Media and culture in Putin's Russia

Post-Soviet Russia's media transformations

Since *perestroika, glasnost* and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's media has gone through a series of profound transformations. This chapter will briefly reflect on how these key milestones were reviewed in academic literature and then focus on the recent changes to media and culture in Putin's Russia. By foregrounding contemporary developments, the chapter allows for a more in-depth insight into the complexity of the Russian mediascape without running into generalisations or simplifications. This focus on the media and cultural aspects strives to overcome a long-term emphasis on the political and economic dimension of media systems in Russia by foreign and native experts alike.

To start with, timely conceptualisations and systematisations of Russian media were provided at the turn of the century by de Smaele (1999), McNair (2000), Mickiewicz (1999), Vartanova (2001) and Zassoursky (2001, 2004). As the contextual factors and the nature of the ongoing post-Soviet transformations were unique, dynamic and complex, it proved challenging to fit the post-Soviet Russian media developments (Oates, 2007) into existing western media system paradigms (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Siebert et al., 1963).

In addition to the media system approach, the researchers were interested in such macro-processes as institutional change and the intersection of media and power, journalism and politics. Some of the key junctions here constitute Yeltsyn's re-election, when the media, oligarchs and journalists were actively involved in his 1996 political campaign (Mickiewicz, 1999), and the subsequent reshuffling of media ownership structures after Putin's election in 2000. Figures in the old oligarchic elite such as B. Berezovsky, V. Gussinsky and V. Potanin were replaced with new ones. According to Kiriya (2019), two oligarchs—Alisher Usmanov and Yuri Kovalchuk— established very close ties to the key TV channels in Russia.

Following a period of relative media liberalisation under Yeltsyn, Putin's two terms in presidential office (2000-2008) were marked by a steadily growing state control (Beumers et al., 2009). This meant that an analysis of the economic structure of media production in Russia had to carefully consider both the role played by the media owners, exerting commercial pressure on media, and various legislative and executive state actors employing other means of media control (Kachkaeva et al., 2006; Koltsova, 2006; Kiriya, 2019). The ownership, however, proved difficult to ascertain due to the lack of transparent data and a distorted system of ownership: the overwhelming majority of national newspapers and TV stations were owned by the groups close to the state, but less so in the regions[1]. There was a sustained legacy of takeovers of TV assets by the state and oligarchic groups linked to the government (Kiriya, 2019; Kachkaeva et al., 2006; Becker, 2018), such as NTV channel in 2001.

A growing internet penetration during Medvedev's presidency (2008-2012) started to draw officials' and scholars' attention to RuNet, the Russian internet (Oates, 2013). Its regulation proved more difficult than traditional media due to the nature of the medium. Gradually, RuNet's relative freedom was curtailed by several 'generations' of control, ranging from the simple blocking of access, legal regulation and counter-campaigns to other more sophisticated tactics (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010) outlined below. Having said that, the Russian approach to restricting the internet differs from simple large-scale direct censorship based on filtering and technical blocking, as in the case of China (Toepfl, 2018).

One of the first volumes to supplement these insights into the structural changes in Russian media, with an inquiry into the socio-cultural aspect of media transformations was *The*

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[1] Zassoursky (2001) and Kiriya (2019) ascertain high dependence of the print media on local and federal governments.

post-Soviet Russian media: Conflicting signals volume edited by Beumers et al. (2009). Other studies investigated the persistence of the Soviet legacy of self/censorship and conformism (Koltsova, 2006; Pasti, 2005), including self/censorship online (Fossato et al., 2008). The overview of journalistic values, the instrumentalisation of media via 'clientelism' (Roudakova, 2008) and 'commodification of loyalty' (Kiriya, 2019) revealed the uncomfortable position of journalists torn between marketisation and ethics. Roudakova's recent book (2017) explores journalists' ethical standards in Russia during the 1990s-2000s, uncovering an erosion of the value of 'truth-seeking' amongst them, and a changing cultural contract between media professionals and their audiences.

Finally, a cultural aspect of media transformation embraces changing media genres due to the cross-cultural dialogue between Russian and transnational media, as well as the audience perception of these 'hybrid' media texts. Several studies have explored Russian television through this prism: earlier research by Mickiewicz – *Television, Power,* and *the Public in Russia* (2008) – and by Hutchings and Rulyova, whose 2008 book *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control* provides a nuanced understanding of changing TV genres and their reception. A large-scale study of Russian audiences (going beyond TV viewership) would be a timely and welcome addition to the existing scholarship.

After noting these dynamics, the chapter shifts its focus to the last decade, when Vladimir Putin returned to office as Russia's president in spring 2012. This timeframe (2012-2022) is particularly important due to: (i) Russia's changing political and ideological landscape, exemplified by its neo-authoritarian turn (Becker, 2018) as discussed below, and (ii) the technological shift, as digital media have dramatically altered established media consumption and production patterns. A complete overhaul of Russia's media ecology – marked among other things by the emergence of new newspaper- or television-internet hybrids[2] and the audience's participatory engagement, which is representative of the post-broadcast era (Turner and Tay, 2009) – adds complexity to the heavily regulated Russian media's landscape. By considering this growing hybridity (Chadwick, 2013) of the nation's media and blending older and new media logic, this chapter provides a novel perspective on the Russian mediascape.

The changing Russian media ecology

Russian media and the socio-political environment

Contemporary Russia's media have to operate in a peculiar socio-political environment. The escalating repressive nature of the Russian regime has led its path to be re-labelled from a 'managed democracy' (Wilson, 2005) to one of authoritarianism. The diversity of definitions of authoritarianisms and proliferation of terms – including neo-authoritarianism (Becker, 2018), resurgent (Fikke, 2016), consultative (Toepfl, 2018), soft (Guriev and Treisman, 2020) and other types of authoritarianism – renders these typologies problematic. Still, it is not the task of this chapter to establish the distinctive type of authoritarian regime emerging in Russia or to investigate to what degree Russia falls within any particular group of a semi-centralising states (such as maintaining a pretence of fair elections, etc.). The goal here is to survey the media landscape in Putin's Russia, accounting for economic and political factors, and to reflect on the recent trends brought about by the changing socio-cultural and technological environment such as digital media.

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[2] One of the first volumes published in the Russian language to consider this shift and the consequences of digitisation for Russian media is Strukov's and Zvereva's volume *From centralised to digital: Television in Russia* (2014).

Nevertheless, state control mechanisms inform the boundaries of freedom of expression in Russia. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) states that Russia remains at the lower end of its press freedom rankings, falling even further in 2021, to become ranked 150th out of 180 countries (RSF, 2021). Intimidation of journalists is commonplace[3] and independent investigative media is suppressed (Khvostunova, 2021). Freedom House's annual Freedom on the Net index also reveals a gradual but steady decline: in 2009 Russia's internet freedom was ranked as 'party free', changing to 'not free' in 2015 (Freedom on the Net, 2021). Earlier optimistic statements about the democratic potential of digital media (Oates, 2013) are now supplemented with disconcerted (Human Rights Watch, 2020) and more cautionary accounts (Filimononov and Carpentier, 2021; Bodrunova et al., 2021), which show how Russia's 'hybrid regime' (Petrov et al., 2014) employs both overt and covert regulatory mechanisms (Wijermars and Lehtisaari, 2021).

Until recently the Russian regime had pursued a relatively open policy towards the internet in comparison to its regulation of other media. High internet penetration[4] is now counterbalanced by the constraints placed on it via modifications to domestic legislation (Deibert and Rogozinski, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2020) and explicit official requests to remove online content[5] and block certain services (such as the messaging app Telegram in 2018). Importantly, Wijermars and Lehtisaari assert that a Russian federal law 'On news aggregators' (passed in January 2017) enabled a shift from the state controlling news content and its producers 'towards governing the algorithmic infrastructures that shape news dissemination' (2021). This can work both ways, by downplaying 'unwanted' search results and promoting pro-state information resources and messages. Finally, Sivetc (2019) draws attention to the growing role of indirect regulations due to the cooperation between internet infrastructure owners and the state.

The regulation of Russian media is ongoing, with further restrictions continuously being introduced under the pretext of informational sovereignty (e.g. the Sovereign Internet Law which came into force in November 2019; the 'fake news' law, March 2019) or the fight against various forms of extremism and terrorism (such as a requirement to store users' data). The establishment exerts 'more influence over international social media companies'[6] and targets independent media outlets by employing its 'foreign agent' legislation[7] to make it more difficult for them to operate (Freedom House, 2021). Furthermore, the legislative documents' vague wording and selective application (RSF, 2021) are also used to exert pressure and create a significant level of uncertainty in the media's day-to-day functioning.

Challenging persistent misconceptions

Even though Russian media have to operate under numerous pronounced constraints on their freedom of expression, the situation should not be viewed in a simplistic manner. Rather than treating Russia as a homogenous entity, any scrutiny of Russian media needs to be more

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[3] Largely, the pressure on the independent media has been steadily increasing 'since the big anti-government protests in 2011 and 2012' (RSF, 2021). This was when the regulation of the internet came into the establishment's focus as well.

[4] In 2018 internet penetration was calculated at 75.4% for those aged 16 and above, with mobile internet use increasing to 61%. There are clear generational differences, with only 36% of the population over 55 using the internet on a regular basis. In turn, 99% of the youngest group (16–29) and 88% of 30–54 year olds used the internet regularly (GfK, 2019).

[5] An official Google report from 2019 shows that Russia filed more than 10,000 requests to remove online content, followed by Turkey, with just 1,000 requests (Mc Gowran, 2022).

[6] Russia positions itself as a 'sophisticated cyber superpower', which can build the internet on its own terms without 'isolating itself from the broader internet' (Druzhinin, 2021). Just before Russia's 2021 parliamentary elections, it made the key tech giants Apple and Google comply with its demands to remove a voting app from their Android and iOS app stores.

[7] Originally introduced in 2012 as '*On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent*', it was changed several times. In November 2017 the 'foreign agents' legislation expanded its remit from NGOs to media outlets which might be in receipt of foreign support (understood very broadly). The amendment in December 2019 included individuals (e.g. people distributing content on social media) who received funding from foreign donors.

nuanced, accounting for regional differences and variations (e.g., Erzikova and Lowery, 2017). An expanding scholarship demonstrates that regional TV might be more autonomous than the state TV channels or that, despite its fragmentation and financial struggles, regional print media can benefit from digitisation in terms of content and reach, branching out onto other platforms and capitalising on other services (Erzikova and Lower, 2017; Bodrunova et al., 2021). The country's media diversity also includes ethnic media, which experience diverging levels of management from the state (e.g. Gladkova et al., 2019).

Furthermore, control of the media in Russia is less uniform and homogenous than previously thought[8]. As has been persuasively argued, (even) the state-controlled traditional media demonstrate a consistent presence of various alternative voices (Flood et al., 2008) and journalistic agency (Hutchings and Rulyova, 2009; Tolz et al., 2020), not to mention the role of alternative media (Filimononov and Carpentier, 2021) and the interplay of the two (Miazhevich, 2021). Furthermore, Kiriya (2019:8), albeit from a slightly different perspective, questions the supposed 'monolithic' nature of state power and suggests substituting the idea of top-down state control of the media with the notion of 'rooted practices', where certain historically-informed routine media practices of 'communication support' might be mistaken for state paternalism.

Likewise, the crude argument that Russia's state media is subjugated to the establishment's message is successfully refuted by Tolz et al. (2020) in their study, which shows that the degree of coordination of the state media might be less than previously assumed. As the research team investigated a hitherto overlooked dimension of media/journalistic agency in Russia, they discovered the complex nature of media production, claiming that even the state media outlets have more freedom at the editorial level and display more agency in their everyday production practice than has traditionally been ascribed to them (despite growing conservativism and tightening of the regulations). Still, at the level of journalistic engagement in the regions, including their social media interactions, the situation might vary (Bodrunova, et al., 2021).

Next, a misleading division between state media and limited oppositional (dissident) media opposing the regime constitutes a recurrent argument. Here a post-Cold War mentality of clear-cut ideological divides informs the viewpoint of oppositional media countering traditional media's messaging. In fact, the 'information ghettos' (a narrow public sphere) and lack of a common platform amongst already marginalised oppositional or 'alternative' media (Kiriya, 2019) can be reviewed when located in a broader *hybridising* media system with more porous layers. In a similar vein, internet use by the political opposition during protests (Oates, 2013) can be conceptualised as going beyond online tools of resistance to the official mainstream.

Unexpectedly, Dunn's (2014) model of Russian media as a two-tier, dichotomous media system – with limited interaction between the official (associated foremost with state TV) and alternative (digital) media – might be effective in bringing the legacy and new media together and challenging an assumption of a passive and/or naïve audience. Indeed, state TV plays an important role for most people[9]. According to Volkov and Goncharov (2019), it remains a crucial source of information for 72% of the Russian population, especially the more mature demographic group above 65 years old, with the level of trust in it gradually declining over the last decade (from 83% to 55%). Whilst there is a sustained division of media consumption patterns among various demographic groups, the audience might be more critical

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[8] Total political control over the press was not possible even in the USSR, as the case of *samizdat* (self-published) literature showed.

[9] TV is still a leading source of information for most of the population: 73% of respondents indicate television as their main source of information, followed by online media outlets (39%), social media (39%), family, friends and neighbours (18%), newspapers (16%), radio (15%) and Telegram channels (4%) (Levada Center, 2020). The younger generation (18–24) heavily rely on social media for their news (65%), while only 16% of the eldest group, over 55s, follow online outlets.

to the media messaging than previously thought. Klimov (2007) shows that a certain proportion of the viewership consumes media texts with a certain degree of scepticism.

Interestingly, since the notion of convergent media – where various types of media such as print, broadcast and new media merge – was introduced by Jenkins in 2006, western media studies have moved passed that pivotal moment. However, for the Russian mediascape operating within this rigid two-tiered media structure (Dunn, 2014) it remains pertinent. It implies that a significant part of the population might still be accessing the same events simultaneously on state TV when 'all eyes [are] transfixed on the ceremonial center' (Dayan and Katz, 1992:15). Furthermore, a sustained distinctive divide between the spectators predominantly consuming traditional media and those exposed to online media flows increases paradoxes of communication. Indeed, Russia Today's (RT) editor M. Simonyan has asserted that the younger generation, who do not watch TV, only know Putin from memes (2019). However, one cannot expect these parallel public spaces to endure.

The Russian establishment is striving to optimise its communication strategy in this hybrid digitised mediascape, signalling its evolution into something akin to 'information autocracy' (Guriev and Treisman, 2020) or 'hybrid regime governance' (Petrov et al., 2014) to ensure sustained legitimacy. This strategy presupposes various approaches, ranging from more rigid forms of control (censorship, filtering, legal restrictions) to more covert and indirect controls (Deibert et al., 2010; Morozov, 2011) including subversive tactics such as infotainment, co-optation, public opinion manipulation, introducing contradictory accounts or information overload. To account for these interrelated tactics and examine how they play out in Russia's mediascape, this chapter considers several specific cases below.

Complex trends in Russia's hybridising media ecology

This discussion will reveal a significantly more complex convergent mediascape in contemporary Russia where various actors, including state media, are active (albeit not equal) participants in media exchanges, as the idea of the top-down dissemination of messages by the official media has been challenged by various other media, revealing a complex dynamic including bottom-up currents and multidirectional information flows. Yet, it will also demonstrate that it depends on whether it is in the regime's interests to tolerate these various 'windows of pluralism' (Becker, 2018:205) and allow certain safety valves instead of ruthlessly constraining and marginalising alternative voices.

Noticeably, contemporary media consumption is characterised by infotainment, as the audience's consumption is driven less by a wish to obtain factual news and more by their social and entertainment needs, as well as by a growing interest in the type of journalism that informs and also explains (Russian Periodical Press, 2015:12). To gratify these needs the online audience, which now incorporates a steadily growing older (previously TV-inclined) cohort,[10] can select from a variety of online media and news aggregators (e.g. Yandex.ru) in addition to the available state outlets and 'institutionalised' oppositional media such as Echo Moskvy radio, Novaya Gazeta print media and Dozhd (TV Rain) broadcaster (Kiriya, 2019). Thus, in order to maintain its viewership in this highly competitive environment and, perhaps in a vain attempt to attract a new 'digital audience', the state media need to supplement 'hard' news with a more amusing news delivery (soft news), diversify its media genres and employ varying 'cross-media' formats, stylistic and aesthetic strategies to imitate the plurality of opinions (Wijermars and Lehtisaari, 2021).

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[10] In Russia's two-tier media system, the older generation is getting more used to the convergent media. The Levada Center (2020) (https://www.levada.ru/2020/04/28/rossijskij-medialandshaft-2020/) detected a 10% increase in online activity in the middle-aged group, those between 40 and 54 years old.

To start with, the official media skilfully utilises various media genes to enable a richer and more complex mediascape. The 'western formats' which are adopted for the local context range from chat and talk shows (or *tok shou,* see Hutchings and Rulyova, 2008) to stand-up comedy,[11] and offer diverse entertainment options. However, this co-optation strategy frequently backfires when social media celebrities are invited to take part in various prime time TV shows. Firstly, their communication strategy confuses and potentially alienates the audience of the first-tier media, who are unaccustomed to the language and cultural references[12] of the online celebrities (e.g. a controversial stand-up comedian Danial Poperechnyi on the 'Vechernii Urgant' chat show on Channel One). Secondly, the invited celebrities frequently display quite a dissident unpredictable attitude when on state TV. For instance, online influencers expressed dissatisfaction at their treatment as guests on the 'Fashion Verdict' show (*Modnyi Prigovor*), and the main guest walked out during 'Let's Get Married' (*Davai Pozhenimsia*), rebelling against its hierarchical communicative mode. Both programmes were aired on Channel One.

Ironically, this two-tier division also means that the state media unexpectedly promote certain events and figures from the second tier when covering various events such as scandals. One of the most recent cases involved cadets from the aviation institute in Ulyanovsk, whose online video parody 'Satisfaction', filmed in the privacy of their hall of residence unexpectedly made its way onto the main state TV channels. This large-scale media publicity led to wider public awareness of this scandalous video – enabling those who otherwise might not have encountered it to have their say (via various media channels) in saving the cadets from being expelled from their alma mater and forcing the state media to dramatically alter their disparaging narrative (Miazhevich, 2021). Similar challenges to the 'top-down' control or dissemination of media messages are highlighted by the arrest of the investigative journalist Ivan Golunov on a trumped-up drug trafficking charge in June 2019 (RSF, 2021). The charges were soon dropped after being widely challenged, demonstrating how quickly the establishment's stance was able to change when media, journalists and the general public expressed their concerns and manifested their agency.

This analysis would not be complete without an investigation into a conspicuous feature of Russia's media ecology, namely, the exploitation of 'information oversaturation' or the information war' (Pomerantsev, 2014) prominent in a post-truth and post-fact society devoid of a coherent sustainable clear-cut ideological stance[13]. Russian official media's products crafted for both domestic and international audiences (near abroad and beyond) at times contain stories which are not (entirely) true, mixing real and fake details. Russia's international multi-language broadcaster RT (Russia Today) plays a crucial role in this process (Miazhevich, 2018), advancing some of the 'grey' narratives on the international scale[14].This oversaturation of the information space with 'diverse, and occasionally contradictory, accounts which cannot easily be verified' is intended 'to create confusion and doubt' (ibid:578).

Apart from RT, Russia's posturing on the international arena includes the use of state-sponsored chatbots and troll factories (OSCAR, 2021) manufacturing numerous online posts, either to boost Russia's profile or criticise its opponents. Big data and algorithm tracking

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[11] A recent phenomenon of 'hollow humour' introduced by Roudakova (2017) questions the potential and nature of the scathing commentary present even on state media primetime entertainment shows.

[12] Similarly, state TV strives to appeal to different generational groups via such programmes as 'Old songs about the main things' *(Starye pesni o glavnom)*, which broadcast old Soviet compositions reworked by contemporary singers. However, it is not enticing a younger audience due to the multitude of different non-shared discursive codes (despite them being performed by singers they might know). The fact that the series, which was created in 1995, was rebroadcast in January 2020 and 2022 indicates either a rigidity of tactics or a lack of available options for the state media.

[13] This chapter omits discussing propaganda and/or promotion of the state line, as it goes beyond its scope. The mere definition of propaganda in the current mediascape will constitute a separate chapter.

[14] Some of the most prominent examples include a manufactured story about a little boy's torture and execution by crucifixion in Ukraine aired on state TV (Channel One, 12 July 2014) and RT's coverage of the Malaysian plane downed over Ukraine (17 July 2014). RT had originally reported that its passengers were already dead due to a virus outbreak on board before the plane was shot down

projects (Wijermars, 2021) explore patterns of these media messages, to ascertain whether they are managed, follow certain patterns, or are simply left circulating without any follow up (OSCAR, 2021). These intersections and ongoing alignments between the state, state-related and other actors need to be urgently explored by future studies.

As Russia's media forms part of global media flows, it appropriates and domesticates global media practices, narratives and genres, in part to feed them back as the projected image of nationhood. In his recent book Hutchings (2022) applies the logic of the feedback loop or 'recursion' to a variety of genres, ranging from TV to performative art, to uncover Russia's multiple 'projections' to the world. The *Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (Gritsenko et.al., 2021) looks into an array of phenomena brought about by the proliferation of digital technologies affecting Russia's media industry, exploring how they are 'domesticated' and what parallels can be drawn with the transformations of journalistic practices and agency elsewhere. Still, Russian media remains quite peripheral within the transnational media flows. For instance, Flood et al. (2008) has established that Russia's terror reporting largely grounds itself in western media's patterns of coverage, which are then used for domestic consumption in line with the country's strategic needs (such as justifying the Chechen wars), rather than feeding back and actively informing transnational narratives.

Conclusion

This overview of the recurring conceptualisations of Russia's media ecology has shown that the country's media constitutes a unique and challenging case for specialists in media, area, communication and cultural studies. Contemporary Russia's mediascape is characterised by a complex intersection of official and alternative media; legacy and digital media; editorial, regional and ethnic media diversity; and a more sophisticated 'hybrid' media management by Putin's government, which consolidates state control over the mediascape yet responds to the changing global environment and media consumption patterns.

Ultimately, the chapter has exposed a set of the current regime's strategies of in/direct control, feeding into what Guriev and Treisman (2020) call an 'information autocracy'. However, in his latest interview (Khvostunova, 2021) Guriev notes that the most recent media suppression in Russia involving the use of laws on extremism, growing censorship and the like signals a further centralisation of the regime, which might potentially move even further away from information autocracy. Possibly, grasping Russian media's peculiarities can be enhanced by comparing them with the post-Soviet (e.g. Becker, 2018) or BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries (e.g. Vartanova, 2015). Bearing in mind the non-linear nature of post-Soviet Russian media transformations (Becker, 2018), it remains to be seen how Russia's media structures and practices will be re/fashioned from now on.

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