
Construction of 'Reality' in Russian Mass Media News on Television and on the Internet

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In the media space of modern Russia, are there any means of forming cultural identities apart from the ones represented by television? Does the Russian-language segment of the Internet (RuNet) produce any alternatives to the 'centralized' forms of collective self-description and self-awareness?



Vizion: *The outlook-forming role of television.*

When trying to answer these questions, one inevitably runs into problems related to the idea of 'identity' itself. The Internet is the technical realization of a ceaseless human urge to create alternative worlds. It is viewed by many users, not only as a medium where one can construct 'the other self', but also as a way of escaping from identity. The ever-changing nature of the Internet is contrary to the traditional notion of identity as a system of stable, easily recognizable features; like the real world itself, the Internet changes every minute – and this is something, that is difficult to put into 'theory'. Thus, Internet research once again brings to the foreground the problem of the inadequacy of theories, which is

especially evident when such an artificial topic as the Russian Internet (→ **RuNet**) in the context of post-Soviet culture is taken as a research topic.

Why, notwithstanding the fact that the Internet provides an opportunity to create 'meta-national' communicative situations, is the Russian-language segment of the Web still persistently referred to as the 'RuNet' by users and RuNet historians [Kuznecov 2004], thus becoming an 'ethnically defined', virtual community? Does this prove that the RuNet is specific and unique, or does this simply mark a post-Soviet identity problem? In the absence of general self-description rules, "the adjective *Russian* is supposed to automatically give a new meaning to the noun" [Zvereva 2003]. When the word is used too often, it becomes "an empty verbal frame". Thus, the question of whether the RuNet 'really' exists or is a mythologeme cultivated by Russian users and Web researchers to define their 'otherness', remains an open one.

Returning to the identity problem, it is worth noting that some prominent Russian scholars tend to present their analysis of the socio-cultural situation in Russia as something that is impossible to analyze using categories of 'Western' culture. While some writers try to modify basic → **terms** (e.g. introduce the notion of "negative identity" [Gudkov 2004]), others insist on the need to change the whole notional apparatus, leading towards the realization that "the notion of identity is not universal and that the emphasis ought sometimes to be shifted towards de-identification" [Zajac 2005, 216].

Theoretical paradoxes are just one reflection of the undefined (indefinable?) situation in modern Russia – matched by the incoherent legislation, lack of boundaries between the official and the

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unofficial, the private and the public, the personal and the collective. Such uncertainty enhances the role of mass media, especially television, and their integral, outlook-forming role becomes vital for the community.

However, this feature of Russian media (their extended role in the re-creation of society) still does not make the socio-cultural situation in modern Russia, 'unique'. It is connected, rather, with the global changes in the role of the media in the culture of the 21st century. This is why a local study of Russian media will make an important contribution to the development of global media theory.

Taking into account the above mentioned factors, this article was conceptualized as a theoretical contribution and introduction to the problems linked with the analysis of political news programmes in contemporary Russia. By sketching the general outlines of the topic, on the basis of some detailed case studies, the specifics of the media context are described and a basis formed for following empirical studies dedicated to the topic of Russian news programmes.

Russian media space of the 1990-2000s: 'global' media in a 'local' setting

Turning to the comparative analysis of TV news and the RuNet news websites, it is necessary to keep in mind above all, the constructive, meaningful and audio-visual differences arising from the immanent, supranational specificity of each of the aforementioned, two communication channels and thus to note the compulsory characteristics of material presentation, defined by the format of every release.

The TV-format is more suitable for broadcasting straightforward meanings imposed by the dominating élites, while the Internet, which functions as a free exchange of opinions, is 'pluralistic' by definition. This latter fact does not follow from the historic or socio-cultural situation specific to Russia of

the 2000s, but is defined by the technical features of the communication channel and the way it is 'introduced' into everyday life, as well as by the role it plays in the organization of social time.

However, describing the Internet and TV formats as 'supranational' does not mean that the issue of national identity is resolved. On the contrary, for the study of Russian TV and the RuNet, the 'global' specificity of these media is mostly important as a collection of given forms, selected according to concrete and 'local' aims and conditions.

In a certain sense, there is no 'global' TV just as there is no 'local' Internet. While the creation of → **boundaries** is a characteristic of television, their erosion is a characteristic of the Internet. However, the official and unofficial language often resists this erosion (which is proved, for instance, by the popularity of the word, *RuNet*). This betrays the complex interrelations of the 'global' and the 'local' in the system of modern mass media. In order to create an alternative to the studies that tend to overestimate the importance of national specificity, it is necessary, first of all, to separate format factors from socio-cultural ones.

Russia familiarized itself with Western (commercial) forms of broadcasting within a relatively short period of time. However, Soviet stereotypical attitudes to the media and the 'Soviet' broadcasting style are still very much alive. These two factors are vital for the understanding of the current situation on Russian TV.

"The rapid growth of Russian media, which changed within ten years from one institutional model to another and altered the formats of major genres" [D'jakova, Trakhtenberg 1999, 125-126] has led to a most welcome reception of new 'commercial' broadcasts. Entertainment TV, for instance, was discovered by people of different generations simultaneously. On the one hand, this made rather mediocre soap operas (and, subsequently, talk shows and reality shows) extremely popular. On the other hand, this produced a non-differentiated audience for many entertainment shows. Thus, 'children aged seven to seventy'

watched programmes aimed at teen audiences, while a 'well-educated' part of the population hurried home to catch the next episode of a second-rate Brazilian soap, originally targeted at audiences with a low education level. The Russian audience turned out to be omnivorous – a consequence, not of their lack of taste, but rather, because of a long, enforced abstinence. It must be said that the paradoxes of 'target audience' are not restricted to TV: for example, LiveJournal, originally a communication channel targeting American teenagers, became an élite community in Russia, primarily of thirty to forty year old intellectuals.

Despite a long experience of using Western TV genres, the Russian media of the 2000s still continue to employ 'primitive' methods of influencing their audiences. This is a consequence, first of all, of the novelty factor inherent in many media forms, and secondly, by the tradition of trusting the information obtained from TV or newspapers, inherited from Soviet culture. The latter phenomenon is especially noteworthy as a specific way of reality construction: why do people keep trusting the media even though they realize that the transmitted information is inadequate? This Soviet-era effect has been called → **“social schizophrenia”** by some researchers and is of primary interest as an example of the importance of value constructions that fly in the face of the experience of every day life. Individuals are united within a nation, and the notional field of 'things we can all be proud of' is created by value constructions. The media are expected to reproduce the universally significant socio-cultural information, not to broadcast topical discussions. The thinly veiled political spin-doctoring and the crude propaganda of the central channels can be explained by the low level of critical evaluation shown by the audiences (or by the fact that the audience's capacity for critical evaluation is underestimated). It is more probable, though, that the reconstruction of the pan-Russian reference frame of 'Russian identity' (which manifests itself,

among other things, in the virtual construction of the 'one state'), which is well-known from Soviet times, is in much greater demand than the values of 'objective information'.

Is this really a 'Soviet' trait only? I wonder whether television can exist (in other countries, for instance) without being expected to reproduce socio-cultural meanings? I think the real opposition here is not 'Soviet vs. non-Soviet', but 'ideal vs. real'. TV as a source of objective information is simply an 'ideal'. [Natalja Konradova]

Such a situation is not, of course, solely characteristic of Soviet and post-Soviet television. The idea that the normative model of 'reflecting reality' and the aim of producing 'objective information' are in opposition not only with political and commercial interests, but also with journalism itself, is a key motif in traditional American media studies. But the situation in the Russian media is even more complex; little nods towards the civic society and its values are often perceived as elements of an alien cultural paradigm. At the same time, the need for a unified 'Utopian' version of events renders nearly optional the values of a free society and the individual point of view. At a glance, the only peculiarity of the Russian media situation is the greater prominence of some features of the TV format – for instance, the near-complete exposure of ideological constructions. But quantitative changes lead to qualitative ones: thus, material is presented by episodes rather than by topics, controversial expert opinions are cited less and less often, and presenters, with their individual programmes are increasingly often substituted by newsreaders. Thus, discussions as a way of forming the public opinion and as a 'decorative' element of TV genres have

nearly disappeared from Russian TV news programmes. When this situation is evaluated, it is often mistakenly described as primitive and retrograde, whereas it is in fact formed by the 'unbalanced' functions of television in post-Soviet society [see Dubin 2000]. [Ekaterina Kratasjuk]

On the one hand, Russian media space is thus a convenient 'colonial' market where the simplest methods of impact can still operate, and trade in 'traditional' goods is still, in a sense, possible. On the other hand, 'alien', ready-made forms are quickly and freely appropriated in order to transmit 'local' meanings.

Television vs. Internet in the post-Soviet media space: the context

Statistics have demonstrated that the Internet is not at all the most popular medium in modern Russia. Besides, the role of the media for the Ru-Net users is often filled, not by specialized news websites, but by resources originally meant for other purposes. An example is provided by the above-mentioned LiveJournal. Many researchers explain the popularity of LJ in Russia by the fact that this blogging service has been transformed into a most convenient mass medium. Regular LJ readers may not even have their own blogs, while some 'web journals' combine high information levels with the 'inner circle' rhetoric, creating a trustworthiness mode most suitable for modern Russia: information written by experts still appears unofficial and uncensored in LJ. However, the selection of TV and Internet news is not random: such a comparison can help to create a model for describing the reality representation structure typical for the modern Russian media as a whole. This is proved by at least two points.

First, as mentioned above, television is used in order to search for and construct values 'that unite all'. It is a 'monolithic' system of histori-

cal norms and political preferences, sanctioned by the state. The Internet, however, exists as a multiplex of communities and points of view; it is a 'discrete' way of describing 'modern' Russia, consisting of meaningful alternatives; it is a discussion, a 'forum'; it is a stream that you cannot enter twice. This division is not restricted to Russian media, but it is most prominent against the background of post-Soviet media space. These are the two major complementary types of representing (constructing) reality; they can and must co-exist, albeit while discrediting and maligning, but not ignoring one another. Meanwhile, it is unclear what choices the audience is to make (and whether it has to make any). Sociological polls organized, for instance, by the Levada Centre (former VCIOM [All-Russia Opinion Poll Research Centre]), have demonstrated that a large proportion of Russians feel nostalgic about the 'monolithic image of the country', which is further confirmed by the invariably high ratings of news programmes broadcast by the central channels that reflect the dominant ideology in a straightforward way. But to what extent does this give grounds for anxiety and conclusions that the country is again hovering on the brink of totalitarianism? Rather than invoke the political views of the Russians, one can explain the ratings more sensibly by the 'media habits', which are historically slower to change in Russia than in Europe or the USA.

The second reason why the opposition of TV and the Internet is present in the Russian media is that printed press can no longer claim to be the universally significant, national medium. After the post-1991 recession, the press partly regained its influence and circulation by the beginning of the 21st century, but it is at the moment represented chiefly by specialized or local media. This includes the high-status, 'quality' weeklies like the *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, *Profil* which have a well-defined target audience and range of topics, as well as 'branch' editions (covering, for instance, real-estate, cars, health, child-care etc.), and the ever-popular tabloids and glossy and 'semi-glossy'

magazines, which concentrate mainly on the celebrity news.

The information exchange system in modern Russia is more like the 'mass communication' of traditional societies than the system of news production and transmission characteristic of the modern post-industrial societies of the West [D'jakova, Trakhtenberg 1999, 10-11]. Unlike the universally significant values that reconstruct the national identity, the universally significant news is not fully in demand by Russian society, since there is not enough interest in the global problems of politics, economics or culture. The interest that unites the inhabitants of Russia's vast territory is the hunger for rumors and hearsay, as well as the desire to learn 'useful news', directly applicable to everyday life. The latter category also includes local news. This is the reason why local TV and radio stations have become serious rivals of central channels in the post-perestrojka period: the quality of programmes and the professional skills of local journalists have improved, while the profit made by advertising has afforded local stations the opportunity to function normally [Cvik 2005].

The lack of a printed medium for the public discussion of universal political and economic problems betrays the fact that the 'average' citizens do not take part in decision-making at state level, and that even the need for such participation is absent, since events outside 'local' boundaries are not interesting to the mass population. However it may be, the structure of Russian mass media of the 2000s is an "expression and consequence of the fact that no social institution, wholly or partly independent of the state, has been formed in Russia during all these years. No independent group with its own system of ideas and interests has appeared. This means, strictly speaking, that there has been no definite → **public sphere** with its plurality and 'agora' spirit, competition between viewpoints, clarification and comparison of different positions, open debates, reasonable and conscious concessions, obligatory and recognized consensus" [Dubin 2000].

The direct consequence of the latter idea is the hypothesis that "modern Russian society is predominantly a society of TV-viewers who exchange symbolic remarks about the programmes they have watched" [ibid.]. The absence of public opinion shaping mechanisms, combined with the acutely felt desire for self-identification, for the creation of an 'image of Russia' (i.e. the search for identity) leads to the development, whereby simultaneous watching of TV programmes becomes, for the majority of Russians, the only mechanism holding society together.

It seems to me that the situation has somewhat changed recently. People are not watching TV any more (perhaps because the old forms have finally stopped working?). Or have they given up the ritual exchange of remarks and started discussing something different? This is a purely private observation, I am not sure if this process can be verified. [Natalja Konradova]

I totally agree with you! But what about the Levada Centre polls monitoring the situation all over the country? Yet it is clear that television has become boring and the TV set no longer occupies the place of honor in the household. Although the situation is still pretty much as described in Russia as a whole, in central areas the attitude towards television is beginning to change, and people are becoming less and less dependent on it. The evident and rapid reduction of diversity on TV has led to changes in the audience demographic, as more audience members change their allegiance to the printed press, which is more diversified, or the radio, which does not distract one from other activities. The Internet is high on the list of mass media that the inhabitants of the capitals now prefer to the TV. [Ekaterina Kratasjuk]

Incidentally, the fact that conservative state papers, such as the *Rossijskaja Gazeta* have survived in the new commercial conditions, can be explained not only by State funding, but also by the nostalgia that many readers still feel towards an unambiguous value system meted out 'from above'. After the ubiquitous pluralism of the Perestrojka times, there is a clear need to make the world cognizable once again. It brings society to the latest remembered construction of reality – that of the 'Soviet pattern'.

The gap that appeared during the crisis of the printed press immediately started filling up with various Internet publications. The news sector of the RuNet is still a national newspaper of sorts, read by a small, socially and geographically contained part of the population. Nevertheless, the Internet brings back the faith in the realization of an ideal journalistic model: the principles of plurality, multiple points of view, ongoing critical discussion, diversity and political neutrality are suggested by the nature of this medium. It is not by chance that the enthusiasm of the first web editions, their return to the 'reflection of reality' rhetoric, even though it already seemed inevitable that reality had to be constructed, was linked to the hope of realizing the normative models of a 'free press', sparked off by the start of the Internet age [see Busse 2005]. The impartiality of web journalism is, of course, just a myth: the → **political spin doctors** realized the potential of the new medium a long while ago and the web media have survived by fulfilling specific political orders. It should also be noted that the 'unfeasibility of controlling' the Internet has a second side: it is also a potentially useful tool for → **leaking politically charged dis-information**.

A concise description of the context of Russian media, against which TV and the Internet should be compared, would be incomplete without mentioning the growing role of radio. In the 21st century, Radio is becoming the media for 'busy' people, with overlapping work and leisure time. The lack of free time, which is often filled by watching TV, makes people regard television

as the equivalent of idleness and passivity. Since it is generally accepted that evening time is family time and the best time to make use of information and entertainment media is during a car ride or a coffee break, it is quite natural that the radio has become, in these circumstances, a channel for creating the 'socio-cultural background' and providing the required information. On the other hand, a considerable proportion of intellectuals also tends to despise the TV as a 'debilitating' channel or is denied the access to it: thus, for example, students living in halls of residence would, as a rule, buy a computer rather than a TV-set. For such people, it is the radio and the Internet that have become the principal mass media. In present-day Russia there is a growing number of musical radio stations that regularly broadcast short news bulletins throughout the day. It is also interesting to note that some popular radio stations (like Ekho Moskvy) are known mainly for their analytic reviews and moderately oppositional views.

But while other media may be important for certain population groups, it is the TV (a homogeneous mass channel) and the Internet (a heterogeneous and élite one) that are the two most important segments of post-Soviet media space. This dichotomy was formulated by Ivan Zasurskij, a modern Russian media researcher, who defined the structure of the post-2000 Russian media system as "state-controlled mass media surrounded by commercial media vs. the Internet" [Zasurskij 2001, 279].

The methodology of media studies: the Russian situation

Since the 1990s, media studies have become in Russia one of the major areas of humanities. At the same time, there remains a noticeable gap in the Russian academics' knowledge of the theoretical background and methods of the American media studies tradition (which has already devel-

oped a large body of work from its considerable experience). The lack of translations of groundbreaking works and a fragmentary rendering of the materials in the few textbooks available in Russian are not enough to familiarize oneself with the language of 'Western' communications theory to the point of meaningful discussions.

At the same time, an important alternative to culturology methods is the methodology of cultural sociology, based on poll data and offering quantitative ways of verifying the research results.

I would not place culturology in opposition to cultural sociology, as if culturology never used precise methods. But this is my own opinion: I understand culturology as a wide field including cultural sociology. This leads to a different question though: how do cultural studies treat the media? Are media studies the same thing as culturology? [Natalja Konradova]

A direct opposition of culturology and cultural sociology was advocated by L.D. Gudkov, the head of a department in the Levada Centre, one of the most authoritative sociological centres of present-day Russia. In his paper entitled 'Lessons of the German 'cognizant' cultural sociology' and presented at the International Winter Academy "Cultural studies in Europe: Boundaries and Opportunities" [Mellas, the Crimea, 15-25 February 2004], he was saying that Russian culturology is "inevitably apt to have small-scale semantic constructions, which mainly limit themselves to micro-descriptions of events or everyday life occurrences, interpersonal links or relations in local or small groups. Hence the constant threat of culturology being reduced to the level of an irresponsible aesthetic game, ladies' handiwork or a frondeur pose of an avant-

garde 'artist'. In order for it to be required, it has to be included in the division of labour between empirical sciences, enhancing its conceptual apparatus by theoretical language and interpretation means used by other social sciences and humanities. [...] in this situation it makes sense to apply the experience of other fields in the study of culture. This problem is, to my [L. Gudkov] mind, most clearly understood by the scholars belonging to the German 'cognizant' cultural sociology". I do not fully agree with the rigorous view formulated by L.D. Gudkov: I am certain that Russian culturology offers wide opportunities for scholarship. But I agree that the problem of method and methodology remains a painful one for Russian culturologists. Culturology is to a large extent, a problem field rather than a scholarly area. [Ekaterina Kratasjuk]

The flipside of a clear theoretical orientation of Russian cultural sociology is a limited number of research objects. Thus, the aesthetic, technical, psychological, visual and even the proper media-related aspects of media studies are often outside the sociologists' interest range. Besides, stressing one (sociological) analytic logic and ignoring other traditions of media studies leads to many 'discoveries' made by studying Russian phenomena, being suspiciously similar to the American observations from the 1970s.

Nevertheless, since the role of modern Russian mass media in recreating and supporting the belief in the 'unified image of the country' is exaggerated, the theoretical statements, research results and basic terms of cultural sociology, for which the problem of identity is a key one, can become important materials for studies of television and, to a lesser extent, other media. It is the works of modern Russian cultural sociologists that have introduced the term 'post-Soviet', which is fundamental for the present article (as

in post-Soviet media space, post-Soviet TV, etc.). The term ‘post-Soviet media space’ denotes both the chronological period and the tendencies important for the understanding of the current situation in Russian media: on the one hand, there is a differentiation, an opposition to the culture of the 1970s and 1980s: on the other hand, ‘the Soviet’ retains its significance in various shapes and forms. The image of stability, still associated with ‘the Soviet’ has not been formed as a result of the → **stability** of the Soviet system, but because reminiscences of what is now history have been romanticized.

‘The Soviet times’ are associated by respondents with protection and the positive simplicity of social relations, and reflect a common wish for a respite from the necessity of making one’s own decisions and forming one’s own opinion, while being bombarded by contradictory information.

Another important term used to describe the socio-cultural situation in present-day Russia is “negative identity”, the “self-constitution by opposition”, when “the attitude to [...] the negative component becomes the unifying element of group solidarity and the symbol of the group itself” [Gudkov 2004, 272]. Such forms are not uniquely characteristic of post-Soviet Russia: indeed, the processes of ‘negative identification’ are typical for a certain (archaic) stage in the development of any society.

What makes them the more interesting and important for the understanding of the transformation processes and the logic of the decomposition of totalitarian society, is the fact that they transcend the mundane sphere of household superstitions and ethnic stereotypes, their secondary ideologization, as means of justifying mobilizing political moves, and their further transformation into a legitimizing background for core social institutions. [ibid., 273]

Introducing the term “negative identity” allows one to formulate an alternative explanation of some phenomena typical of present-day Russian television: mechanisms of ideological impact, the ‘mobilization’ logic underlying many programmes, the specific image of the enemy, causes of culti-

vating the sense of anxiety and ‘national offence’, anti-American feelings.

The spread of negative identification on the Internet can be illustrated by such phenomena characteristic of the Russian segment of the Web as ‘the logic of distrust’ and conspiracy theory rhetoric. The model of élite vs. mass is a reflection both of the opposition of the RuNet and other social spheres and the opposition of the ‘Russian’ Internet as a free, uncontrollable and furthermore, ‘non-mercenary’ space and the English-language web as a commercialized part of global mass culture. The latter contrast is a technological variation of the ideological opposition of the ‘spiritual’ Russia and the ‘spiritless’ West.

It is noteworthy, however, that the hypothesis of negative identity is of limited use and is linked to a rather narrow field of phenomena. A more realistic explanation of many Internet phenomena can be provided by the logic of de-identification.

Besides, sociological studies have demonstrated that present-day Russian media often assume the functions of social institutions and serve as a field of defining ‘the mass’ and ‘the élite’ and as a sphere of real interaction between the authorities and the society (as opposed to elections, ‘meetings’ and adopted laws).

However, the emphasis on the ‘uniqueness’ of the Russian situation, typical for the works by leading Russian cultural sociologists seems to be an accident of the phenomenon described in the works themselves. This is the social ‘inferiority complex’ which manifests itself by the constant stressing of the society’s ‘special’, ‘unique’ and ‘unknowable’ character.

The analysis of (or the search for?) historically, nationally or locally conditioned peculiarities of using the global media is a very popular topic in the developing area of Internet studies. But it can also be considered that an ideological component is always present in the evaluation of these

phenomena. While the manifestations of 'uniqueness' by marginal groups tend to be interpreted somewhat positively in the globalized world (meaning their freedom from dominant cultural paradigms), the insistence on 'being unique' in countries which, like Russia, have an imperial past, is more associated with the intent to maintain their dominant position with regard to other cultures or nations. [Henrike Schmidt]

American media theories are dedicated to the study of events arising from cultural and social conditions that are fundamentally different from those of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, notions like 'agenda setting' or 'format' have become part of the universal jargon of media description in the West, while currently, there is no alternative and equally developed tradition based on Russian phenomena.

The study of Russian media as products of the interaction between 'the global' and 'the local', the crossroads of the interior logic of electronic communications, politics and social self-identification, would benefit from combining the methods of cultural sociology and a positivist approach to the issue of reality construction (the 'agenda setting' hypothesis). At the same time, such a method neglects many interesting aspects of the problem, for instance, the 'visual logic' of many media products and the notion of the Internet as 'multiple realities' (a phenomenological approach).

While the chosen approach is irrelevant with regard to talk shows, reality shows and other entertainment programmes, it conforms fully to the main subject of this article – the study of news.

Russian news programmes

Information programmes are one of the most popular research subjects in media studies. "News that everyone shares, cements the uni-

ty of modern society and legitimizes its view of the world with the same measure of success as the myths and legends of traditional societies" [D'jakova, Trakhtenberg 1999, 13]. The universal significance of news and the 'presumption of reality' (the main genre difference between information and entertainment programmes) make their study as valuable for political scientists and sociologists as for culturologists and philosophers.

At the same time, the Russian media audience gives news high status and top ranking in the popularity polls. Russians often turn on their TV- or radio sets as soon as they wake up (many watch morning information and entertainment programmes while having their breakfast). Office workers start their day by browsing the online news. Evening time spent with the family is associated with watching TV, and news programmes are often scheduled to be watched during a family supper.

Among the locally specific features of the more popular Russian TV news programmes are their comparatively small share, their unambiguous presentation of information without discussions, as well as the paucity of transmitted values. This is matched by a straightforward and obtrusive manner of news presentation which has been made possible because of the inherited Soviet custom of half-listening to boring political indoctrination sessions about the 'stagnating West' or from watching TV reports prescribed by the Comsol (Young Communists League) Committee, even if they might be showing scenes from the life of village technicians that are of little relevance to city dwellers.

Thus, high ratings of TV news programmes since the year 2000 can be explained by something quite different from the mass interest in information programmes during the Gorbachev era, when the whole country was riveted to a succession of broadcasts of party congresses, lasting for hours at a time, as the people felt that they were, at last, taking part in decision-making at State level. At present, the necessity of being

'in the know' is not the result of a pleasant, if illusory, feeling of personal involvement in the ongoing changes. For some Russians today, a symbolic 'reunion' with the rest of the country by means of watching TV is a way of reassuring themselves that things are no worse than they used to be, while for others it is, on the contrary, a constant confirmation of their pessimistic outlook and a familiar feeling of anxiety. What is significant is that both the former and the latter category read 'between the lines'. The most important aspects of the information programmes, consequently, are the agenda setting, the presentation methods and the time distribution between episodes, rather than their content *per se*. 'Meaningful' interest is attracted by a small number of topics, especially emergency situations (terrorism, crime, air accidents), weather forecasts and, possibly, 'zoo news' – curious episodes diligently sought after by news presenters, usually dealing with the animal world.

Information programmes on Russian TV do not wholly fulfill another function believed important by normative media theory authors: that of introducing their audiences to current events through alternative points of view. For instance, the requirement that "information should be balanced and unbiased and reflect alternative points of view presented in a non-sensational manner" [McQuail 1994, 241-254] is evidently ignored. Any normative scheme is, of course, idealistic by definition, but in the case of Russian television it is significant that the standards of 'free media' have ceased to be part of the channels' image or a way of disguising 'commissioned' information: newsmakers (with very few exceptions, including, up to a short while ago, the REN-TV channel) do not attempt to convince the audience that they are presenting diverse and high-quality information. On the contrary, they make the viewers believe that 'news' and 'information' are two completely different things. This has led to the growth of (often unwarranted) trust in the Internet as a source of information.

Thus, one of the basic assumptions of active Internet users in Moscow is that the news programmes presented by central TV channels are purely an attempt to construct reality on the basis of State ideology, while Internet news is associated with 'obtaining objective information'. Displayed on one screen and connected by hyperlinks, news websites and information agency news logs, Russian- and English-language resources create the impression of boundlessness, impossibility of control and plurality of information streams. Besides, the Internet is the first and main source of information for the newsmakers themselves and this fact alone makes it an important component of the information field in Russia as a whole.



Interfax.ru: *Presumption of objectivity.*

On Russian television, the information field is formed by national TV channels: The First Channel, RTR, NTV and REN-TV. The first two channels are openly State-owned, while the names of the remaining two are associated with private media ownership, the ideas of 'the fourth branch' and 'the free press'. NTV keeps this status mainly for history's sake but REN-TV, despite the fact that its controlling interest has always belonged to the state, could, until a short time ago, claim to be the only 'independent' channel specializing primarily in news releases. Other channels, such as TVC, copy the agenda set by the central channels.



Russian Channels' Logotypes: *Homogenous TV*

An interesting alternative to the channels with a structure-forming news grid is represented by entertainment channels such as STS and Domashnij (Homely), as well as specialized channels, such as Kul'tura (Culture), Sport, DarjalTV or MuzTV. Their ever-growing number is an indicator of the commercialization of Russian television and a result of the crisis in the information genres. These channels have created their own analogues of information releases, which help to form an alternative opinion of the news: news that is outside politics and economics, giving the private world a priority over the public one.

'Local' news is presented in the information programmes broadcast by regional channels, such as the Stolica (Capital), which covers Moscow and the Moscow Region. The 'local' image of this channel affords it the privilege of being able to form its own professional and original news policy without taking part in political scandals and notorious PR spin.

The field of RuNet websites is diverse and inexhaustible, which is especially evident in comparison with the homogenous TV programmes. Besides the 'universal' news websites, there is also a multitude of dedicated information websites covering IT news, literary publications, etc. Preliminary polls have shown that these resources are just as popular as the 'universal' news websites, though they have markedly practical uses.

Among the websites presenting universal news, professional journalists give high ratings to large information agencies such as RIA Novosti [2006] and Interfax [2006].



Information agencies: *Highly rated by journalists*

RIA Novosti is a State structure, so judging by the general train of thought of the article it must also be working for the State agenda setting. Or do you consider that professional journalists and Internet users are 'special cases' with 'special needs', as representatives of a class in their own right (due to their education level etc.)? [Henrike Schmidt]

Information agencies definitely have the presumption of objectivity (they say, in so many words, that they only collect and publish facts). This is in fact their main function: collecting the information for journalists. The websites of such agencies are used by news channels that do not have their own correspondents and information sources. But this raises an interesting point: if, for pecuniary reasons, 'opposition' channels use State-controlled information sources, their opposition is restricted to the interpretation of events, but not their selection (agenda setting). [Natalja Konradova]

We can indeed say that ownership (state or private) is not the most important factor for information agencies. This becomes evident as soon as we start comparing the TV news with information agency news logs. Since news has to be broadcast every few minutes, and because the agencies are supplied with the logs by a great number of correspondents, it is practically impossible to exercise strict control over them: the internal need to reproduce the organization, for which the need to 'please' the State Authorities is only one of the factors, turns out to be much more important. This issue has already been widely covered [e.g. in Epstein 1973]. Returning to the case of RIA Novosti, I'd like to

emphasize once more that State ownership of a media channel does not always imply rigid ideological control of the content of that channel – for example, the TV format allows (though not necessarily) for the programme content to be subject to the overall thematic grid (which is precisely what we can observe on State-owned TV channels), while the Internet format offers quite different opportunities. We cannot regard State-owned and private resources as being one and the same thing, but we can compare them, since they exist in relatively equal conditions. [Ekaterina Kratasjuk]

An important segment of the news field is formed by Internet versions of offline editions (e.g. the website of the Izvestija newspaper, which used to be a pioneering example of online journalism) and TV channels. By launching their own websites, TV companies do not simply hope to discover a new resource, but also 'to play on the enemy's field' by realizing the fundamental rule of television – to be omnipresent.



Izvestija.ru: Pioneering example of online journalism.

I wonder if the news on the TV channel websites is any different from TV news as such – in structure, agenda or other criteria. Or do they give the same impression of being monolithic

and monotonous? In other words, do they just upload all they've got to their websites and merely register their presence on the Internet [Konradova 2005], or do they publish any additional information? Do Internet versions of TV news programmes attempt to win over the readers who have already been lost as TV-viewers? This may well be the case, considering that many well-known Internet figureheads used to work for the First Channel (Gel'man, Konstantin Rykov) [Henrike Schmidt]

Although the Internet content of TV channels is little different from the corresponding news releases, the aim of these websites is to win over viewers and to bring them back from the Internet to their TV screens. However, this is happening, not because the news content has changed, but simply because they are present on the RuNet. I believe it is a characteristic of the RuNet that its users tend to trust the Internet as a medium (with all the mystical connotations of this word) – if you are present in this 'free' space, then you are an 'insider'. [Ekaterina Kratasjuk]

TV news: ways of agenda-setting

The agenda of TV news is easy to reconstruct, while its monolithic and permanent character does not deter either journalists or viewers. Within the current priority-setting, a pseudo-thematic form of reporting has been able to prevail: isolated and often insignificant events can be presented as evidence of the successes of present-day Russian politics. Thus, a report on the construction of fountains in the city of Krasnojarsk makes the Governor of the region the 'hero of the day' and praises the effectiveness of the State programmes, while expert opinions in

a report on the rise in value of the rouble are, for the most part, laudatory remarks on the effectiveness of State policy and the actions of the President himself.

The result of this set agenda is a limited number of Russian news 'characters' (V. Putin, S. Shojgu, Ju. Luzhkov, S. Ivanov). There is more variety where foreign figures are concerned, but on the whole, the amount of time allocated to the coverage of international events has been significantly reduced. The tone of world news has changed as well: the enthusiasm to 'discover the world' and the sudden freedom to be impressed with 'capitalist' achievements, typical of the perestrojka period, gave way to notes of criticism, covert and overt denunciation of the West, manifesting itself most clearly in anti-American propaganda, which has become a familiar feature of the TV news programmes. Thus, until a short time ago, information channels were fond of juxtaposing Presidents Putin and G.W. Bush. While Bush was often presented as uncouth and uneducated and prone to make cultural and language blunders, Putin was always presented as smart and confident and appeared to be aware of everything that was going on. This image is in significant opposition, not only with the image of the American President, but also with Putin's predecessor, Boris El'cin, who seems to have acquired the associations with an 'uncouth bear' on television, and who appeared on the screen in his later days as President mainly to humor the public with drunken aphorisms.

The homogeneous character of the Russian media field forces the 'opposition' structure to revive the values of 'pure information', which have become obsolete in the post-industrial society. Elena Fedorova, chief editor of the REN-TV channel news department, unwittingly challenged the famous BBC slogan of, 'inform-educate-entertain', when she claimed that "People ought to be informed, and not educated! This is what we are doing – informing!" [personal communication, April 2005]. In a society with a historically conditioned attitude of suspicion towards any official

information, both 'entertainment' and 'education' can be perceived to be the screen of 'objectivity', concealing ideologically charged content.

The REN-TV newsmakers claim that their programmes are structured according to the relevance of the news reports: news concerning the President and the Government are broadcast first only if some important State legislation has been passed. But the lack of a real diversity of viewpoints creates a situation where the few existing private channels that insist on the independence of their information policy are forced to voice opposing views on the main points of the national agenda: their criticism of the main issues and figures is contrasted with the optimistic coverage by the central channels but the significance of certain topics remains unchallenged. Consequently, the 'independent' channels have to use the same criteria of what is 'news' as the State-owned ones.

Scandalous and 'uncontrolled' news, which became familiar in the Gorbachev and El'cin era, are now an exception from the rules followed by information programmes. This is an indication that present-day Russian TV has moved towards complying with world standards. Nevertheless, the Russian media have their own specificity which was discussed above: the homogeneity of the information field, the uniformity and lack of discussions, etc. In order to explain this, the following hypothesis can be put forward.

The form of national consensus reproduced on TV is a consequence of "negative identity". The customary mistrust of media materials removes the necessity of creating the illusion of valid TV news. Television exploits the Soviet habit of 'double-coding the world': the world view based on everyday experience and common sense coexists with an 'illusory' world view, the only function of which is to maintain the sense of State integrity and social security. In fact, TV news leads the viewer to nationwide identity via negative identification, using the universal quality of television. Even, "if the TV world is significantly different from reality, the

active TV-consumers make evaluations which, to a large extent, agree with what they have been shown.“ [Gerbner et al. 1984, 283-300].

Thus, the target audience has virtually no influence over the news content.

Against the background of thematic uniformity it is easy to discern the emotional agenda: the relevance of issues is in correlation, not only with screen time allocated to specific episodes, but also with the familiar intonations associated with a specific topic.

An expressive method of constructing the information stream is the airing of ‘pseudo-discussion’, ‘pseudo-authorial’ programmes on the central channels, such as the Odnako (However) programme. The familiar agenda is set against the rhetoric of protest and criticism: the speech patterns of the presenters are similar to the emotional speeches of the Young Communist League meetings. Until a short time ago, the only exception from this rule was the ‘24’ authorial programme (presented by Ol’ga Romanova, REN-TV).

The appeal to emotions is a necessary part of any mass-produced product [see, for instance, Freud 1998, 131-194], which includes TV news. This is why creating an emotional environment is not something typical to Russian TV alone: the public frenzy over the protection of civic society values is similar in its psychic origin to the mass hysterics over a newly-elected President.

The Russian TV of the 21st century is highly puritanical: scandals rarely make it to the news releases, and newsmakers try to keep within the bounds of ‘high culture’: the ‘interest’ category is associated with ‘classics’ and ‘ecology’. The information field of Russian TV is, at present, formed by monotonous releases exercising the traditional scheme of ‘politics, economics, culture’, and ‘interest’ programmes, structured as a collection of harmless episodes. Genuine ‘news’ only appears during an emergency situation (a terrorist act, a plane crash or an unexpected political scandal). But such cases immediately expose the drawbacks of the Russian media system: all the channels, news-

papers and even the Internet are filled with standard-made reports deprived of information, while the interpretation of the events is nearly always the same. While there is a natural explanation for uniform reports of tragic events, the appearance of standard bulletins on different channels and in different newspapers can even be perceived as a well-planned PR stunt, although, this is more likely due to the paucity of sources used by the journalists than to clever spin-doctoring.

It must be said that such a situation on Russian TV reflects not only the passivity of post-Soviet audiences, but also the immanent processes characteristic of mass media. Viewers who find ‘nothing new’ in the news work out specific ways of obtaining the information that actualize peripheral factors such as color, background, sound, rhythm, etc. By turning into an “absent-minded examiner” [Benjamin 1996], the viewer becomes capable of absorbing the material in ways appropriate for the “informational society” [Kastel’s 2000]. The *informational society* (as opposed to the information society) is one in which the recipient no longer reacts to the information logic and content *per se*, but to its form and other formerly peripheral characteristics. In the *informational society* it is important to be aware, to know which issues are topical and what is on the agenda. There is too much knowledge around, and it is too easily accessible, such that adapting to its quantity and diversity becomes more problematic than finding it and there is a need for ‘awareness maps’ and universally meaningful landmarks. This is why television, with its relaxing lack of options, is a way of testing the new ways of absorbing the information when there is plenty of it, especially on the Internet.

News on the Internet: ways of limiting the agenda

Unlike the information programmes on TV, Internet news sites create the impression of per-

ceptive discomfort: the first page is overloaded with information and offers several search criteria at once. Small print, windows of various sizes with text placed inside them, hypertext – all this can befuddle an inexperienced user and suggests some audience selection. Only those who are certain of what they seek and who can navigate the combinations of confused snatches of text can become permanent users of news websites. Often, the illusion of diverse information is created by means of splitting the information into tiny segments. The agenda of Internet sites is not evident; it is marginally located, pushed to the boundaries, which only highlights its importance in defining the information field.



Dni.ru: Splitting information into tiny segments.



Utro.ru: The agenda is not evident.

The specific Internet format reflects the key features of present-day → **post-modernist** culture. Of particular importance is “diffused perception” as described by Walter Benjamin, which is a necessary skill for any active web user. The information is placed on news websites according to the peripheral way it is intended to be browsed through and the visual tricks creating the illusion of diversity are a way of luring the reader to the hypertext – the variety of commercial inserts located on the screen periphery is contrasted with the paucity of the sought-after information.

The ‘global’ specificity of the Internet is altered in the RuNet by means of ‘local’ conditions – a low number of users (as opposed to users in other countries and recipients of other Russian mass media). Bringing the comparison with other mass media even closer, one can say that the main distinctive feature of the Internet is the absence of State control. The lack of attention paid to the Internet by State Authorities is due to the small percentage of Internet users among the population. However, publications creating the image of a → **‘dangerous Internet’** show that the political élite is nervous about the potential mass popularity of the RuNet.

However, such mass popularity is unlikely in the immediate future, due to both objective reasons (such as the slow rates of technological spread) and subjective ones. The RuNet space nurtures the Soviet traditions of underground, closed communities and conspiracies. RuNet founders do not conceal their counter-cultural or opposition views, but to maintain these views, it is necessary to remain a minority. Some websites recreate the atmosphere and even the ‘space’ of the kitchen [Kaspe 2005] as a traditional place for opinion exchange among the Soviet intelligentsia. Resources like Gazeta.ru, Grani.ru, Polit.ru attempt to influence public opinion and highlight their independent and oppositional character.



Gazeta.ru: Attempt to influence public opinion.



Grani.ru: Highlight oppositional character.



Polit.ru: Place for opinion exchange.

News websites are not, of course, random collections of messages – they contain quite conventional headings within a traditional hierarchy of political news followed by economics and culture, plus the

'hot five or ten news items': this creates a priority system, evaluates the relevance of an event and sets the criteria of the event. The search options (which are a feature of the Internet) can be different from those typical for the traditional media like TV and press: for example, 'news-commentary-analysis'.

I agree that one can find traces of the traditional hierarchy on the Internet news websites. For example, the Newsru.com website lists its headings from top to bottom: 'in Russia', 'in the world', 'economics', 'religion', 'crime', 'sport', 'culture', 'inopressa' (foreign media) – a curious structure, isn't it? But on other information websites the hierarchy is more difficult to discern. The Polit.ru news log includes news from all the sections and the log is structured chronologically. Furthermore, the 'yellow' column is gaining importance (it is called 'Life' on Utro.ru and 'From life' on Gazeta.ru). This is an interesting point, which has already been discussed: the key positions are given to 'zoo news' which overtakes the ever-boring 'news of culture' which is banished to the traditional newspaper position: the last page, just before the crossword. [Natalja Konradova]

In many ways, news websites imitate the layout of a newspaper page. But there are important differences: we are dealing with a hypertext, interactive newspaper linked to the news log. In the absence of a national paper, news websites are an attempt to take over one of the functions of such a paper – forming the notion of actuality and covering all the spheres of the country's life, including relations with the outside world. But it is evident that other important criteria make news sites very different from printed national newspapers. First of all, their readership is even smaller than that of regional periodicals. Secondly, news websites are not the place to explain the basic values shared by the majority of the society, so they cannot be used as a method of regular re-

construction of State identity, which is one of the main *raison d'être* of national press. The key place on news websites is occupied by the news log, which does not provide the answer to the question 'Who makes the news?', but rather serves as a symbol of objectivity and actuality. The news appears at intervals, from one to twenty minutes, which creates the impression of a permanent and uncontrolled stream of information. Visually, any comments or analyses take second place: they are located in the margins of the screen or even hidden by hyperlinks. The 'stream' of information mixes 'yellow' factoids with serious and even tragic messages, which undermines the hierarchy of news (breaking news, politics, economics and culture).

Besides, the presence of a news log is a real and visual reminder of the history of professional journalism in the post-Soviet period, when key authors of many influential periodicals were experts in one field or another, rather than professional journalists. Thus, the notion of specifically professional journalism was eroded during *perestrojka*: 'well-informed laymen' could well pass for journalists. The same model is realized on the RuNet: readers absorb the current information without the mediating role of a professional presenter; they themselves take the place of experts and evaluate the relevance of events and the present-day reality. There are special areas allocated to such texts on the news websites (forums, reader feedback, etc.)

It is noteworthy that news logs reflect yet an alternative, more democratic way of shaping the event. The hierarchy-breaking mixture of 'yellow' and 'serious' information reflects the notions of what is 'interesting', 'exciting', the foundation stones of infotainment genres, which are for some unclear reasons not very popular on Russian TV.

Could this be related to the State ideology (in the wide sense) being oriented towards 'high culture', and the way this is realized by State-owned channels? [Henrike Schmidt]

This is a very topical issue and I like this approach. We are still talking about official art and State kitsch, Soviet monumentality, the eternal Russian ballet and the love of all things classical (because there is nothing modern?) [Natalja Konradova]

Will the Internet news survive as a special semantic space if the Internet spreads further in Russia?

Internet news and TV news are not in opposition; they are built within the mass media space and use the technical facilities of a different medium and the aesthetic methods of both. The difference in ideological content is largely conditioned by the lack of a common field (of audience and information) and the absence of State interest in total control over the Internet.

This is why the main characteristic feature of the RuNet is its 'élite' background – it has been rather difficult to find other factors that would make it (and Russian TV) sufficiently different from their counterparts in Western countries. What is specific for the Russian media is its method of self-presentation: television news programmes openly position themselves as either 'vassals' of the authorities or as the opposition, which disguises the commercial background of many phenomena, whereas on the RuNet, it is the élite club rhetoric that prevails. This reflects the search for self and a national complex connected with the absence of historically formed identity.

Translation by Maria Artamonova.