experienced in their lives, but they lacked access to each other's views. As Timur Kuran has shown, the expression of unpopular or politically unacceptable views depends very much on the ability to know that others hold these views too and are willing to express them. Large numbers of people may hold unpopular views, but they express them only when they know it is safe to do so. It is for this reason that there often appear to be sudden, very large shifts in public opinion when the tipping point has been reached. In Soviet times, Kuran writes, simply keeping quiet and failing to actively support the system was considered unacceptable, which is why the "spiral of silence" is a less accurate term than the "spiral of prudence".³ By eliminating secondary associations and controlling much of the content of large-scale mass media, this critical connection between individual attitudes and group attitudes could, the regime estimated, be prevented. One of the great changes made by post-Soviet Russian media has been to provide the public with a pluralism of views by reporting on public opinion surveys and by charting dissenting elite voices on political issues.

While the post-Soviet Russian public has gained something new from the media — a much larger information universe and knowledge of the views of others — it has also retained the culturally specific skills which, as Soviet viewers and readers, they have brought to the consumption of media messages for many decades. The legacy of their political culture has made them extraordinarily sophisticated media consumers, especially as television viewers. Their cognitive complexity is as impressive in high school as in college-educated populations. Though levels of information and numbers of sources differ, the heuristics employed are derived from a common experience.

Another way to approach this issue is through the lens of exposure diversity and exposure intensity. By this is meant the diversity of sources which are actually consumed by various publics. This is quite different from looking at the universe

of messages that *could* be accessed, and it also counterposes the universe of messages or information which actually *is* received by any individual. Looking closely at *how* individuals view the news tells us much about the world of information they are able to extract from sources and the methods by which they do so.

The media landscape

Television developed rather late in the Soviet Union. It was not until the first communications satellites were launched in the late 1960s that it became possible to penetrate the enormous country. In 1960, only 5 per cent of the Soviet population could watch television, but by 1986, the second year of Gorbachev's administration, fully 93 per cent were viewers, and the prime-time audience for the nightly news was estimated at about 150 million people. Like newspapers, television was organized at the central (all-Union) republic, regional, and city levels. Two national channels (Channel, or Program, One and Two) broadcast programs in Russian to all fourteen republics of the Soviet Union. The authoritative news program, *Vremia (Time)* came on at 9:00 pm and preempted all other programs on all channels. It was broadcast in separate, live editions for each time zone, and the last was for the region in which Moscow was situated. This was the broadcast the Politburo — and its apparatus — watched. This was the broadcast that the general secretary dominated, even if he was propped up, nearly dead. Reforming state television was a risky strategy, and the deeply contradictory policies of the Gorbachev administration showed how divided his Politburo peers were and how ambivalent he was about the ambit of genuine televised pluralism. Soviet leaders believed passionately in the power of television to imprint the stamp of their authority on the public. They did not reckon with the capacity of that public to engage in the making of meaning.

It is remarkable how quickly television toppled newspapers from their venerable perch at the top of the media consumption ladder. From the 1920s through the 1960s, the newspaper was the leader in providing information to the public.⁴ When television was introduced in the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, it sharply altered traditional time-use patterns. The passive behavior that was at odds with the official values of activ-

ism and collectivism increased (movie- and theater-going, reading, visiting friends, participating in sports, hobbies, and civic volunteer work all declined), even though the function and organization of the media remained, for the most part, unchanged during this period. It was clear from the start that television possessed its own dynamic and its own appeal to the most heterogeneous audience of any medium. That said, the importance of newspapers for political and cultural elites, especially in the big cities, did continue. Even though there were no longer any truly "national" newspapers with millions of subscribers, such Moscow-based newspapers as *Izvestiia*, *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (*The Independent Gazette*), *Segodnia* (*Today*), *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, and *Kommersant* continued to stimulate public debate. To some extent, the elite/mass gap (or the newspaper-reader/television-viewer gap) was reduced by the frequent appearances of public intellectuals on television. After the economic crash of 1998, all the television stations had to tighten their belts, and, as a result, there was a boom in the relatively inexpensive genre of talk shows. Well-known newspaper columnists and editors often turned up on the small screen and, in this way, amplified the work of their papers.

In 1993, the second year in the life of the Russian Federation, two commercial television stations — TV-6 and NTV — began broadcasting from Moscow. TV-6 began as a collaboration between Turner Broadcasting and a Russian group headed by Eduard Sagalayev, the former head of the youth department of Soviet television, then its news chief, and then, after the attempted coup, the head of Russian state television. TV-6 was a family channel, featuring youth programs, especially entertainment. The partnership with Turner was later dissolved, and TV-6 became wholly Russian-owned. Until the crash of 1998, Sagalayev maintained his dominant stockholder's status, but as debts mounted, more shares were sold, and Boris Berezovsky gained control. Thus, the used-car-leasing cum oil-magnate tycoon acquired influence in a fully commercial station, which proved a useful alternative when his role as decision maker at Russian Public Television (ORT, Channel One — described below) was reduced. Because the Russian government owned 51 per cent of the shares of ORT, it had the legal right, even if it could not contribute sufficiently to operating costs, to reassert control.

Banker Vladimir Gusinsky created NTV, along with a trio of former Soviet television officials: Igor Malashenko, who had

been in Gorbachev's *apparatus* and had briefly headed state television; Oleg Dobrodeyev, who had been in charge of news at Channels One and Two; and Evgeny Kiselyov, the most popular anchor on television. Unlike TV-6, NTV, from the beginning, stressed its focus on news, assembling a large, expert corps of reporters. By the beginning of 2000, about two-thirds of the country could receive NTV, and it and TV-6 were still expanding their range of transmission beyond large cities into areas of smaller population concentrations.

Early in 2000, Dobrodeyev, the respected president and former news director of NTV, left to take over Russian Television, which is discussed below. He took over not only this station, whose broadcasts penetrate the entire territory of Russia, but also a large group of state-owned and -operated stations in the locales along with the national channel called the Culture Channel. These properties were losing audiences. Channel Two, which had been the second most-watched station in the country, had dropped to third place and was sharing a berth with the commercial TV-6, which only half of the Russian public could receive. Dobrodeyev's task would be to reform the state channel to attract the public in the new, competitive market in which the public had a choice. Whether he would attempt to do so with the news values of an independent journalist or one in the employ of the state was the question much of the media community asked.

In summary, then, four large networks dominated the Russian television landscape. Channel One, called Russian Public Television (ORT), was 51 per cent owned by the Russian state and 49 per cent by private-sector institutions. The largest private stockholder, Boris Berezovsky, was the most influential decision maker at the station until he sold his shares to Roman Abramovich, thus facilitating government control. The Russian government directly controlled Channel Two and appointed and fired its presidents. NTV and TV-6 both offered a mix of news and entertainment, though the former was clearly the leader in news and public affairs. Table 1 (facing page) displays the features of the four large national networks.

The Moscow-based national networks were certainly not the whole story. Television stations had been popping up all over the country. The crash of 1998 altered the picture. The sharp decline of the advertising market hit the small provincial stations hard. Some were bought out by the big commercial networks, which were developing a system of owned and

Table 1: National television networks in Russia⁶

	<i>ORT [Ch. 1] Russian Public TV</i>	<i>RTR [Ch. 2] Russian TV</i>	<i>NTV</i>	<i>TV-6</i>
<i>Owner</i>	State 51% Private 49%	Russian Government	Commercial	Commercial Berezovsky
<i>Penetration [excluding rural, including small towns]</i>	98%	95%	67%	c. 50%
<i>Rating</i>	1	3	2	4
<i>News Capacity</i>	strong	strong	strong	building
<i>Weekend Analytic Programs</i>	yes	yes	yes	—
<i>Trust/Credibility</i>	2	3	1	—

operated stations. Some downgraded their programming, reducing staffs and postponing projects. By 1999, about 1,200 licenses had been granted in the country, about half of which represented stations that were actually on the air. Though some provincial stations were impressive in their programming capacity, from 83 to 85 per cent of the national television audience tuned in during prime time to the Moscow-based networks.

Structural diversity in Post-Soviet Russia

A democratic media system is one which displays pluralism, is protected as much as possible from interference in editorial news decisions, and has the economic means for survival. (How much pluralism representing how broad a range of views, however, is a key question; editorial independence, in turn, has traditionally been defined vis à vis government intrusion, but increasingly also vis à vis commercial interests.) For such a system to operate most effectively, it should be shaped by the journalistic values and norms of accuracy, fairness, and responsibility. The notion of the media system as essential to the democratic process is often likened to the familiar marketplace of ideas. If this marketplace functions efficiently — so the theory goes — citizens will be sufficiently informed of enough varied points of view as to be able to perform their roles as citizens, and especially as voters. A corollary to this is the idea of the press as a check on power. Quite apart from the marketplace notion, an arena of free speech may be seen as important to an individual's development, especially in fulfilling the need for expressivity.⁶

No media system fully meets the ideal standard of the perfect marketplace. As Philip Napoli has noted, "the assumption that optimum citizen decision-making arises from the consideration of information from 'diverse and antagonistic sources' ... is implicit within the marketplace of ideas metaphor."⁷ The most widely used indicator of the breadth of sources available is the breadth of ownership arrangements. The more owners, the assumption goes, the larger the marketplace of views. As I discuss below, the assumption that plural or diverse ownership results in viewpoint diversity is problematic, as is also its extension, that the availability of viewpoint diversity in television content translates into viewers being exposed to such di-

versity. In regard to the latter, viewers may and do choose to limit their exposure to viewpoints in ways which significantly reduce their awareness of contending points of view.

In the current global media environment, technology is rapidly expanding the opportunities for choice; television channels multiply, while the Internet allows low-cost, impressive access to opinion groupings that lack the resources to enter traditional television arenas. The very notion of "mainstream" or "national" news breaks down as publics fragment into customized narrowcasts and niches. However, this vision of explosion of choice does not yet fit post-Soviet Russia. The range of choice certainly has increased exponentially, but from an extremely narrow base. In larger cities, such as Moscow, viewers can access many channels, and some consume such foreign sources as CNN and BBC teletext. Broadcasts of Channels One and Two continue to penetrate the entire Russian territory, and NTV and TV-6 have been expanding their transmission range. There are direct broadcast satellite, cable, and UHF options, as well. Internet connectivity is more common in big cities and is spreading, but is still limited. The crash of 1998 constricted a rapidly expanding television sector and restrained its brisk growth.

By 1997, television properties were considered to be among the most desirable of investments, and business for them was booming. The advertising market, a main engine of growth, was doubling every year. Advertising agencies sought out audiences that the national stations could not reach, and local stations for the first time became attractive on account of their own markets. Moscow-based networks began to expand into the provinces, buying smaller stations outright or concluding agreements to provide programming for part of the broadcast day. The market was not confined to broadcasters. Cable television was an early entrant into the market, gaining viewers initially with pirated foreign films, and then converting to more stable and legal regimes. NTV, the largest commercial national network, led the way into the world of direct broadcast satellite services with NTV+.

Not all of these options offered significant news capabilities. Some local stations were still state-owned and -run, often under the influence of local political power. The more numerous local commercial stations relied on a mix of Moscow-based programming and home-grown music and entertainment shows, and had limited newsgathering resources. Some larger ones, such as Afontovo in Krasnoyarsk and Volga in Nizhny Novgorod,

did do professionally competitive local news. Although the newspaper market was buoyed by the growth of the regional press, it was still fragile, and the crash of 1998 dealt it a severe blow. It was still television, mainly broadcast, that was by far the primary source of news and entertainment for this vast country. Broadcast television cost viewers nothing, and as incomes contracted because of wage arrears and the ruble devaluation, television watching grew.

Thus, before the crash, it appeared that structural diversity was, apparently, on its way to being met, and the first condition of pluralism appeared to be in place: the pluralism of ownership. (Content diversity is a different matter and a more vexing dilemma of regulation; it is addressed below.) Was there sufficient structural diversity? Was the Russian market in fact open to new entrants? The biggest commercial networks, TV-6 and NTV, had no competitors for their frequencies, even though competition was a requirement for the awarding of frequencies. Cross-ownership and near-monopolies were virtually unregulated. Thus, before he sold his stock in ORT, Boris Berezovsky, was the largest private stockholder (or rather his company was) in the hybrid state/private partnership of Channel One (ORT — Russian Public Television), the biggest television network in Russia. He also became a major investor in the commercial station, TV-6, and controlled newspapers (for example, *Novye Izvestiia* and *Nezavisimaya gazeta*) as well as a large-circulation magazine, *Ogonyek*. The Uneximbank empire, run by Vladimir Potanin, included such media properties as the papers *Izvestiia*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the Prime news agency, *Expert* magazine, and the Europe Plus radio station. Gazprom, the natural gas behemoth with which former prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin had been associated, had its own media properties, having invested in the daily newspapers *Trud* (Labor), the magazine *Profil*, and the private NTV's DBS operation. Vladimir Gusinsky, meanwhile, grew rich with his MOST bank, which controlled NTV. In the winter of 1997, he moved over to head the MOST-media group, which consisted of NTV and its spin-offs, including NTV+ (the DBS service) and TNT (called THT outside Russia — a network made up of regional stations). In addition, Gusinsky controlled the newspaper *Segodnia*, the radio station Moscow Echo, the magazines *Itogi*, and the program guide *Sem' dnei* (7 Days). In the fall of 1998, NTV had a U.S.-built satellite with a substantial digital television transmission capacity put into orbit. This event marked the first

time a private television station had possessed its own capability to disseminate satellite signals and did not have to rely on government facilities. This landscape changed dramatically when the creditors foreclosed on Gusinsky's properties, and the state brought criminal charges against him.

Yury Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, also became a key media player. Until the crash, Moscow had been an attractive magnet for foreign investment and business, and the resulting economic growth had provided Luzhkov with municipal funds that he could invest. He, like all the other leaders and contenders for power, understood the political value of media properties. He converted the local television station into a new channel, TV-Center; he invested in the struggling commercial station REN-TV; and he bought stock in TV-6. His position also allowed him to influence all the other media properties the city had a piece of: the Moscow radio station and a newspaper group that included *Vecherniaia Moskva* (*Evening Moscow*). In addition, he sought out alliances with politically compatible regional television stations outside Moscow. The crash of 1998 reigned in this exuberant expansion, but not Luzhkov's ambitions. Though much was made of the mayor's control of his own television property as he sought political office, the 1999 parliamentary elections left him and his party, once the favorites, a reduced force. The effect of the bombing of two Moscow apartment buildings in 1999, the second Chechen war, the advantage Boris Yeltsin gave Vladimir Putin by resigning in the latter's favor and elevating him to acting president, and the positions of the larger television channels all formed a context of choices in which the fact of Luzhkov's control of his own media property counted for relatively little.

Finally, the Russian government was still a very big player in the post-Soviet television system. It directly controlled a number of electronic communications properties, including 51 per cent of Channel One, Channel Two (Russian Television and Radio — the second largest of the Soviet-era channels), major radio stations including Radio Russia and Mayak, two leading news agencies, and over a hundred state-owned radio and television properties in the provinces.

The creation of the Culture Channel, in turn, vividly illustrated the dilemma of market versus governmental support for television. When the Russian Federation became independent, the predecessor of the Culture Channel, Channel 5, was the St. Petersburg channel. The Soviet television industry had intended

to transform it into a third national channel and had expanded its broadcasts until they covered much of European Russia. The channel had launched some notable reformist programs in the Gorbachev era, among the best of which was perhaps *Piatoe koleso (The Fifth Wheel)*, produced by the feisty Bella Kurkova. In the less heroic days after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, programs on Channel 5 were dull, provincial, badly produced, and little watched. When the Yeltsin government asserted its authority over the station, the plan was to convert it into a powerful instrument for the maintenance of Russian culture. The subsequently created Culture Channel became the hope of those who aspired to resurrect the kind of programming that would not be driven by ratings and advertising. This was to be the station that would solve the dilemma of public-interest broadcasting. We can learn much about what sort of chances the Culture Channel had of doing that — and indeed, also much about Russian television, thrust so suddenly as it was into the turmoil of a nascent market — by looking first at the fate of public-interest programming in the United States.

The dilemma of the public good and the television market

Because the United States, unlike the rest of the world, developed a television broadcasting system that was commercial first and public-service only much later, and even then only in a very limited way, it is instructive to look at the basis for the regulation of that system when we wish to consider the effects of the market. Television, as few other businesses, is said to have a special claim on the socialization of the public and, consequently, to have a special responsibility for transmitting programs that improve civic culture and do not harm viewers. This claim has a long history wherever television has become the dominant mass medium. The arguments depend in part on the technology of television. Before the advent of cable, the dissemination of television signals took place over the airwaves, which, it was argued in the United States, was a good held in common by the public. That characterization provided the opening for a degree of federal regulation. If television broadcasters were not owners but stewards of the airwaves, then they were, at the same time, obliged to give something to that public. That was both a positive and negative obligation. On the positive side, the broadcasters were required to support the educa-

tion of the public, particularly with special children's programming. On the negative side, the broadcasters were restricted from airing programs considered inappropriate for reasons of sexual explicitness. When the stewardship of the station came up for renewal, stations would be subjected to hearings reviewing their record in terms of these content issues as well as in terms of structural issues. Structural requirements related to questions of size and influence over the market. Stations were restricted in terms of how much of a market they could dominate and how much cross-ownership would be allowed.

These original assumptions have undergone a great deal of change, reflecting in part a change of political ideology and in part a change in the technology of signal dissemination and reception. Political ideological changes relate to the increasing appetite for deregulation and the transfer of governmental intervention or regulation to the operation of the market. Thus, President Reagan's FCC commissioner, Mark Fowler, famously claimed that the public's interest is the public interest. Television was, it was said, only another commodity to which supply and demand applied. In other words, there is nothing special about television; it is a product like any other. There is no special public trust involved and no special impact and importance which make of the medium something different, something to be regulated to provide what the market might not provide (such as children's programs, information about U.S. history and politics, voices of minorities, or other cultural programs) and to limit what the market might produce in excess (such as sex and violence).⁸ This view denied that there was a special obligation television carried and a special trust it enjoyed. The public — i.e. the market — could determine what was in its interest simply by tuning in or tuning out. In this view, market failure — the underproduction of social goods — does not apply.

Second, the renewal hearings based on the station's adherence to obligations to provide some content in the public interest were effectively ended. Increasingly, the government's role eschewed ruling on content and favored ruling instead on structural arrangements. To judge the quality of a station's programming and its fit for regulated categories requires content monitoring and evaluation. The U.S. federal government has never been comfortable with such content policing. It lacks a monitoring capacity, and even if it were to contract for one, it would be difficult to arrive at a consensus on interpretation

that would not risk confrontation with the First Amendment. In recent years, at least, Congress has been opposed to such a role for the FCC, even to the extent of blocking an FCC proposal to allot free television time to major presidential candidates. In the United States, content regulation has not been possible because of the fear of expanded governmental power in the area of free speech. Changes in content, such as increased commitment to children's educational programming or adopting violence labels, have come as a result of persuading stations to act voluntarily.

Even though Russian television has traversed a very different road in its history, the basis of governmental intervention to monitor content is equally at issue and for something of the same reason. Critics of Russian television continue to press strongly for the creation of monitoring councils and for the passage of strict regulatory legislation to favor or disfavor particular content categories. The counter-argument is in part philosophically close to the American one: content regulation requires content monitoring, content characterization, and judgments as to content acceptability. Such content policing was common during the Soviet period; not only was television subject to strict censorship rules, but the broadcasting organizations themselves also contributed to content policing. Bringing the state back in to rule on content, however, carries with it the danger of a reversion to less protected speech.

Because content regulation is so difficult to implement in the United States, the government has moved virtually to abandon it and rely on its power in structural regulation. It is true that some FCC chairmen, such as Reed Hundt, did make strong moves to reinstate content oversight — pressing for violence labeling, increasing children's programming, and making free time available for candidates — but the pendulum has not swung back far enough to make it effective. Structural regulation refers to the market position of the television company and its ability to control or dominate a particular market. But here, too, the rules have been stretching. The 1996 Telecommunications Act loosened the rules and made possible much larger concentrations of media ownership. Thus, a general movement toward deregulation and concentration has resulted in greater market domination by fewer and fewer media companies.

Television systems in the West have displayed a broad range of structural variation, but the central pillar has been and continues to be the dominance of public television. How

that public trust is put into programming practice results from many different rules reflecting the traditions and political preferences of given countries. The Netherlands, for example, decreed a high degree of pluralism for its public television system, reflecting not only its diverse political culture, but also the availability of extensive choices due to the near-total cabling of the country.⁹ Germany, because of the Allies' immediate post-war concern that such a powerful communications (or propaganda) system not be centralized, was given a highly decentralized television broadcasting authority, in which the *Länder*, or regions, are paramount.¹⁰ Austria, as of this writing, still has no domestic competition for the monopoly public television station. Great Britain, the model of public-service broadcasting, did not admit commercial stations for many years and then developed rather complex ways of awarding them frequencies and financing them.¹¹

Yet, as television — worldwide — entered the second millennium, certain commonalities emerged that suggest that the U.S. model will be less and less different as the years go on and that, therefore, the dilemmas of the regulation, stewardship, and responsibility of television stations will also have a certain — by no means total — similarity across countries. For one thing, the reduction of direct governmental responsibilities and the increase of privatization, deregulation, and, in many cases, decentralization means that public broadcasting all across Europe depends on a retreating, not expanding, public sector. In the United States, where public broadcasting came late and was only modestly funded, the retreat has also been more marked. In a subset of countries, this reduction of the government's role is the result of suspicions by political parties that the ideology of public television runs counter to theirs. This has been the basis of the Republican Party's attack on public television in the United States, but also of the Christian Democrats on their public broadcasting system in Germany.

Supporting this more generalized ideological position on the withdrawal of government in favor of the private sector are certain technological and institutional developments. Digital compression has made possible a nearly unlimited increase in the number of channels of communication for television, data transmission, telephony, radio, and all of their allied information media. After the initial costs of instituting the new technology, the individual cost drops significantly, so that not only is an enormously broader range of content available, but it is also

far less expensive to enter that stream of content. As content possibilities increase, so does the competition for a fragmenting audience. In the old days of only over-the-air broadcasting, the three big U.S. networks claimed huge audiences. But as cable television developed, as more and more homes were able to receive cable television, and as the number of cable channels proliferated, competition for audiences became more pitched. When there were few channels and a large audience, the channels developed programming to fit a broad spectrum of interests — one wanted the largest possible audience. Under conditions of many commercial channels, the audience is so fragmented that the strategy must change. Now it behooves a channel to please not the largest audience imaginable, but rather to identify a narrow niche and deliver that audience to its most interested set of advertisers: thus, the proliferation of cable channels dedicated to travel, history, food preparation, or romance; thus, the burgeoning number of channels seeking specific, narrow sets of demographics — young girls or boys, older people, upscale high-culture consumers, young males with a taste for violence, or sports enthusiasts from every demographic group.

In this welter of competitors, news and public affairs programs take on a new face. By the time of the Clinton scandals — particularly the Monica Lewinsky affair — the channel surfer could encounter pundits and commentators in increasing numbers day and night. The more disputatious and emotional the talk, and the more uncompromising and sweeping the positions, the more distinctive the channel could be in its quest for identity among the vast field of choices. This often angry, contentious bazaar of public-affairs programs is a fact of the increasing competition for audiences among cable television channels. The audience for the traditional networks has declined significantly, and that includes the aging audience for news. Even among American viewers of the relatively new CNN, the average age is sixty-three years old. But the real competition for the public has hardly begun. Hundreds, not tens, of channel choices are in the offing. Nor does the choice have to be confined to what is available on the traditional television screen. The Internet, television, and the telephone are all capable of transmitting information.

I raise these questions of economics and choice in the United States, not because Russia or the rest of the world will become carbon copies of this country, but because some of the fundamental dilemmas introduced by technology and the eco-

conomic policies surrounding it in this country will not be absent in Russia.

All Russian television stations except the Culture Channel depend wholly or significantly on advertising to pay for their operations. That dependence has made ratings extremely important, since only through ratings can advertising time be priced and advertisers attracted. This nexus, then, has inevitably brought about the dilemma noted above, that reliance on the market leads to the underproduction of certain kinds of programming, usually referred to as public-interest programming. Specifically, the ratings have not been favorable to — nor have advertisers favored — programs that featured cultural presentations: operas, concerts, theater productions, museum shows, dance performances, or poetry readings, all of which were quite frequently encountered in Soviet programming. The ratings showed that given choice, large numbers of viewers preferred other entertainment. Similarly, large numbers of viewers were not keen on programs illuminating the lives and concerns of ethnic minorities, nor were viewers inclined to watch programs on the various regions of Russia and their local issues. Stations presenting educational programs did not attract the large numbers of viewers desirable for advertisers.

All of these categories of programs typically fall within the purview of public-interest television. It is logical that the market will underproduce them; they do not appeal to a wide enough range of viewers to bring in revenue. But these programs do have significance for society at large. Without the rich subsidies of the Soviet period, who would pay for them, if it was not good business for advertisers to do so? The disappearance of such programs from the Russian screen deeply disturbed the intelligentsia, but a remedy was not easily at hand.

The Culture Channel presented the opportunity for just such a reordering of the balance of programming and the restoration of the public interest. Although it was not a national channel, it could be seen over a large and heavily populated area of Russia. Leading cultural figures, including the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, urged President Yeltsin to create the channel. The state would subsidize it. The state did so, minimally; audiences were extremely small, but large numbers of viewers were not at issue. At issue was an underserved population, however large or small it might be. Money was very tight, but the station could draw on the sizable archive of cultural programs in the country. Many thought the Culture Channel a

good idea, even if it did not have money for attractive productions of its own. At least the government was making some move toward reestablishing the public interest in television. Ultimately, though, financing could not be dismissed. The government's withdrawal of adequate backing — forced upon it by its own financial woes — illustrates how difficult it is in Russia to compensate for market failure in public-interest programming. It is doubtful that the limping Culture Channel, no matter how prized it is by its niche audience, can possibly provide an adequate answer to the dilemma of public goods and market solutions.

Media concentration

While, as noted above, increasing media concentration is a fact within the United States, it is also proceeding apace throughout the world. All over Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union, the issue of concentration emerged first and foremost because of the economic disaster that marked the end of the Soviet Union and of the Soviet-type institutions of Eastern Europe. Difficulties were most dramatically seen in the print media. Economies plunged along with the ability of household incomes to support newspaper subscriptions, especially during the period of rapid inflation. The subscription base plummeted. In 1996, in Hungary, ten out of eleven of Budapest's daily newspapers were on the verge of bankruptcy. In the same year in Russia, only three newspapers could claim a national circulation. One of them, *Izvestiia*, had seen circulation decrease from 12.5 million in 1990 to only 600,000; by the end of 1999, it would further decline to 260,000. At the same time, the ability of the government to support the media also declined. State-owned and -operated television subsidies were cut and wage arrears grew. To protect freedom of speech, the newspapers argued, state financial help was needed. However, the distribution of governmental subsidies inevitably raised questions of criteria and of whether those criteria were or ought to be political.

To many, the answer was foreign help in the form of partnerships with commercial media enterprises, but the partnerships were very unequal. Especially at the regional level, many newspapers were supported by foreign capital, and, according to a report in 1993, the Bavarian media firm Passauer Neue

Presse had become the most important foreign media owner in the Czech republic, having purchased nearly all daily and weekly regional publications.¹² In the former German Democratic Republic, thirty-one out of thirty-four daily newspapers found West German partners, with the ultimate result that the twelve largest West German publishers owned more than 85 per cent of the former East German papers.¹³ In Poland, German media magnates — and some other foreign investors — took over so many newspapers that a Warsaw daily ran an article entitled “Are there Polish papers in Poland?”¹⁴ In Hungary, 80 per cent of the capital investment in media is of foreign origin. In the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland — where press freedom was most advanced — the print market has become dominated by foreign, mainly German, capital. As Liana Giorgi has pointed out, concentration in these media markets is not so different from that of “most European members of the European Union, where the top ten European publishing conglomerates control 50 to 70 per cent of the market...,” although the players, in the cases of the Czech Republic and Poland, are different.¹⁵

Except for the Czech Republic and Romania, most countries had limits on foreign investment in broadcasting, but even so, the stations with foreign partnerships tended to outperform the older media. The Central European Media Enterprises Group — set up by Ronald Lauder, an American investor, and Mark Palmer, a former U.S. ambassador to Hungary — created TV Nova in the Czech Republic; by the mid-1990s, they had captured over two-thirds of the Czech market and, looking beyond, had also started up Pro-TV in Romania and had established partnerships in Slovakia and Hungary. In 1999, the head of the fabulously successful TV Nova was Vladimír Železný, a Czech citizen who had acquired the all-important right to the frequency. When, under a legal cloud, he and his foreign backers parted company, he claimed to be the real, the only TV Nova. Locked out of the station’s building, which belonged to the foreign-owned company, he brandished the license, which, he claimed, was his and not the property of the foreigners and their Czech appointees. This case underlines the problems inherent in these arrangements. Getting the legal right to broadcast — the license — made domestic partners indispensable, but agreeing thereafter on the strategy and direction of the station sometimes put domestic partners on a collision course with their investors or owners.

Russia was a case in point and yet different: initially the potential of the Russian media market attracted foreign media investment. One of the earliest media investors was Ted Turner, who had personally supported Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and who developed a host of collaborative programming ventures. Turner's company acquired a 50 per cent stake in the first private television broadcast station in Russia, TV-6. When Turner's investment was replaced with Russian backing, the partnership ended. It was the Russian side that held the right to the license, and Turner had to seek other options. The American company eventually settled on cable and lost the over-the-air national transmission plan it had first sought to implement through the TV-6 partnership. The new Russian backers of TV-6 and the station's management were committed to original programming of their own design, targeted solely to their own, domestic audiences.

Foreign investment in Russian media properties has been much more cautious and limited than is the pattern in Eastern Europe. The potential of the Russian market is, it is true, very large and very tempting, and some small forays have taken place. For example, in 2000, NTV sold 4.5 per cent of its stock to an American funds group. The station had planned an initial public offering (IPO) in 1998, but the crash set those plans back. The large-scale investors remain, for the time being, on the sidelines. There are several reasons for this. The first is the uncertain legal status of television stations. A law on the press was passed in 1992 and remains the most important legal basis for media organizations. However, it was to be supplemented by a law on broadcasting. As of this writing, that law has yet to be passed. Numerous variants have been produced; the presidential veto has been applied to those judged overly restrictive. Debate is heated on these issues, and there is much significant disagreement on fundamental approaches. Foreign investors would have to be prepared for changes in the current legal status of television stations and in the degree to which foreign investment may be accepted by any electronic media company. When, for example, in 1999, it was rumored that Rupert Murdoch was interested in investing in ORT, Channel One, the Duma quickly passed a law forbidding the sale of any part of that company to foreign investors. Again, we return to the special status accorded the electronic media in general and television in particular. For the Russian Duma, television is decidedly not a consumer commodity like any other, but a profoundly

important and influential social and political institution. That is why the issue of foreign ownership and investment is particularly sensitive and why potential foreign investors remain cautious. The most notable exception to this rule took place in 2001, when a highly visible offer for NTV stock came from a Western consortium headed by Ted Turner (not as part of the AOL-owned business structure) and George Soros. It would be difficult to see this interest in investment as mainly financially driven. Although NTV was at the time the best media property available, it was failing economically. It would be many years beyond the time horizon of most U.S. businesses before real profits could be collected. Rather, political principles and support for pluralism appeared to motivate the offer.

The procedure governing the granting of broadcast licenses and the laws and practices affecting corporate governance are problematic. For large-scale foreign investors, the lack of transparency and predictability of law enforcement is a significant deterrent. What goes on in the corporate boardroom — and who is entitled to be there — and what laws and decrees require corporations to do with respect to taxes, subsidies, repatriation of profits, etc., remains fluid and hazy.

In addition, the map of the Russian television market reveals some organizational structures that make foreign investment difficult. Most obvious is the arrangement at Channel One. With 51 per cent of the stock held by the Russian government and 49 per cent in private hands, it remains unclear just what kind of a company this is — an uncertainty exacerbated by the legislature constantly peering at it with concern. Outside the capital, the state owns over a hundred stations. They are underfunded and struggling, but considered as strategic assets in parliamentary campaigns. The attempt in the spring of 1998 to recentralize the system and place these stations back in a single bureaucracy is evidence of Moscow's continuing interest in these properties, even if the federal budget can scarcely support them. However, any attempt to re-centralize the local stations must address the fact that local power structures also regard the stations as their instruments, and those goals do not always coincide with those of the capital. Needless to say, any attempt on the part of the Russian government — at whatever level — to sell off these properties would first need clarification of their complicated legal status.

Is concentration of ownership mitigated by exploding choice and new technologies? In the Russian case, it is still too

early to tell. The capital cities certainly have a vastly expanded range of choice, including access to foreign stations and to a more vigorous cluster of local stations. Some Russians have enough disposable income to subscribe to direct broadcast satellite (DBS) services. Some local private stations are also strong independent voices and feature good professional programming. What the long-term effects of the crash of 1998 are will be difficult to predict. The range of choice will undoubtedly eventually widen, but the capacity of the vast majority of the population to benefit from that choice will remain limited for the time being.

Even before the crash, one of the most prominent media owners, Vladimir Gusinsky, had embarked on a significant expansion of transmission capacity in order to offer a greatly enhanced menu of choice to viewers. NTV has since engaged in the most ambitious marketing and technological development effort of any station on the Russian scene. It has, moreover, attempted to ensure that its new services can operate independently of Russian governmental structures. The lofting of its communications satellite and the development of new studio and transmission facilities ostensibly freed it from dependence on the Russian ministry and the Ostankino tower. Still, none of this was sufficient to protect Gusinsky from a government-ordered raid on his bank in 2000. As one of the first acts of President Putin, it raised alarms in Russia and the West about the new administration's commitment to press freedom. The crash of 1998 had dealt a fatal blow to Gusinsky's empire and left him hopelessly indebted; the creditors took over.

Some might argue that structural diversity need not require any individual component to present the entire salient range of contending viewpoints; each owner logically presses his advantage. For example, one of the most opinionated Russian television news personalities, Sergei Dorenko, openly pushed his owner's agenda, saying that he never criticized any of ORT's stockholders or their commercial properties. Using the argument of external diversity, Dorenko maintained that his weekend news analysis/opinion program was just one of three on television and "together with my colleagues on the various channels, we present viewers with the entire spectrum of the political rainbow."¹⁶ According to this argument, no single channel need ensure representation of all salient points of view, if overall, across the channels, there is reasonable diversity. This, however, requires viewers to sample broadly, which is a significant commitment of scarce time resources. Anthony

Downs has developed the theoretical implications of this in his study of the differences in resources among citizens of democracies and how those differences affect democratic participation. Central to the notion of democratic participation is the level of information on which to base decisions, such as voting. For most people, the costs of acquiring information — costs in time and costs in effort — are not worth the investment unless certain kinds of direct utility can be derived from the information. Thus, to expect democratic publics to consume multiple sources of information and to compare contending approaches and conclusions is simply not realistic. Even though the diversity of sources is available, the diversity of exposure is not ensured.¹⁷ The rationale of structural or external diversity imposes a heavy responsibility on the public, for whom time is limited, and tradeoffs must be calculated between acquiring information (and among the varying utilities of different kinds of information) and relaxing with entertainment.

Given the high degree of media concentration, is there sufficient pluralism in the post-Soviet media system to achieve a reasonable diversity of views? The newspaper market does display a very wide range of views. However, a shrinking market has also led to a tremendous decline in circulation. Government subsidies to individual newspapers prevented some bankruptcies but also introduced a degree of dependence. What about the television market? In times of crisis, it is the national television networks to which Russians turn.¹⁸ Are Russian viewers given an adequate diversity of views on the national news programs? Three national networks established prime-time daily news programs, and schedules were often staggered. Viewers, as we shall see below, could and did compare the news. Two more networks, TV-6 and Moscow's TV Center, are building a news capacity. The turbulent changes of spring 2001 resulted in new management for TV-6 and NTV. The extent to which either or both provide differing views and coverage will certainly affect the total field of information available for comparison.

Ultimately, evaluations of television pluralism are related to the way viewers consume the news. To the degree that they consume more than one source and to the degree that they bring critical skills to the enterprise of news viewing, they are expanding the amount of usable pluralism. To the degree that they are passive and light consumers, they are more disadvantaged by the pattern of media concentration. As this study will

demonstrate, however, Russian viewers exhibit an extraordinary degree of media literacy and active engagement with news messages.

The tension between editorial autonomy and owner preference

In the United States, concern about the effects of owner interest on the content and quality of news has been growing. Large media organizations merge, and the resulting giant goes on to ally with still another giant. As a result, writes Dean Alger, “conglomerate synergy has been a significant factor in skewing economic competition in favor of megamedia conglomerates and is presenting troubling issues of conflicts of interest in and degradation of quality in news operations.”¹⁹

A pernicious effect of owner preference on news content is a skewed news coverage or a deliberate blackout in the coverage of events in which the media organization has a specific economic interest, the conflict of interest to which Alger refers. It is usually difficult to trace such effects. The process which led to the Telecommunications Act of 1996 revealed clear economic gains or losses for different kinds of media organizations. There was substantial public lobbying by media interest groups. Members of Congress were aware of their dependence on local television stations for the kind of coverage they needed for reelection, and thus they were likely to take into account the preferences of those stations with respect to the proposed legislation.²⁰ Because of the known benefits different kinds of media companies would enjoy from the passage of the act, it was possible to trace the path of owner interest and media agendas more rigorously than is usually possible.

In looking at the Russian television industry, I shall examine two categories of owner interest: economic and political. Necessarily speculative, my purpose in what follows is to develop the implications of the agendas of owners in a partially marketized industry and the tensions resulting from the maximization of different — and, in some cases, conflicting — interests.

Maximizing economic owner preference

Ratings in Russia are highest for entertainment programs: comedy, drama, or the newer form of "dramedy". The pace must be sufficiently fast to hold the audience's interest, and the scenes must contain enough tension and conflict to prevent the viewer from changing channels. Modern themes of sensationalism — sex and violence — may be publicly deplored, but they are certainly watched in the living room. Station owners wishing to maximize their ratings and hence their profits will program these high-ratings programs. Though they may alienate retired people, who are heavy television watchers, they will attract the groups with buying power, the advertisers' targets. It is for this reason that all of the Moscow-based national networks air gruesome real-life crime shows, littered with bodies and splashed with blood, and it is for the same reason that foreign and domestic soap operas are run and rerun. News programs are also among the most watched, especially during the frequent and threatening crises which have become all too common.

Beyond the ratings game, Russian station owners have another kind of interest in maximizing their economic preferences. They may wish to show programs which advance their economic interests not by seeking ratings, but by attempting to affect specific economic decisions from which they will profit. Owners, thus, may favor airing programs advocating the passage of laws or decrees which carry specific economic benefits for them. Such programs focus heavily on matters of little interest to the viewers and are scarcely adapted to dramatic narrative treatment, and they will lose viewers and hurt ratings. To this extent, therefore, such use of their television stations by owners will be counterproductive in terms of attracting an audience, but may be justified for the reasons given below.

In fact, the logic of using broadcast television for such purposes seems on the face of it quite strange. The owner is, after all, attempting to seek a favorable outcome from legislation, decrees, or other official acts. Thus, the object of persuasion is a small circle of Moscow-based political figures, some Duma deputies, or the relevant governmental officials. Advancing an agenda on a television program to effect a specific outcome is a strategy which results in sending a message to millions of people across a vast country. This strategy makes sense if the intent is to mobilize the millions of viewers to seek out

their representatives in order to press for a particular economic policy on, say, tariffs or natural resource auctions. But, clearly, this is not how politics works in that country. Such attempts at mass mobilization on these relatively arcane issues simply do not take place, and station owners know it full well. So, the use of this huge medium to mobilize public opinion to influence the course of Moscow lawmaking on specific economic questions appears senseless.

Note that what I am describing here is quite different from a strategy of mobilization on a large-scale, easily understood issue — such as wage arrears — that touches many individual lives. There are certainly examples of such a strategy in the use of television to gain exposure for the plight of miners or teachers.

But the question of paying wages or consigning miners to life-threatening conditions for little or no pay is not the kind of economic issue we are discussing here. We are discussing the use of television content to further specific economic rules or outcomes of interest to the owner. One of the most prominent issues in this category was the auctioning of the state's oil company, Rosneft. In February 1999, the muckraking newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets* ran a story which contained, it persuasively claimed, taped recordings of Boris Berezovsky giving orders to further his economic interests. Berezovsky denied that he had made these statements. One such tape revealed Berezovsky giving orders to Channel One anchor Sergei Dorenko with a view to improving his chances for beating his competitors in the Rosneft auction. Specifically, the tycoon wanted to improve Shell Oil's chances in the auction and hurt British Petroleum's, which was allied with Russian groups in competition with Berezovsky.

Berezovsky: Listen, here's what I'm interested in.... I have data that BP has a debt of 7 billion dollars. Now I'm giving you this information. This is very interesting. You understand, yes? ... British Petroleum does not have the money that Shell does. And considering its debts of about 7 billion, they have to act much more selectively. That's very important. That is, they come here to almost steal. You understand, yes? On these grounds you can say that at

Shell, everything's OK. They have pluses. But the others have nothing but a hole, nothing.

D[orenko]: OK, I got it.²¹

We return to the question: why engage a very large number of viewers with respect to a question about which they have little interest and no real possibility of nor inclination to influence the officials who would make the decision about the auction? Why use the blunt instrument of television to attempt to influence a neat surgical operation that would take place in the back rooms of Moscow decision makers?

Two explanations can be drawn from both the Soviet political cultural legacy and from the particular way in which the current Russian television market has developed. First, Berezovsky, like the other owners, may still believe in the magical properties of television. Like the old Soviet leaders, he may believe that sending the message out over television is tantamount to creating the desired reality. The analytic pathway of how persuasive communication really does take place — that it is a co-creation of sender and receiver — may be of as little interest now as it was to Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko, all of whom believed that a mummified leader going through the motions on the television news was not an effigy but a magus.

A corollary of the stimulus/response fallacy that was so habitual in the past relates to the central decision makers. The men making the decision about the Rosneft auction, a small circle in Moscow, unaware of the overall lack of interest of the mass of viewers and their general scepticism, would be likely to credit the televised report with having more impact than it does. Tending to believe in the power of the medium, as the elites do, they would see a message aimed really only at *them* as having an effect on the large mass of viewers. Then, assuming a large-scale, mass persuasion effect, they would believe their own options to be constrained.

A second hypothesis: the slanted news was essentially a message on closed-circuit television — a message that was intended to be transmitted from the Ostankino tower to the halls of power in Moscow. Though broadcast to millions, only a dozen were targeted. It was rather a short-circuit form of communications, aimed at only one tiny fragment of the television audience. But that was quite enough for the owner, and the ineffi-

ciency of sweeping so many others into the communications process was well worth it.

The element of "short-circuiting" may be illustrated by a very different case with a similar property. The Russian case is one of biasing a news report; the American one is a very different one of paid political advertising, which, by definition, is intentionally and publicly partisan. What is interesting to explore in the meaning for democracy is the element of the diminished loop or short circuit. I have in mind the example of the tremendously successful and now classic "Harry and Louise" campaign. There are, of course, tremendous differences between the American and Russian cases, between the organization and structure of the media, between the political cultural context of media/governmental relations, between the economics of the market and so many other important variables. But the idea of "short-circuit" issue advocacy is instructive.

In the famous "Harry and Louise" campaign of 1993-94, the firm of Goddard-Clausen/First Tuesday developed a campaign of televised spots for its client, the Health Insurance Association of America, for use in its battle with the Clinton administration over the latter's health care reform initiative.²² Though this television ad campaign is justly famous for its many innovations, only one aspect concerns us here. The funding for this campaign was relatively small, as these things go. Therefore, the placement of the ads had to be strategic. It was decided to place them in two kinds of markets: places where key legislators lived and worked (primarily Washington, D.C.), and places where major media were located (primarily East and West Coast centers). There was no attempt to blanket the country or to mobilize public opinion on a large scale. The ads targeted decision makers and media organizations only.

Legislators were targeted, obviously, as decision makers. Media industry centers were targeted in order to get on the media agenda. If the media picked up the story of the campaign, decision makers were, it was believed, likely to assume that coverage was the result of national resonance and reflected the agenda of the mass public. This strategy could successfully promote the agenda without mobilizing the mass public. By efficient, precise targeting, the circle of influence would run from the media to the decision maker and back to the media. Eventually the "Harry and Louise" campaign did become a national event, but only because the Clinton administration chose to retaliate with its own ads responding to the campaign and with

a widely circulated videotaped spoof. "Harry and Louise" created an entirely new approach to issue advocacy and has become a classic in the field. It is this element of "short-circuiting" which I wish to examine in the Russian case.

Berezovsky, in his campaign to win the Rosneft auction, did not approach his use of television with efficiency in mind, because, unlike Goddard, he could sweep all markets into the effort at no extra cost. News and public affairs were purchased, not advertisements. Berezovsky's target was extremely narrow; the broadcast was enormously wide. But the intention was the same "short-circuiting" one as Goddard had: to convince political decision makers that if the media became interested in something, it both reflected a wider concern and persuaded the larger masses. Neither of these assumptions was well founded, but the decision makers, the only real intended viewers, were no more likely to think in new ways than was Berezovsky, so concerned as he was with each word Sergei Dorenko might utter about British Petroleum and Shell.

Maximizing political owner preference

Owners may also seek to use their media properties for direct political influence with programs that advance their own political ambitions and values or that advance the political careers of their allies. However, the way they do this is important. Lecturing viewers will prompt the latter, given a choice, to switch to another station. Talking heads are simply less attractive to the pre-retirement population than other choices of greater dramatic or entertainment interest.

Two cases are of interest here. The first is that of Yury Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow. Luzhkov's takeover of the Moscow Channel, which he renamed "TV Center", was widely seen as an early step in his quest for the Russian presidency. When it was started, TV Center attracted a good deal of attention. It put on short news capsules beginning just before the hour and early in the evening, and, more importantly, Luzhkov's station was lavish in its expenditures on glossy foreign programs. It was the entertainment that attracted the audience. It was a mistake to assume that, should these films and serials be replaced by earnest campaign speech from talking heads, the audience would remain — unless they had nowhere else to go.

Yury Luzhkov's purchase of a property with which to advance his electoral prospects was helpful only if he put on the kind of programming that drew viewers to the station. This was the same strategy that Silvio Berlusconi had devised in Italy. His stations showed the games of his soccer properties, Western soaps and serials, and movies. He posed a formidable entertainment challenge to the monopoly hitherto exercised by RAI. In this context, he could make himself and his party known as a political alternative in Italian politics.²³ Without the expensive entertainment programming with which he launched his station, Luzhkov could not attract viewers as Berlusconi did. Again, an underappreciation of viewer choices in a television market resulted in a vast overestimation of the likely power Luzhkov as a television owner would wield.

The second interesting case of an owner with political ambitions is that of Boris Berezovsky. Berezovsky occupied high non-elective political offices. He was secretary of the President's Defense Council and then secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States, both appointive positions. He successfully ran for the Duma in December 1999, but from a small region in the northern Caucasus. Thus, he entered elective politics, but it is likely his political ambitions exceeded his new deputy status. He made sure he was shown with considerable frequency on the news on Channel One. The fact that Berezovsky was often in the public eye certainly made him the best known of the television station owners. In the summer of 1998, a sample of Russians representative of urban viewers was asked to name the owners of the various television stations. For Channel One, 14 per cent named Berezovsky, while 70 per cent responded that they did not know who the owner was. In comparison, 86 per cent did not know who was in charge of Channel Two, while 88 per cent responded similarly for NTV.

This result is not surprising. Knowing who owns television stations is not particularly useful or interesting information. The fact that people generally do not know who owns the stations they watch does leave them unaware of what kinds of interests, other than ratings, might be driving programming. It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that of all the station owners, Berezovsky was known by the greatest number of respondents, yet this still amounted to only one-seventh of the whole. In another setting, a focus group, I used a different type of recognition test. Since the owners are shown (and wish to show

themselves) frequently on television news, focus group members were asked if they could identify photographs of people in the news (including but not limited to owners). I included pictures of owners and major investors who were all frequently seen on television news programs. Only Berezovsky was identified frequently by almost all of the college-educated participants, but by far fewer among the high school educated. What he owned was another matter. Again, the college-educated correctly said Channel One, but the high school educated confused him with other owners (some thought he was a partner of his rival Vladimir Gusinsky) and his station with other channels.

Berezovsky was the owner most people who know anything about owners recognize. Was he also, then, a person whom Russians might name as an attractive candidate? Had he been able to translate his exposure thus far into a political advantage in a run for the presidency? Our national survey of urban Russians found that, when asked for whom they would vote if presidential elections were held in the near future, only three-tenths of one per cent of the respondents answered Berezovsky. This was in spite of his considerable name recognition.

What about advancing the interests of political allies rather than one's own interests? Owners engage in this practice frequently. The most obvious case of this was during the presidential election of 1996. Television was partisan in this election, and, both in Russia and in the West, there were bitter recriminations. There are many layers to this complex question of objectivity and partisanship in the 1996 presidential election. The partisanship of television was based on an evaluation that a return to power of the Communist Party did not mean a basically democratic administration of a populist or social welfare complexion, but a regime seeking monopoly power and the likely future cancellation of free electoral choice. The Communists denied this version of the story. However, the party was actually an alliance, some of whose more extreme members repeatedly and publicly advocated anti-Semitic and coercive nationalization policies. Faced with the looming threat the television organizations and the government saw — the return of Communism and the potential shutdown of speech pluralism — what should the press do? The way of the democratic press would be to oppose speech with more speech. Only in times of crisis could that right be qualified by restrictions on words that cause immediate and specific harm. There were

important differences among the networks in their campaign coverage, but the choice of non-partisan television was not among them. All four of the Moscow-based television networks coordinated their offerings to maximize Yeltsin's chances. The president of NTV, Igor Malashenko, became the president's media campaign manager.

Free-time rules were still in force and fairly applied. Paid political advertising was still an option and generously used by the president's campaign and by the campaigns of most of his competitors in the first round. NTV, though it was a major part of the Yeltsin campaign, offered the Communist Party opponent, Gennady Zyuganov, considerable time for live interviews (each one lasting over twenty minutes), and its news coverage covered the competing campaigns. While NTV was tough and professional in its coverage of Zyuganov, it did not even begin to cover Yeltsin's abundant campaign promises, decrees, and projects, nor the precarious health of the candidate. As always, Zyuganov's approach was sober and deliberately uncharismatic, and he shunned the trappings of "Americanized" campaigning.²⁴

It would be a mistake to ascribe too much influence to television and too little to the capacity of voters to make their own evaluations. On one absolutely critical dimension, television likely did have a profound impact. It presented visual evidence that there was a living candidate to vote for. Maybe it was as simple as that. Television sent a nationwide message that Boris Yeltsin really was a candidate, although the effort nearly killed him in the process.

Another notable example of owner interest in candidacies was the electoral campaign of Aleksandr Lebed for governor of the Krasnoyarsk region. The focus groups referred to above were convened in Moscow at a most interesting time, right after the concluding round of the Krasnoyarsk election. Presidential hopeful Lebed was running for governor of the province, a vast region in which is located nearly 30 per cent of Russia's raw materials. If he lost, Lebed was unlikely to attract support for a run for the Russian presidency in 2000, to which, at the time, he publicly aspired. This Krasnoyarsk race attracted intense national interest, and, for the focus groups, it was an excellent natural experiment. The major television networks regarded the regional contest as a nationally significant one, and they gave it prominent coverage on the daily news programs and on the weekend opinion programs. On the Lebed candidacy, the

owners of Channels One and Two disagreed. Boris Berezovsky backed Lebed and helped to finance his campaign. The Yeltsin government, to which Channel Two was accountable, opposed Lebed. An outsider, coming into the Siberian race with clear intentions to move on in two years, Lebed still won convincingly. His opponent, the mild-mannered incumbent Valery Zubov, had to run on a record of unfulfilled promises in a declining economy and on the wan hope of better things to come. NTV was generally balanced in its coverage. A content analysis of all news stories on the networks for the period of the campaign and election shows the pattern on Table 2 (p. 42).

This is certainly consistent with the table of preferences noted above. For a government to conceive of its media property as a public trust to be protected from its own immediate political preferences is difficult and rare. The institution of buffer mechanisms appears to be the only way to guarantee autonomy, even though it, too, is never perfect.

The increasingly important role television has played in elections in post-Soviet Russia has been analyzed in considerable detail elsewhere.²⁵ Russia stretches across a large landmass with uncertain transportation facilities, especially during bad weather, and campaigning is logistically difficult; the party system is young and characterized by large numbers of highly personalized parties fissioning, re-forming, and renaming themselves; the official campaign is extremely short — only one month; other forms of campaign information dissemination, such as newspapers, are failing economically. Added to these arguments for the importance of television in the electoral campaign process is the deep-seated belief of many Soviet and post-Soviet politicians that the medium has an almost unlimited capacity for persuasion.

After the parliamentary elections of 1999, television was seen as kingmaker by both Russian and Western journalists. A newly formed political party endorsed by Vladimir Putin, the acting president, suddenly surged ahead of all the established parties. Both Channels One and Two were strong in their advocacy of the government's position. NTV, after a period of neutrality, endorsed the party of Yury Luzhkov — to redress the balance, they said, or, as the framework we employ might label it, to provide viewpoint diversity. At the time, the second Chechen war was in full sway, and Russian military casualties were either not shown at all or described as light, while the horrific impact of the war on the civilian population in Chechnya

Table 2: Krasnoyarsk election stories, Russian National Networks, bias in news and analysis programs

Total:

Stories clearly favoring one or the other candidate: 31%
 Stories favoring a candidate in *selection of material*: 31%
 Stories favoring a candidate in *editorial writing*: 21%

Daily news stories with bias: 23%

Total:

ORT [Vremya]	RTR [Vesti]	NTV [Segodnya]
20%	63%	0%

Selection bias/total stories:

ORT [Vremya]	RTR [Vesti]	NTV [Segodnya]
20%	63%	0%

Editorial bias/total stories:

ORT [Vremya]	RTR [Vesti]	NTV [Segodnya]
0%	38%	0%

Weekend analytic stories with bias: 56%

Total:

ORT [Vremya]	RTR [Vesti]	NTV [Segodnya]
100%	100%	0%

Selection bias/total stories:

ORT [Vremya]	RTR [Vesti]	NTV [Segodnya]
100%	100%	0%

Editorial bias/total stories:

ORT [Vremya]	RTR [Vesti]	NTV [Segodnya]
100%	100%	0%

Direction of bias:

ORT: consistent — for Lebed, against Zubov
 RTR: consistent — for Zubov, against Lebed

was virtually absent from the small screen. A combination of reasons for this skewed coverage included Russian popular support for the war, the Russian military's success in cordoning off the war zone, and the fragmentation of the Chechen leadership into warlords, whose penchant for kidnapping journalists for ransom was well known. Furthermore, the backdrop against which this ugly war played out was the bombing of apartment buildings — two of which were in Moscow and all of which were asserted by the Russian government to be terrorist acts perpetrated by the Chechen leadership — and the incursions into Dagestan by armed Chechen formations intent on proclaiming a greater Chechnya. The truce agreement of 1996 had left a workably hypocritical reality: Russia maintained Chechnya was part of the federation but did not interfere with local rule, while the Chechens considered their Republic of Ichkeria to be independent. However, the projection of terror in 1999 was, in my view, the decisive point at which Russian public opinion moved from regarding Chechnya with relative indifference to supporting a military solution. Surveys conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation found that at the beginning of 2000, the majority of Russians favored a full military victory rather than peace talks at points short of victory. The majority of Russians also said that they expected international censure for this strategy and that they would personally suffer from sanctions. In addition, the majority of Russians felt that the casualty figures understated the true cost of the war and — according to two-thirds of the respondents — that the mass media were not providing them with sufficient information about the war. Still, in spite of this assessment, they supported a military solution, and among the supporters were, prominently, people with higher education and people living in the capitals, usually the population one would associate with a dissident view and one that would favor negotiated settlement.²⁶

That Vladimir Putin and the party he endorsed benefited from and cultivated this frame of mind is beyond doubt. His decisiveness and much-vaunted physical strength also made him the image of the non-Yeltsin, for we cannot ignore the context into which Putin stepped. Russians had seen their president, like so many past Soviet leaders, appear on television as a remote figure, wheezing, walking stiffly, speaking with slurred speech. Often he did not appear at all and was said by news anchors to be “working” and “monitoring events”. For viewers raised in the Soviet era, that was an all-too-familiar euphemism

for “immobilized” or “gravely ill”. This leadership incapacity was well known to the Russian public, and it had lasted for over five years. A healthy president actually at work was for them a real change. As polls discovered, most Russians reported knowing nearly nothing of the political and economic policies a president Putin might favor, which only confirmed that voters were looking for a leader to make government work, something they had not seen for many years. The risks in this position and in this sense of limited choice were certainly great.

Certain elements of Russian election campaigns would continue to be controversial. The Central Election Commission, though proclaiming itself the monitor and enforcer of fair campaigning, was powerless to do more than comment publicly. It was particularly difficult for the commission to enforce the prohibition on negative campaigning, as it was unable to differentiate between negative news and negative campaigning. Clearly, barring the former from the airwaves would be a grave interference with free speech, but implementing the ban on the latter was in fact impossible. Determining the line between news reports and active campaigning was, similarly, too challenging a task, particularly when owners inserted their political preferences into news stories. Compensating for incumbent advantage is never really possible: media-savvy political leaders will always create opportunities to be covered, if necessary, devising an initiative a day. Whether they are engaged in small-scale, transparent public-relations opportunities or genuinely important national initiatives, incumbent politicians have learned how to dominate the airwaves, and that advantage is simply a fact of political life. The enormous advantage that presidents have had in the amount of news coverage in Russia is, thus, derived in part from their use of the office, but only in part. The disparity in coverage has gone well beyond that advantage and is likely to do so in the future as well.

Candidates may themselves create opportunities to reach Russian voters by skillful use of the randomly and equally allotted free time and by paid political advertising. There is, however, no predictable and direct effect from paid advertising. It depends on how the televised campaign is constructed and the dominant frame of the candidacy. In parliamentary elections, some parties have spent heavily on political advertising and yet still have failed to pass the 5 per cent threshold for parliamentary representation; the Communists, in contrast, have spent very little, relying instead on their durable grass-roots troops of

organizers, and they have reaped great rewards as a result. They have won votes especially from older citizens and in rural communities, people and places least adapted to the risk-laden future. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the rabble-rousing nationalist, has also proven himself a savvy campaigner, tailoring his ads to traditional issues, eschewing Western advertising models, and introducing an entirely new mode of discourse — emotional, direct, and relishing such hitherto taboo subjects as nationalism, religion, and sex. Many other candidates have proven to be politically tone-deaf; they have not appreciated the circumstances in which ordinary people have been living, and they have pitched their ads instead to Moscow Yuppies. Others have been didactic and unable or unwilling to speak plainly. As in other countries, political parties have tended to spend most of their funding resources on television and radio.²⁷

Television has been a key factor in the changing politics of the Western world; in Russia, this has been equally true and, perhaps, more singularly so because of the deterioration of the national newspaper market. This has left television as the primary structure for the dissemination of information, including that critical flow of information about candidates, parties, and elections. The decline in the newspaper market has also made television the prize during campaigns and has put it at the center of the struggle for power.

Exposure diversity and exposure intensity: how Russian viewers expand their information world and negotiate meaning in television news

I have noted above that the logic of the American media relies on a diversity of ownership to produce a diversity of views for viewers who will, presumably, consume across that diverse field of messages. I have also noted that the steps in the logic are by no means assured in fact. A diverse set of owners may still present a limited field of contending views. Even more problematic is the system of incentives for the media consumer. As the Downsian model suggests, acquiring information is costly for citizens, and as Napoli points out, “for any of the broader social goals commonly associated with the marketplace of ideas to be accomplished, citizens must take advantage of the information from ‘diverse and antagonistic sources’ that is made available to them.”²⁸ What evidence we have from the United

States, where choice is accelerating with enormous speed, shows decreasing, not increasing, exposure diversity, as viewers more and more narrowly customize their options, and crossover audiences become smaller.

It is through the lens of exposure diversity and intensity that we look at the Russian public. Clearly, choices among information sources are far, far more constricted in Russia than in the United States, but my research with Russian focus groups suggests that notwithstanding this enormous disparity in information sources, exposure diversity and the intensity of attention actually significantly expand the amount of usable information. The intensity of the political elite's struggle for power over television rested on assumptions about how the public processed televised information. Other than ratings, very little was known about the way people actually watched the news — what their thoughts and emotions were, and whether they were interested enough to spend time and energy engaging the issues. In the West, economic models of information acquisition tell us that the likelihood citizens will access and digest large amounts of political information is, in real life, quite low. We know that in the United States, most people are often characterized as poorly informed. They flunk the tests that pollsters put to them to see if they know who their representatives in Congress are, what the level of foreign aid is, or how much they know about the geography of the world. They make up for their lack of information about issues or events that matter to them by taking mental shortcuts, and these shortcuts, relying on both emotion and reason, are the heuristics to which I shall refer below.²⁹ There is a significant gap between people who have the cognitive capacity to process large amounts of information and those who do not, but this ability is not simply reducible to one's level of formal education. Other kinds of learning — from a variety of experiences — also expand the individual's ability to process information.³⁰

The foundation of the Soviet-era heuristic is skepticism. For decades, television news was rationed, centrally controlled, and confined to a single authoritative source. Viewers questioned the credibility of that source, even as they attentively watched, since the limited volume of information could contain vitally important cues about coming threats or opportunities and had to be carefully and skillfully mined. That skepticism, together with a high interest in news, creates the basis for today's exceptionally media-literate Russian viewer. That said, I do not

mean to imply that Russians simply reject everything they see on the news as meaningless rubbish. They do not. Their strategies enable them to tease out what is important for them and to correct for methods that trouble them. It is a continuous process of discovering and refining. These are subtleties and dynamics that the mass public opinion survey can rarely capture, but are particularly well suited to work with focus groups. Some of this research with Russian focus groups is summarized below; a more detailed discussion may be found elsewhere.³¹

Three of the most important elements of the Soviet-era heuristic are a suspicion of broadly generalized good news, an attention to sources as potential beneficiaries, and an ability to evaluate internal consistencies in the news. Viewers are keenly aware of overly positive messages which apply broadly to large contexts. Since Soviet news programs were intended to inspire and lead the public to a desired policy goal, stories were frequently about hoped-for rather than about realized progress. Small gains were exaggerated into large-scale achievements, on the theory that the future was tending in that direction in any case. As a result, post-Soviet viewers deflate stories of excessive optimism. Considering who might benefit from a news story is also part of the critical apparatus ordinary Russians bring to their consumption of the news. They pay attention to sources of news stories and possible bias in them.

Inconsistencies on the news set off warning signals in viewers. It may be a matter of facts appearing to contradict each other or, more subtly, a disparity between the anchor's previously displayed level of intelligence and subsequent material he or she mouths. From these tensions and evaluations of imbalance or dissonance, Russian citizens employ a system of correctives. Some of the correctives involve accessing their own, real-world experience and that of others whose opinions they know to be close to their own. It is not at all unusual to hear about contacting friends and relatives in order to get their interpretations of individual news stories. Nor is it at all uncommon to hear viewers compare "how it is on the street" with how it is on the news.

Education makes a difference. College-educated Russians consume more information and typically use more sources, including media — especially newspapers — and they are more skilled at articulating the steps in their strategies. However, both high school and college-educated viewers in Russia em-

ploy the same basic strategies and both bring to news-watching sophisticated critical approaches.

Russian viewers employ both active and passive strategies to deal with issues of objectivity and bias on the news. The active strategy is to change channels or to turn off the set. In larger cities, there are more choices, and channel surfing is more common, especially among the well educated. But, as noted above, national news networks tend frequently, though not always, to present their news in a staggered fashion, and should viewers be dissatisfied with one channel, they will not find another newscast at the same time. They are, however, able to watch different news programs and to compare them. Especially during times of crisis — for example, the wars in Chechnya and the crash of 1998 — that is exactly what they do. During these above-mentioned events, ratings shot up, and NTV gained the most.

Russian viewers come to the news consumption process with cultural baggage. Just as they bring Soviet-era tools of analysis, so too do they bring habits of staying with news programs. Among both high school and college-educated viewers, most continue watching a news program in which they have lost trust. But though they continue to watch, their attitude has changed. This mental process is vividly described by two members of a focus group:

Eugeny: I do not switch, if there's a theme that interests me ... I'm interested in *how* they do it.... Do they lie well or skillfully; will they lie dazzlingly; will they lie disgustingly, vilely?

Katya: Even if you don't like something, you have to know your enemies; that is, you have to know how the other side is presented. That's why it pays to see it and stay abreast of things.

Because the passive strategy does not affect ratings, it goes unnoticed by television and political officials. This disconnect adds to the misperceptions elites hold about ordinary Russian citizens. Elites apparently do not understand that media publics bring to their consumption of news and public affairs programs the willingness and habits to engage actively with the news.

That the persuasive intent of the message is undercut by viewer identification of what they believe to be bias or by the presence of an owner's agenda is consistent with research done elsewhere on intentional correction. "To be aware of a contextual influence allows cognitive operations that modify its impact on the judgment."³² Behind that apparently passive strategy of Russian viewers is a very active challenge to the news.

Conclusion

The flawed and narrow Russian media market does not permit low-cost access and does not guarantee the editorial autonomy of news organizations. Pressure on news coverage is constantly exerted from both government and business sources, and, oftentimes, they are the same. Although there has been and continues to be a significant diversity of coverage at key points in post-Soviet Russia's turbulent life, it is by no means perfect, and, at critical times, there has been collusion (the 1996 presidential election) or a plurality of partisanship, as opposed to a quest for objectivity. There are too few players in the market, and the responsibility for genuine news diversity rests on the shoulders of a vulnerable few. Often it is only NTV that has provided the corrective to the official government view. The role of NTV as an innovator in creating a professional news corps has made it distinctive in the Russian media market, and that distinctiveness has been noted by the public. A national survey of Russians who could receive NTV found that nearly half considered the station to be mainly accurate and objective, while just over a tenth thought it was not. The comparable figures for ORT were 29 per cent and 32 per cent, and for RTR, 17 per cent and 22 per cent.³³ The battle for control of NTV was so serious because of the threat to the public's ability to compare different views. NTV was by no means perfect; finances had been badly handled, and as the government and industry applied pressure to the owners and correspondents, the on-air reactions became increasingly shrill. Yet the network continued to provide a different voice. When the standoff ended and NTV was taken over on a weekend, many decamped to TV-6, a smaller platform. How many voices would ultimately be heard in the vast and influential television market remained a serious question.

An understanding of the impact of television in Russia must take into account *both* structural diversity *and* exposure

diversity and intensity. While the former is limited, but still present, the extraordinary power of the latter amplifies and expands the overall information field. The attentive public is very large in Russia, and the judgments that ordinary viewers render display their subtlety and sophistication, lessons they learned well in the Soviet school of newswatching.

Notes

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⁴ V. E. Shliapentokh, *Problemy sotsiologii pečati*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Novosibirsk: Nauka, Sibirskoe otdelenie, 1970).

⁵ The data on penetration and credibility are drawn from a survey conducted for the author by the Public Opinion Foundation (Moscow) in non-rural Russia in the spring of 1998. The data on ratings are drawn from the Gallup Media organization's national ratings and made available by the Foundation.

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²¹ *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 12 February 1999, p. 7. I thank Vladimir Shliapentokh for sending me this electronic copy from the website of the newspaper.

²² For an overview of this campaign of issue advertising, see West and Loomis, *The Sound of Money*. The discussion is also based on numerous discussions the author had with Ben Goddard, the designer of the campaign.

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