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TELEVISION IS NOT MEDIA

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Abstract

In this research paper Russian media, specifically, television was analyzed through history of the whole Russian mass media and comparison with current situation of press, radio and Internet. This analysis was made by two arguments: television is not media because it is strongly commercialized and is a mean of propaganda and governmental manipulation. Russian history follows a cyclical pattern and tends to repeat itself, something that is particularly evident in its press, and this process also goes to other media outlets. Events on the end December of 2011 and March of 2012 clearly show how government regulates information broadcasted on TV news. In conclusion, television itself is not guilty for these problems, but people should learn how to differentiate and search truthful and important information themselves.

Key words: media studies, television, press, radio, Russia, Russian media, modern media, Internet

“When you’re young, you look at television and think, There’s a conspiracy. The networks have conspired to dumb us down. But when you get a little older, you realize that’s not true. The networks are in business to give people exactly what they want. That’s a far more depressing thought. Conspiracy is optimistic! You can shoot the bastards! We can have a revolution! But the networks are really in business to give people what they want. It’s the truth.”

Steve Jobs

Nowadays Russian national television is not media because it doesn’t provide citizens with information needed for self-governing, which is the main purpose of journalism in a democratic society. News on television don’t provide efficient amount of diverse opinions and information needed for making own decisions about the current situation worldwide and countrywide. The abundance of entertainment programs and commercials also decreases television’s role. The reasons why national television is unreliable are financial problems of establishing alternative sources of information as spread as main ones, and state ownership and strong influence of government on most of national TV channels.

Recently, an autonomous non-commercial Analytical Center of Yuriy Levada(2013) made a survey asking Russian citizens from which medium do they usually get news. The survey compares results of one made in 2009 and a new one in 2013. Even though the number of people who get news from television decreased, overall, it still is the greatest comparing to number of people who read news in the Internet, newspapers and listen to radio. Also, news from television channels are considered to be the most reliable ones, as it is shown in the survey. It is not hard to guess why television in Russia is so popular. One of the main reasons of it is that considering geographical features of Russia there are some problems in many regions which don’t allow people to have a good Internet connection or other technological advances. Thus, television is one of the easiest ways of getting news, since national

channels are free and available almost everywhere and anytime. I can tell from my own experience that technological advances have great influence on my usage of media to get news. Currently, I am a student of American University in Bulgaria and 8 months of the year I spend in my dormitory, where students and professor are provided with good Internet connection. We have some TV sets in dorms, but I personally don't watch TV news, because I'm most of the time online and check news in several news websites. However, at home I don't have regular Internet connection, since we live, and all news I get from TV with my parents. But at home I have a different habit. I check news on the TV, but later I search for more information and different point of view on Internet myself, because news from television are not efficient for me, as a media literate person.

However, Oleg Dorman, Russian documentary movie director, said in newspaper "Sovershenno Sekretno" (Top Secret, 2013): "Russia is no more an island, and TV set is not an idol either. There is no main informational center – no propaganda, agitation and organization. Television is not the main media, but not media anymore". Why is it so? Is his argument truthful? To prove it, firstly, we need to understand Russian media's history and not only about television, but press and radio.

Development of technologies, since first invention of radio, required a lot of money investing and only the biggest corporations could make it. This is the way current biggest TV corporations, such as BBC, CNN and others were founded in developed countries. In most of the world, where there were no technological advances like in Western civilizations, such big money investing could be made only by governmental organizations. It was the same for Soviet Union. Consequently, governmental TV broadcast organizations owned a huge property of national TV network, and it is hard to found as big network as governmental one even till now, because it requires a lot of money investing, due to geographical features of Russia. Thus, the history of foundation and current situation of television influence on future media state.

To get overall impression of current situation of Russian television we need a good understanding of modern history of media in Russia. During last twenty years the role of television in terms of influence on Russia's life and nation has grown greatly. The main reason of this change is the establishment of first commercial TV broadcast. After the full governmental monopoly on television during time of Soviet Union's existence, commercialization was the main reformer on Russian television. Only twenty years ago Russian TV broadcast was with no commercials and advertisings, when in Western countries it was already there since 1930s'. Commercialization was a strong mean of influence on Russian people, who were used to scarcity of products in shops, called "deficit" (Starikov 2013). First commercials opened up a new world of beautiful life of American style consumption and materialism. This was the time when American "penny-press" revolution finally got in Soviet Union. In 1920's, the editor of "New York Sun" newspaper came up with an idea of getting money from putting an advertisement in his newspaper, instead of firstly used method of getting all income from newspaper's subscribers. He put advertisements in his "New York Sun" and sold it for one penny. The new method appeared to be very profitable, and since then all press was full of advertisements. This is what happened to Russian media after so-called "perestroika" during 1990s', the time when Soviet Union collapsed and Russian Federation was established.

Press media during 20th century was one of the main means of propaganda, incorporation of government, and was used for mobilization of nation to achieve concrete agricultural and political goals. One of the ways media was freed from Soviet strict censorship and political manipulation was the new Law on Mass Media, which started working in 1991. Journalists actively used their new freedom – only in 1993 there were 238 newspapers, five times more than it was during Soviet Union. However, the history of press in Russia started from the first Russian newspaper "Vedomosti" in XVIII century, with which Peter the Great manipulated nation's mind (Starikov 2013). Peter's direct involvement in publishing meant that he personally edited secular manuscripts, a practice that continued, to various extent, through

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the reign of Joseph Stalin (Aratunyan 2009). After Peter the Great, Ekaterina II had her own newspaper aimed only for mocking human weaknesses and sins, and entertaining people, because she thought that is the main point of journalism. Though, she had opponents. It was N. Novikov and A. Radishev, who opposed her strongly subjective point of view, and tried to prove that slavery, existed at that time in Imperial Russia, is immoral. These opinions didn't please Ekaterina II, and she imprisoned them in Siberia as foes of the country. Later, in 1804 Aleksander I first time officially established censorship on press medium, and then Nikolay I made censorship stricter, banning ambivalent opinions pieces about government. Luckily, in 1861, Aleksander II freed most of political prisoners and, as Starikov said, it was the time of democratic journalism rise, when more than thousand and a half of new newspapers and magazines were founded. However, this democratic freedom allowed revolutionist thoughts to get popular and found people, who later killed Aleksander II himself. Nikolay II on 17th of October 1905, in threat of upcoming revolution, declares that he will give everyone freedom of speech and all rights a person in a democratic society has. Though, again, a great amount of new newspapers and magazines, plus historical moments, a loss in the First World War, only fuelled revolutionary mood in the nation and, again, the end of Nikolay II and his family is very tragic.

After socialistic revolution in 1917-1918, the press was divided into two forces: Bolsheviks (pro new government) and opposition. However, during existence of temporary government, the biggest and most influential newspapers such as "Russkaya Pravda", "Novoye Vremya" and other were closed and their publishing houses were given for main newspapers of Bolsheviks. Later, it was Communist party who dictated through various agitprop departments the general "line" that all printed production had to take (Aratunyan 2009). The story of dictatorship and censorship in Soviet Russia is well-known. The most interesting part of history of Russian media is the time of perestroika, after collapse of Soviet Union. As Aratunyan (2009, p. 67) says, we can draw many parallels between Soviet Russia of the 1920s and post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s and early 2000s. The Bolshevik Revolution – much like the breakup of the Soviet Union – spawned a whole raft of new, private periodicals, much like perestroika did 70 years later. Essentially, Russia was undergoing natural capitalistic processes that the media in the West had experienced more gradually in the past. With the surge of advertising and capital came the desire of advertisers and media moguls to take advantage of the press they controlled. "Russian history follows a cyclical pattern and tends to repeat itself, something that is particularly evident in its press" (Aratunyan 2009).

Today the main federal newspaper is "Rossiyskaya Gazeta" (Russian Newspaper) and also there are "Rossiyskiye Vesti" (Russian News), "Rossiya" (Russia) and other. Big non – governmental newspapers such as "Komsomolskaya Pravda" (Komsomol's Truth) and "Argumenty i Fakti" (Arguments and Facts) are made for the mass, thus, usually has low-quality "yellow" content. Somewhat the same process, the popularity of invaluable non-journalistic information, we can see in current situation of radio. In 2003, rating of music radio "Russkoye Radio" (Russian Radio) became much greater than rating of federal news radio "Radio Rossii" (Radio of Russia). This means that Russian radio is developing as any other in the world, meaning that most of people want entertainment shows. However, as Starikov says, in the world practice, usually there are also some talk or news radios. As Russian practice shows, this kind of radios cannot stand the competition with musical ones. News radio is too hard to make it work for a still "young" Russian media business, since it is risky and requires big money investing. This is the same for press and television too. There are hundreds of different regional newspapers, magazines and TV channels, but they won't get to the level taken by federal and national media outlets. It is not government's fault that there are no alternative news source like national TV channel with such great and wide audience, but it is matter of business and financial hardships of creating those alternatives.

Nowadays the overall number of Russian TV channels is around 330 and 16 of them are national. All-Russian State TV and Radio Company (VGTRK) is a big state-owned media holding company. It includes main nationwide channel Rossiya1, also includes non-stop news channel "Rossiya 24",

“Kultura” and sports channel Rossiya2. National Media Group is one of the largest private media holdings. It has the largest nationwide broadcasting channel – Perviy Kanal 51 percent of which is state-owned and 49 percent is privately owned. The large private channel and media holding company Ren-TV is also in Nation Media Group. There are other national privately owned media like the third main nationwide channel NTV (Nezavisimoye Televidenie – Independent Television). This means the main media for common people are almost completely controlled by the government.

Public protests against cases of fraud during parliamentary elections in December 2011 had a profound impact on the content of media coverage in 2012. While federal television channels completely ignored the opposition before the end of 2011, in 2012 they covered all major events organized by opposition. Opposition leaders, who used to be persona non grata on national television, became regular newsmaker. As it is written in Europe & Eurasia Media Sustainability Index 2013, state-affiliated media were often used as instruments of pro-government and anti-opposition propaganda, such as the federal NTV channel’s “Anatomy of Protest” programs, which purported to prove foreign sponsorship and pay for opposition protestors. The TV Press Club, an informal community of journalists who cover television, called these and similar programs on the leading channel, Channel One, notable for their “propagandist zeal, use of disinformation, facts juggling, and promoting intolerance to dissent.” I myself remember the way first protests were presented on federal news program. It was 5th of December, when on 4th of December United Russia party won in Federal Duma elections. Firstly, they mundanely said that there was a protest against United Russia party, the first one. And then, with couple of wide shots of a huge crowd on Moscow’s and Saint-Petersburg main squares, it was said “... and then they all together started celebrating the win of United Russia.” Both I and my grandmother were confused with such twisted news story. Later, I checked the event on online version of British newspaper Guardian, and there it was said that police arrested around 250 protesters from Moscow’s Triumphal Square and 150 in Saint-Petersburg. There was no such information on national TV channels till the moment when it was hard not to hide news about protests.

According to D. McQuail, mass media, especially press and television 1) have to fully update people with world and local news and comments on them; 2) information has to be objective in terms of truthfulness, sincerity, reality, trustful, and differentiating facts and opinions, and 3) information has to be balanced and it has to show alternative points of view in non-sensational way. Of course, these features are too utilitarian; however, they are truthful and surely required for Russian media too. Thus, according to McQuail, Russian TV journalists completely failed to provide Russian citizens with full information about situation in the country during such important events, such as federal elections in 2011. It was the time when I became a university student and started living with no Russian television. During my first semester of studying at American University in Bulgaria, professor of Writing for Media course taught us to check news every day through pop-up news quizzes. It became my daily habit, and even if I heard some news from friends, I always check them on the online news sites later. Also, firstly, I try to find news according to McQuail’s second requirement, because this is the best information possible. News can be written in many different ways, thus, people can be easily manipulated by the tone of storyteller or language of an article. That’s why it is so hard to have information according to the third McQuail’s requirement, but for this reason I usually check a number of news sites, so it is easy to get overall impression of an event.

Thus, my main source of information is the Internet, and it is not so unusual for modern people. Today, Internet is the main opponent in the battle of news sources. The Web does not have limitations in time similar to those of print media or broadcast. As soon as an event happens, it can be reported via Internet in the shortest amount of time. It is also possible to update a Web story continuously. This is why immediacy is a core and special characteristic of news in the web. I have noticed that more and more TV news use citations and videos from Internet news. They even show a screenshot of an Internet article and then lighten up needed lines. Arina Borodina, observer of RIA Novosti news agency, recently

said(Козырев Online, 2013) that TV loses the fight with the Internet, because, when there was a bomb attack in Domodedovo airport in Moscow, news about it were on a broadcast only 3 hours after the actual terrorist attack. In contrast, first mentions about the event occurred on the Web immediately. Also, Internet doesn't just win by its immediacy, but also by its flexibility. News on the Internet has text, photos or pictures, like press media, and also it can has attached video and audio files, so TV and radio is not special anymore too. Plus, if you have an Internet connection, then you have most of the all information for free, which is not the case, for instance, with newspapers or magazines.

Now even TV channels, newspapers and magazines have their own web sites. It is logical, because at the beginning of 2012 92% of people, living in cities with population more than 100 thousand people, have internet connection at their homes, and monthly number of users is over 54 million people (Starikov, 2013). Web sites are easily updated, and TV broadcasts also have online translations. On the one hand, all mass media has already transferred to the online versions, but not all of Russian people are there yet. Even though the number of people from regions who have access to the Internet increases, the gap between that number and number of people having not just access, but high speed Internet connections in central regions around Moscow and Saint-Petersburg is still big. As Arina Borodian said(Козырев Online, 2013), the only problems Internet faces in battle with television are technological and financial, due to geographical special features of the great, in size and status, country.

To sum up, Russian television and media as a whole through its history faced many difficulties at the time crucial for media's development, such as the Great Russian Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century, The Second World War, and collapse of Soviet Union. These events played the main role in media's situation today, and help us understand it. Globalization introduced commercialization, the global problem of journalistic media, when profitable news make the day, but not important ones. Television today is the most ubiquitous and accessible mass media in Russia. Even though it also became a mean of selling products and lifestyle, it still has news and people believe them. The main problem is that news on television are usually put in a better way for government's needs. It is still a mean of propaganda and governmental manipulation, as it was during Soviet Union.

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