

(Information) Revolution in One Country

ANTHONY OLCOTT | JUNE 2010

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY

“The future is already here. It’s just not very evenly distributed.”

William Gibson, November 30, 1999

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF INFORMATION?

Speaking in China on November 16, 2009, President Barack Obama said, “I think that the more freely information flows, the stronger the society becomes, because then citizens of countries around the world can hold their own governments accountable. They can begin to think for themselves” [[video](#)—[transcript](#)]. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton quoted most of the same phrase two months later in her own ringing endorsement of Internet freedom, delivered in a [speech at the Washington, DC, Newseum](#) on January 21, 2010.

The equation of freedom with the unimpeded flow of large quantities of information is a touchstone of American life, one of the reasons why the Constitution protects free speech so strongly. Even before the American Revolution, belief in the power of information made colonial newspaper publishers send one another copies of their newspapers— a postage-free right that was written into law with the first Postal Act, in 1792, and that continued to exist—despite the protests of a series of postmasters general—until the combination of the invention of the telegraph and political pressure from other, nonsubsidized businesses, led to the revocation of the privilege in 1873.¹ Six years later, the same equation of information flow with good

The contours of diplomatic engagement are changing rapidly, as are the environments in which diplomacy is crafted, honed, and practiced. New media have changed the pace and content of political awareness and provided new tools for diplomacy.

Every global issue now tests the assumptions and practices of traditional diplomacy. Non-state actors—whether benign or malign, constructive or disruptive—now play increasingly important roles in the conduct of international politics and lead us to think differently about global development, conflict, and reconciliation.

These issues, conditions, and actors are helping to refine, and perhaps redefine, what diplomacy means, how it is conducted, and how we examine the new terrain of diplomacy.

1. Richard B. Kielbowicz, “News Gathering by Mail in the Age of the Telegraph: Adapting to a New Technology,” *Technology and Culture* 28, 1 (January 1987): 26-41.

public policy led to the institution of subsidized distribution of newspapers and magazines as second-class mail, a category that remains in effect to this day.²

Belief in a freer flow of information is also what has powered the U.S. government's interest in broadcasting into what it considers to be controlled environments. Initiated immediately after Pearl Harbor,³ the Voice of America (VOA) was just the first in a long string of government efforts to increase the volume of information that audiences in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Cuba, China, and, more recently, the Middle East and Iran, might access, with the goal of affecting domestic politics in the target countries.

VOA and similar government efforts at information dissemination had their roots in a battle that had raged since World War I, as scholars and politicians tried to grapple with the consequences of what they saw as three powerful new forces on the political landscape:

- Large numbers of people who, though anonymous and strangers to one another, were perceived to share interests, goals, and desires so similar that they could be conceived of as a single entity, *the mass public* or, more simply, *the masses*.
- New communications capabilities like radio and cinema, as well as improved older ones, such as newspapers, which now could draw on telegraph and telephone to bring in news from around the world (indeed, many thought these media could inject ideas directly into the minds of the masses, essentially enslaving them);

2. Richard B. Kielbowicz, "Postal Subsidies for the Press and the Business of Mass Culture, 1880-1920," *e: The Business History Review* 64, 3 (Autumn 1990): 451-488.

3. Alan Heil, *Voice of America: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). The Foreign Section of the Committee on Public Information had started sending films, pamphlets, and lecture tours about America and American values into South America and Europe as early as April 1917.

- Ideologies that used, or appeared to use, these media to pull the masses into even tighter, more obedient groups that could be mobilized in support of Nazism, fascism, or communism.

Competing factions of academia, government, the judiciary, and the private sector advocated various remedies to the threat that information—whether overabundant or tightly controlled—seemed to pose, both to the American electorate and to the world at large. But all took for granted that there is a link between the information that people are provided and the political stances they will take. Nearly all sides in the debate subscribed in some degree to the views of Justice Louis Brandeis, who had asserted in [Whitney v. California \(1927\)](#) that “[i]f there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.”

RUSSIA AS TEST CASE

Implicit in Brandeis’s statement is the conviction that truths and falsehoods have an independently verifiable existence, with the companion consequence that “bad politics” are the product of ignorance, not choice. This belief was widely shared in the United States, both within government and outside it, making it an easy leap to conclude that the totalitarian societies that seemed to be taking over the world could be combated (in part at least) by supplying people within those societies with what the senders in this country understood to be “the truth.” Although it was not until 1976 that VOA adopted a [formal charter](#) requiring itself to be “accurate, objective, and comprehensive” and “a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news,” its [very first broadcast](#), on February 24, 1942, had begun with the assurance that “we shall tell you the truth.”

Not surprisingly, particularly for a government-funded organization, settling who got to decide what “the truth” was proved challenging. The country had already suffered the disturbing experience of [George Creel’s Committee on Public In-](#)

[formation](#), which had conducted a vigorous and tightly defined domestic “pro-America” campaign at the end of World War I. The question of whether or not America should compete with European propaganda (produced not just by the Axis powers but also by England) was highly contentious throughout the interwar years, making it little surprise that—as Alan Heil put it in his [history of the VOA](#)—the decision to set up VOA “led inevitably to a second war, a domestic battle for control” over the issue of what kind of content would prevail—“news with a twist or news that was, in the context of the times, more straightforward.”⁴

With the death of Nazism, and the descent of the “Iron Curtain,” the Soviet Union increasingly became the target of much of VOA’s effort. This was due in part, of course, to the belief that the communism its government espoused was the prime existential threat to America, and also to the belief that the elaborate, controlled information environment that the Russian government had set up following the October Revolution, and then increasingly perfected over the decades, looked to be the very antithesis of the information environment that prevailed in the United States. All media in the Soviet Union were government owned and, more important, were used as overt tools of opinion control. Whether paradoxical or predictable, one of the effects of that control was that recipients of much of what VOA sent tended to assume that the news and opinion issuing from the United States was as much propaganda as that issued by their own government (an assumption that was often enough correct, because of the ideological battles that raged in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s).

In the late 1950s, partly in response to a suspicion that “propaganda vs. propaganda” was an ineffective tactic, the VOA began to offer a range of content much broader than just news. This included plays, discussion forums, magazine-style “slice-



4. Heil, *Voice of America*, p. 36.

of-life” programs, and—most importantly—jazz.⁵ By accident or design, this change in content took advantage of the fact that the massive Soviet state information industry was geared not only to supporting the government but (with greater or lesser fidelity at various times), to making sure that Soviet citizens received only information that was uplifting, educational, and of benefit to them and the state. Willis Conover’s “Jazz Hour” was everything that the state information system was not—lively, fun, and devoted to nothing more serious than good music. As a result, the “processes of education” of which Brandeis had written had far more to do with enjoyment than they did with ideological argumentation—as this flyer (intended for dissemination in the United States) for Radio Free Europe (part of the VOA operation) from what seems to be the mid-1960s will attest [the power of Conover’s influence may have been in this [listserve of comments](#) collected when he died and also in this [Russian-language memoir](#) of what formed the so-called “*Shes-tidesyatniki*” [1960-ers] of Russia’s literary and cultural elite].

All that began to change in the second half of the 1980s, as Mikhail Gorbachev and his supporters attempted the revitalization and “reconstruction” (in Russian, *perestroika*) of the “stagnating” nation they had received from previous leaders Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko (nostalgia buffs, or those curious to see Soviet TV at its stiffest, may wish to access [Brezhnev’s 1970 New Year’s greeting to the nation](#), [Andropov’s oration](#) at Brezhnev’s funeral in 1982,⁶ or [Chernenko’s address](#) to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CPSU] Senate the following year). One of the prime tools for this “reinvigoration” was publicity or, as it became

5. Heil’s book has an amusing anecdote suggesting that music was always part of VOA’s “business plan.” The first broadcasts were announced by playing a few bars of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which had to be scratched when the broadcasters learned that the tune is an old German march, “*Laura, Laura*,” to the sounds of which the Nazis had invaded Norway. They hastily switched to “Yankee Doodle” for the new service’s signature tune [Heil, *Voice of America*, p. 38].

6. The English subtitles in this video version bear no relation to what Andropov is actually saying.

known to the world, *glasnost*. Begun as a whisper in 1986, with publications of once-banned authors in obscure, hard-to-find journals (Vladimir Nabokov, for example, had his Soviet debut in a chess journal), *glasnost* had by 1991 become a full-throated roar. Radio and TV became freer than they had ever been, augmented now by the arrival of new technologies such as VCRs and, a bit later, CDs; domestic newspapers and magazines proliferated, as old titles shook off their dust and new ones appeared to challenge them, joined as well by a flood of foreign publications, either in their original form or, as the *New York Times* attempted for a while, as look-alike versions published in Russian.

Once the Soviet Union had been swept away, Russia became what may have been the world's freest information environment. TV channels proliferated, as localities and local potentates seized bits of the electromagnetic spectrum and then used their holdings to batter one another. Talk shows, scandal shows, even a news program called *Naked Truth* (during the course of which the comely newscasters disrobed)—all these were available, and more. Cable and satellite came, too, and the Internet as well—dial-up in the late 1990s, but quickly becoming broadband, too. Book publishing staggered for a bit, knocked back on its heels by the disappearance of state subsidies, but then found its feet again, as did the film industry.

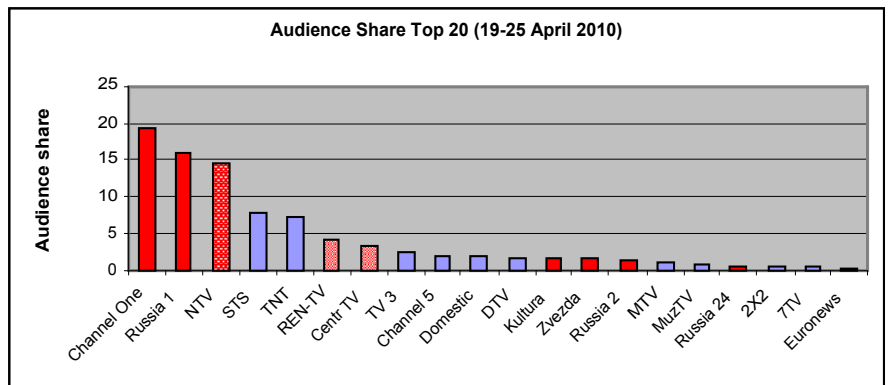
In short, by New Year's Eve 1999, when Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned, Russia found itself with three major TV broadcasters, one of which (the most boring) was more or less controlled by the state, while the other two were owned by new-minted billionaire oligarchs who used their media as extensions of their political intrigues and machinations. One station had been the main Soviet-era station, and the other was brand new, a post-Soviet start-up, but both behaved as if the Kremlin (and each other) were major enemies. Newspapers, too, did battle, some of them Soviet-era "brand names" now in the harness of oligarchs, and others of them new.

Perhaps ironically, one of the reasons that *glasnost* had proven so destructive of the established order, and a reason also why among the first assets that the oligarchs snatched up were

TV, newspapers, and radio, is that Russians had long been perceived to have an exaggerated faith in the power of words. More than a century before poet [Osip Mandelstam had remarked gloomily](#) to his wife that “only Russia respects poets” because “this is the only place that kills poets,” another poet, Aleksandr [Pushkin, had written](#) of the descending angel who would “burn the hearts of men with your Word.” The victory of the Bolshevik revolution was also portrayed as the triumph of “the word” (not for nothing was the main newspaper called *Pravda*, or “Truth”⁷).

Given that reverence for “the word,” and the continued belief that contested power was one of the things leading to the continued weakness of the Russian state, President Vladimir Putin and his Kremlin team began slowly gathering back control of the major information outlets. Because these new media had largely been funded and run by a card-house structure of debts and shady deals, it was relatively easy for the Kremlin to force out first Vladimir Gusinsky (owner of NTV and the newspaper *Segodnya*), and then Boris Berezovsky (who did not own but still somehow controlled ORT, which soon became Channel One, and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*). Other oligarchs got the message and either dropped out of the media business or swung in behind the Kremlin, buying up these assets and more.

In 2010, the picture of Russia’s media environment could be viewed as quite gloomy. As the graph at right shows, most of the TV stations are either owned by the government outright (in solid red) or are owned by Kremlin allies or are generally progov-



7. This point lies outside the main argument, but it is worth noting that Russian has two words that are translated into English as “truth.” One is *pravda*, but this has the connotation of “man-made truth” or “rhetorical truth.” Contrasted to it—and for a time also the name of a newspaper published by the Russian Orthodox church—is *istina*, or God’s truth.



ernment (in dotted red).⁸ The top two nongovernmental stations, STS and TNT, offer entertainment only.

A similar picture obtains with newspapers—four of the five newspapers with the widest circulation are either government owned or are generally progovernment. The two largest radio broadcasters that offer news are also state owned, but radio is a comparatively insignificant source of most people’s information. News is tilted strongly toward the government, with President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin receiving substantial coverage, and very little attention devoted to internal issues or disputes. Indeed, the news departments of the major TV stations have basically become press offices, with no capacity to cover fast-breaking events. This was abundantly clear on March 29, 2010, when two sets of bombs exploded in the Moscow metro. The only organization with the equipment needed to cover a story of that sort was Russia Today (now called RT), which had been established in 2005 to be a kind of “Russian CNN,” in order to show a Russian point of view to the world. Ironically, RT for that day at least was also the primary source of information for Russia itself, augmented by the contributions of bloggers, tweeters, and people with cell-phone cameras. The photo at left, taken by eyewitness [Tatyana Krasnova](#), captures some of the spirit of that moment.

[A blogger’s description](#) (as translated by another blogger) of the way Channel One, the country’s primary broadcaster, covered the March 29, 2010, terrorist bombings in the Moscow metro gives some sense of what the news environment looked like in the main outlets:

“At 12:00, Channel One began their regular news programme. Without any hurry, they told about subway bombings in Tokio (1995), Baku, Paris, Dusseldorf, London, about [the Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich]’s condolences, about the condolences sent by [Ukrainian lawmakers], by Angela Merkel, Bernard Kushner. Then, very quickly,

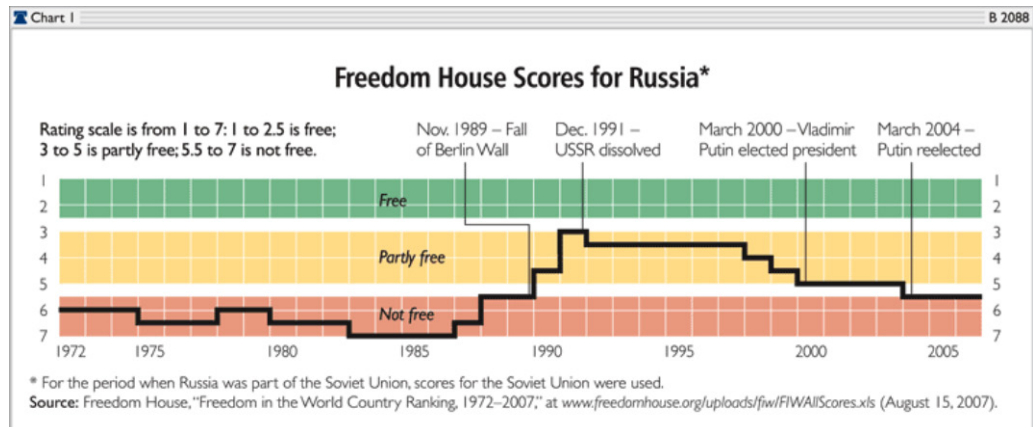
8. Based on information provided by the TNS-Global media monitoring company. Website: TNS-global.ru.

they gave a short report of all the major events in Moscow, one-and-a-half minutes long: 35 dead, 70 wounded, metro doesn't function from Komsomolskaya to Sportivnaya, there're traffic jams in the center, government demanding to increase security in all Russian airports. For a couple of seconds, they had [reporter] Timur Seraziev reporting live from Lubyanka Square, and then they turned on the advertisements of healthy food, Pepsi, some Antistax, chocolate Inspiration, juice The Loved One, synthetic oils Mobil1, window washing substance, new yogurt Apple Musli, Afobazol—a cure for anxiety and pressure, coffee Jacobs Monarch, wholegrain Nestle cornflakes. Each of these ads was longer than the live report from Lubyanka. After the end of a 7-minute ad break, they started an unscheduled talk-show 'District.'"

This kind of disconnect between events on the street and the picture portrayed by the main TV news outlets, as well as the generally heavy-handed way that journalists are treated in the country, has led many observers to conclude that Russia has [returned "to Brezhnev times,"](#) a kind of Soviet Union without communism. That opinion is reflected in the country's Freedom House rating, the history of which is shown in the graph below. As can be seen, the western judgment was that Russia flirted toward freedom during Gorbachev's era, remained reliably "almost free" throughout the Yeltsin era, and then began to deflate again under Putin, finally sinking back into Brezhnev-like "not freedom" with Putin's reelection.

HOWEVER...

As much as Russia's "freedom index" of today may resemble that





of 1988, there are significant differences. Unlike in 1988, when foreign TV was easily receivable only in Tallinn (which could get signals from Finland, making Estonia the only part of the Soviet Union that could watch *Dallas*), and a bare handful of foreign newspapers and magazines was available only in the off-limits hotels for foreigners, Russia today is awash in information outlets.

The country has more than fifty thousand legally registered publications (though not all appear regularly). In terms of political stances, these run the gamut from far left to far right and are owned by a wide variety of supporters. More important, the media environment in the country is no longer uniform, as it was in Soviet days—the Glasnost Defence Foundation (gdf.ru) publishes a periodic “glasnost map” that measures the degree of media freedom by region across the state; as the most recent version (through March 2010) shows, nowhere in the country is ranked as “free,” but large swathes, including the second city of St. Petersburg, are characterized as “relatively free” (orange), and only a few regions are regarded as “not free” (brown). The foundation further reports on this map that the situation had “improved” in six regions and “worsened” in thirteen, suggesting that the situation, while not ideal, is at least dynamic (the same point is made by comparing the maps from different reporting periods).

Another set of maps on the same site indicates that these variations in degree of media freedom are reproduced at more local levels, meaning that a comparatively freer region will lie next door to one that the foundation judges to be “not free.” The map at right is of the Central Administrative district—essentially Russia’s heartland—and while generally less than free, does include comparatively freer regions.

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Russian theaters receive Hollywood movies the same day as do American ones, so that, for example, [movie-goers in Ufa](#), the capital of Bashkortistan, are able (in early May 2010) to enjoy *Avatar* (in simple 3D and IMAX), *Iron Man 2* (normal screen or IMAX), *Robin Hood*, and *Plan B*. Movie-goers in [Chelyabinsk, deep in Siberia](#), are unable to see *Avatar* in 3D because the local 3D theater is showing *Battle of the Titans* instead, but they are able to watch the film in 2D. They can, if they prefer, also go to *Robin Hood*, *Iron Man 2*, or see *Friends Forever* (a German-French-Italian coproduction), *Nanny McPhee 2* (a British comedy), or *Burnt by the Sun 2*, the sequel to a Russian movie.

Similar diversity is available via cable TV—to which more than [half of Muscovites subscribe](#), although penetration elsewhere is much less—or via satellite (the western half of [Russia lies within the footprint](#) of most of the satellites serving Europe and the Middle East). [Internet TV](#) offers even more, essentially an infinite menu of TV for every taste, from most of the countries of the world.

Unlike during Soviet days, Russians are also able to leave their country and indeed have become avid travelers. According to the [World Tourist Organization](#), Russia ranks ninth in dollar volume of outbound tourism, with Russians having

spent almost \$24 billion to travel the globe in 2008. Although more detailed country-by-country destination figures required paid subscription, anecdotal information offered by the World Tourist Organization suggests that Russians travel everywhere that Americans do, with particular attention paid to resorts in Turkey and Thailand.

And then of course there is the Internet. [Russia has the third largest Internet user pool](#) in Europe, behind only Germany and the United Kingdom. With a larger population than either of those two countries, however, Russia's forty-five million users mean that the country's degree of penetration is only [33 percent](#), about the same as in Turkey. Not surprisingly, Internet usage skews toward youth—nearly 70 percent of those under twenty-four are Internet users. About 7 percent of the total Internet is reckoned to be of Russian origin, and there are more than seven million active bloggers—among them President Medvedev, who in addition is one of Russia's ten thousand or so Twitter users. Cellphone ownership in Russia is greater than 80 percent, while there are actually more SIM cards in use than there are people (penetration is 140 percent of the population). In addition to keeping Russians connected to one another, mobile devices are increasingly a means of accessing the Internet—about a quarter of Russian Internet users have reached cyberspace via their hand-held devices.

RUSSIA—THE ETERNAL PARADOX

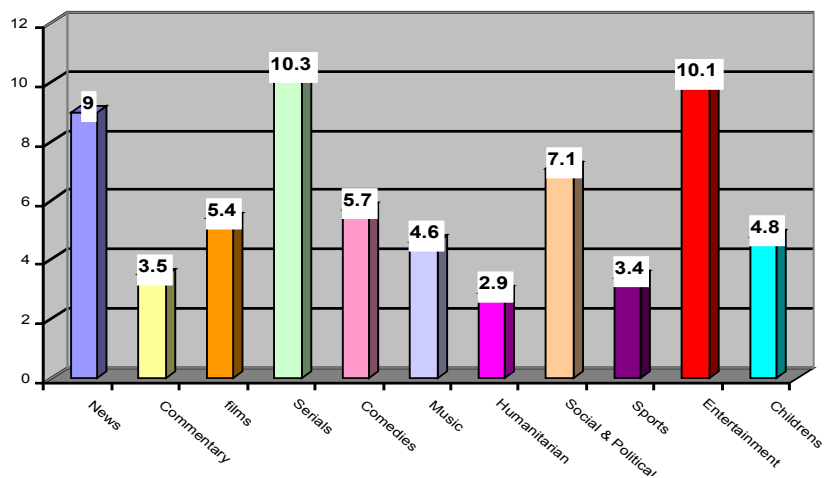
Indices such as that of Freedom House and the Glasnost Defence Foundation measure output: The declining scores reflect things such as increasing concentration of ownership by pro-Kremlin forces, pressure on journalists, and reports of topics that are forbidden or restricted in the major press outlets. Unlike two decades ago, however, that does not mean that the information is unavailable in Russia, if someone wants to find it. Indeed, in the Russia of today a person can probably find whatever information he or she desires—including such previously unthinkable things as a slideshow that gives the [retail prices of the watches](#) worn by politicians who claim modest salaries (President Medvedev, for example, claimed income of

\$119,000 in 2009⁹ and is shown wearing a watch said to cost \$32,000); a video with a [biting rap song](#) decrying the way in which the vice president of Lukoil was able to shift blame for a fatal automobile accident onto the victims; or [cartoon versions of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin](#) dancing and singing satirical couplets, as portrayed on the New Year's show of Channel One, the nation's largest.

What this means is that—unlike in the Soviet past—almost anyone anywhere in Russia can obtain almost any information, about any subject. In other words, what the information revolution has wrought in Russia today is a shift from the assumption that political attitudes and behaviors are a product of information shortage (which can be overcome by supplying more) to the possibility that they are a product of *information access choices and preferences*.

Like their fellows almost everywhere in the world, Russian audiences seem to be using the overflowing abundance of the communications offered them increasingly to select only the things that genuinely interest them rather than the things in which other people think they ought to be interested. The increase in information availability in recent years has tended to be exponential, while the increase in information actually accessed is only arithmetic—meaning that even popular venues do not attract mass audiences in the way that mass communications once did. This may be seen, for example, in the ratings (or percent of potential total audience) achieved by the most popular TV shows in various content categories (this graph is based on information [provided by TNS-Gallup](#)).

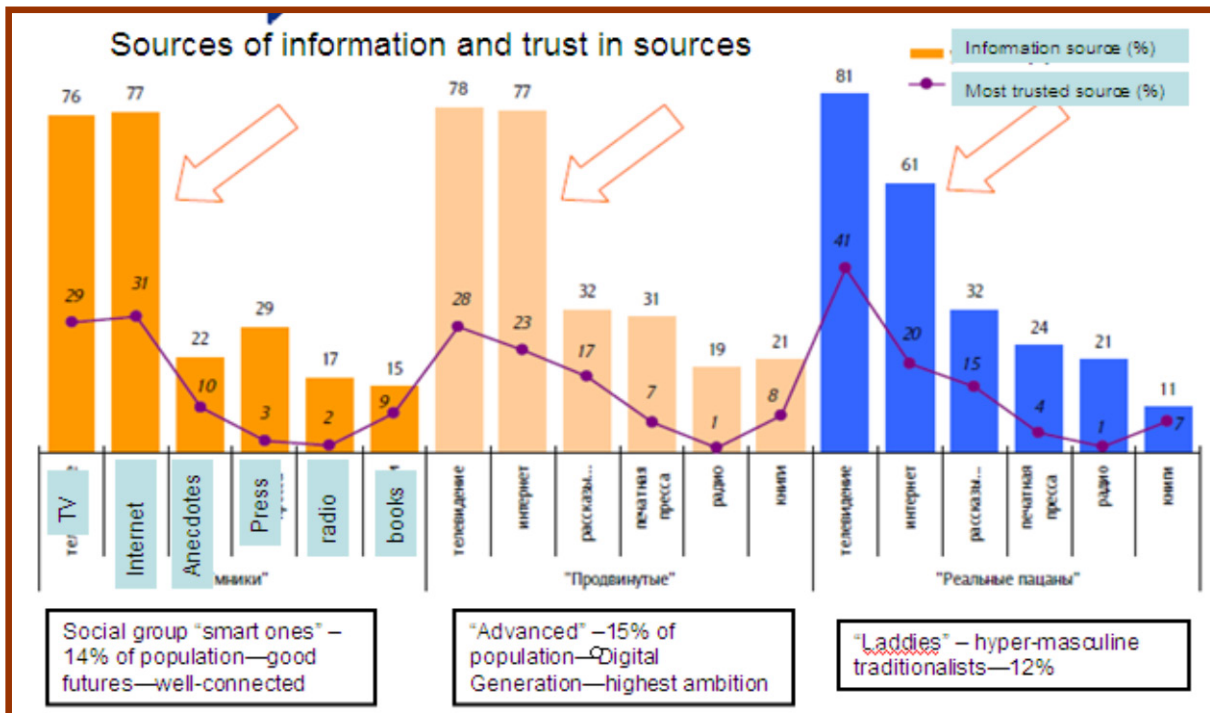
Rating of Top TV Show in Russia by Category, 26 April-2 May 2010



9. Henning Shroeder, "Modern Times: Is There Movement in Russian Politics?" *Russian Analytical Digest* n^o. 77 (April 2010): 4.

The graph shows that, although people do watch the main news programs—which critics consider to be the creatures entirely of the Kremlin—they watch entertainment slightly more. Even more important, though, they clearly spread their attention among a far wider variety of fare than was the case in Soviet days, which suggests that politics simply does not have the hold over them that Russia’s elites may once have imagined was the case.

Resources today also make it possible to measure not just



what people watch but also what they think about it. Thus, a [public opinion poll](#) from March 2010 found that 60 percent said that they didn't pay particular attention to media reporting about the economy, perhaps because 71 percent felt that the media were not reporting the situation "objectively," and 45 percent felt that the economic situation was worse than was being reported. Nor is distrust a factor only with older, perhaps more cynical generations. [Another study](#), this from April 2010,

indicated that youths (shown in the graph at left according to the demographic segments assigned respondents by the polling firm) spread their information searches out over a number of sources.

In other words, what the available data suggest is that Russians may not be “information deprived” but rather are getting pretty much the information *they want to get*. Although that makes them no different from people anywhere else (at least if the tenets of “uses and gratification” theory are generally correct), the notion that Russian audiences may be indifferent to the kinds of information that outsiders think they should want is profoundly disturbing to many people. That discomfort and disappointment has shown up particularly strongly in studies of the Russian Internet, which was widely imagined to be a sort of “electronic *samizdat* [clandestine printing]” that would bring Russians the kind of “freely flowing information” that President Obama and Secretary Clinton imagined would be used to “hold the government accountable.”

A study by journalists Floriana Fossato and John Lloyd, “[The Web That Failed](#),” is representative of this sense of disappointment. The authors report with distaste that the activities of Russian Internet users suggest that news ranked ninth in their interests and that, moreover, a great deal that fell within that rubric is “sensationalist and largely unchecked stories.” Fossato and Lloyd outlined three unsuccessful attempts to use the web for political mobilization, drawing the overall conclusion that most conversation on the Russian web is not political (or, as they characterized it, is at a “low qualitative level”), that trust levels are low and networks tend to be closed, and that would-be leaders are easily coopted or compromised.¹⁰

Eugene Gorny, a Russian émigré who was one of the first students of the Russian blogosphere, [found essentially the same contours](#) in his own research but drew different conclusions about the import of his findings. To him, Russians’ use of

10. Floriana Fossato and John Lloyd, “The Web That Failed” (Oxford; United Kingdom: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, September 2008), p. 58.

abundant information is essentially the same as it was when information was limited—the public is “socially atomized;” has contempt for officialdom and “the Other;” and relies almost exclusively on their personal networks for information, opinions, and support.¹¹

Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk, a professor in Moscow, [agrees](#)¹² as well that “the Internet is not informing a virtual public sphere in Russia” but argued that what people seem to be searching for is not “information,” in the sense that President Obama meant it. What they seek instead, she argued, is *variety*. According to her research, people in Russia—especially the young—collect bits and pieces of what they consider “news” from a broad array of sources: TV, the Internet, social media, e-mail, and from interaction with friends, precisely as was suggested by the graph above.

To Lapina-Kratasyuk, her findings are not an indictment of political passivity in youth but rather seem to point to a kind of “information overload,” which, she argues, “reflects the situation of indifference in contemporary Russian society.” People do not feel a purpose in engaging with politics or indeed with people outside their own social spheres. As Lapina-Kratasyuk puts it, “The typical Russian Internet user is not interested in discussion and accepts media content uncritically. The users are dependent on it and have great antipathy toward it at the same time.”

The information environment in the United States has many of these same features. News programming is usually the choice of between 1 and 4 percent of the TV viewing audience (see figures on the website [tvbythenumbers.com](#)), and [72 percent agree](#) with the statement that “most news sources are biased.” In a [ten-year period](#), the percentage of those willing to accept that “all or most” of what the various purveyors of TV

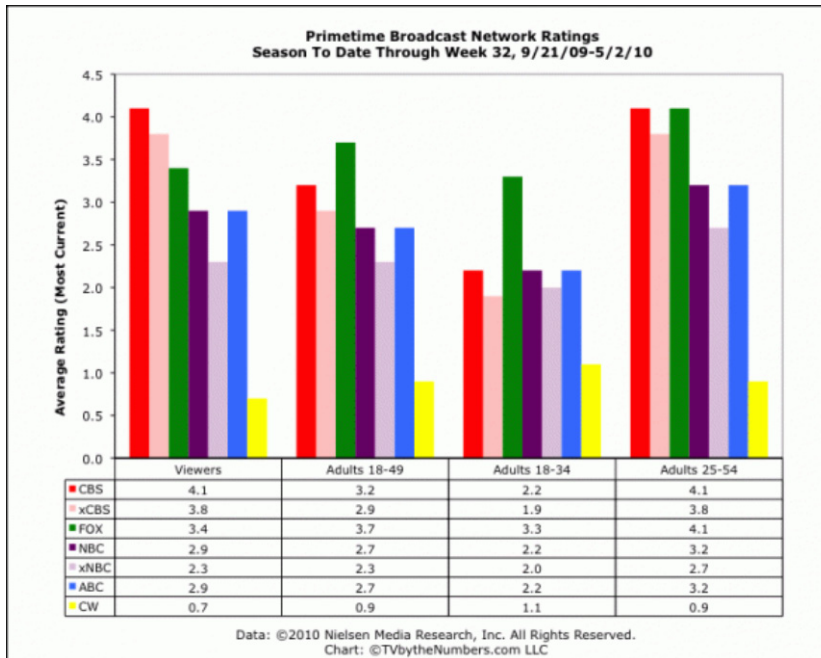
11. Eugene Gorny, “Understanding the Real Impact of Russian Blogs,” *Russian Analytical Digest* n°. 69 (December 2009): 8.

12. Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk, “News in the Russian Internet: The Growing Indifference of a Closing Society,” *Russian Analytical Digest* n°. 69 (December 2009): 14.

news are offering is true has dropped from the mid-40 percent range to the 20-30 percent range (depending upon the channel), while the numbers for major newspapers have trended even lower.

The “mass audience” for other fare is also as fragmented as in Russia. Even popular entertainment programs frequently attract no more than 10-15 percent of the total potential audience, and many “top-rated” shows achieve their status in spite of having ratings in the single digits. As was noted in an earlier essay, even the TV program that drew the largest audience in U.S. history, the broadcast of Super Bowl XLIV, did not [attract more than half of all the TV viewers that day](#). Just as in Russia, the U.S. TV audience is fragmented, as the [graph below](#) suggests (the chart aggregates the average rating for each network channel for the year to date—as may be seen, none manages to capture more than about 5 percent of the total viewing audience).

isd working papers in new dipomacy



FROM PUSH TO PULL

In short, what is happening in Russia seems to be nothing more than a local expression of a much broader tendency, the [transition from a “push” environment](#)—one where the supply of information was greater than the demand—to a “pull” environment. In a “pull” environment, the audience, not the broadcaster, is in charge—an inversion that infuriates “pushers.” Newspaper publishers and journalists fulminate about what people *should* read, critics and directors intone about the movies people *ought* to see, politicians and campaign workers carry on about issues people *ought* to care about, and democratic activists insist that people *ought* to hold their governments accountable. What behavior increasingly seems to demonstrate, however, is that in a “pull” environment, people make choices as they wish, paying less and less attention to what the “pushers” consider they *ought* to do and increasingly doing whatever they want to.

In the case of Russia, what Lapina-Kratasyuk and Gorny are suggesting is that Russian habits of information access are not a product of information deficit but rather are a reflection of peoples’ own preferences. Yes, there are some political activists, just as there are in America, and there are many people who wish their government were not so corrupt, cynical, and occasionally brutal. However, most Russians—or at least most young Russians—appear to have abandoned traditionally understood “news” as something of no particular interest to them. This is, as Lapina-Kratasyuk concludes, part of a “larger phenomenon” as “political news” everywhere moves to “become extinct.”

This growing indifference of Russia’s audience to “political news” was one of the reasons that [VOA stopped broadcasting](#) to Russia entirely in 2008.

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University
Washington, DC 20057

telephone 202-965-5735

fax 202-965-5652

Web site <http://isd.georgetown.edu>