1992-03

Russian Television's Slow Progress: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3479

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Contemporary Russian television is easy to criticize. Studios and new sets look little like the high-tech oases of the West; advertising ranges from the clumsy to the bizarre, there are still no sitcoms, and appallingly few channels are available to keep remote addicts’ fingers busy. But simply turning on the television and clicking the channel button is not really the place to start. As with much in today’s Commonwealth of Independent States, television is best defined as what it no longer is.

Just a year ago, the politics of television were completely different. Under the new leadership of Leonid Kravchenko, a hard-liner personally appointed by Mikhail Gorbachev, state television was undergoing a censorship campaign. "Vzglyad," an enormously popular Friday night program that mixes the best of "60 Minutes" with "MTV," had been pulled off the air, disappointing more than 10 million viewers. Censors were posted in newsrooms across the country. And while some journalists took the change in stride (when the black beret OMON troops and their Soviet Army colleagues cracked down in Vilnius, the main news program "Vremya" concentrated on the plight of Russian citizens living in the Baltic states), the younger generation of journalists protested (nearly all the principled, cynical anchors at TSN [Televizionnaya Sluzhba Novostei], a late-night news program with a hip format, left or were fired as a result of censorship interference).

One dazzling young TSN anchorwoman, Tat'yana Mitkova, known especially for her frank remarks and her willingness to air controversial footage, even finished one news
broadcast which included stunning footage of the Soviet military in Vilnius by saying, "I don't know if I will see you tomorrow, but goodnight." While Mitkova's willingness to spar with the censor earned her an award for her reporting from the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, she lost her job under Kravchenko, and reappeared only after the August coup attempt.

This time last year Russian Federation Presidium chairman Yel'tsin was still fighting Gosteleradio for the right to broadcast six hours three days a week on the all-union second channel, traditionally reserved for educational television. Even more than starting an independent newspaper, which required access to printing facilities belonging to the USSR and mostly affiliated with the communist party, strong independent television required some agreement with the powers that be. No one could imagine duplicating the broadcast facilities of Gosteleradio with anything short of billions of rubles of investment. When Yel'tsin finally won his six hours, some of the air time granted his new All-Russian Television and Radio Broadcast (VTRK) company initially went unused because the affiliated independent producers simply did not have the money to produce such a block of programming.

Strangely enough, even as the censor's pen slashed pointed commentary and non-communists battled for air rights, the Westernization of the airwaves continued. Gosteleradio proceeded with agreements which brought such American gems as "Dallas" and "The Love Boat" to Channel 1 prime time viewing hours. Donald Duck and Chip and Dale learned to speak squeaky Russian as Walt Disney cartoons splashed into Russian living rooms. In the interest of attracting business advertisers, "Adam Smith's Money World," a WNET/PBS production on business and the economy, aired throughout the year. Kravchenko smoothly justified such programming: "Our viewers are tired of politics," he claimed, "so I have promised them a movie every night." Little did he realize that soon he would rank even below politics on his viewers' preference lists.

While it is difficult to say that the failure of the August coup attempt has meant a radical improvement in the overall situation in Russia, at least it is possible to say that it aided
in cleaning many of the old-guard overseers out of the media. Kravchenko was the first to go, being replaced by Yegor Yakovlev, editor in chief of Moscow News. Once a propaganda rag for foreigners issued in many different languages, under Yakovlev Moscow News had undergone a remarkable transition to a leading newspaper. It was hoped that he could do the same for television, although he came to the position with no broadcast journalism experience. With Kravchenko finally gone, many of the old stars returned: "Vzglyad" reappeared in the wake of the coup with a stellar program that included the videos made by Gorbachev's son-in-law during the former president's house arrest during the putsch. Tat'yana Mitkova was called back by Yakovlev to anchor one of the first post-coup news broadcasts. Choked with tears, she declared herself "very glad to be back."

While the Yel'tsin administration picked a good man for the job in Moscow, they proceeded to fumble in St. Petersburg. Simultaneously with an effort to ban the publications of the communist party, the administration decided to take the notorious program "600 Seconds" off the air. The main reason was "600 Seconds" host Alexander Nevzorov. The grandson of a KGB official, a former stunt man and trick horseback rider, Nevzorov was militantly in favor of preserving the union of the USSR. Along with standard "600 Seconds" fare—like the St. Petersburg mafiosi and radioactive farm produce—Nevzorov had produced a short video called "Nashi" ("Ours") which was markedly sympathetic to the work of OMON officials in the Baltics. In another film, "Black Berets," he claimed that Lithuanian nationalists had dragged young women to use as a human barricade in front of the television tower that was later seized by Soviet troops. A staunch monarchist, in 1991 Nevzorov was second only to Boris Yel'tsin in Russian popularity polls. When his program was banned, viewers sent thousands of telegrams and picketed outside the St. Petersburg City Council building. "600 Seconds" was reinstated, only to be forced off again in early December 1991, when Viktor Yugin assumed control of Petersburg TV. With the help of another rally of viewer support and a showing of unity by other conservative forces (including Pravda), the program was back on the air in two days. "And so," wrote a Pravda commentator, "the program is on the air. We will watch, disagree, argue and get angry at Nevzorov. And that's normal."
With "600 Seconds" in place, Russian television is now open to the broadest ideological range of programming in its history. Showing on the opposite side of Nevzorov's political spectrum are a range of programs on Channel 2, now devoted full-time to Yeltsin's VTRK. Channel 2's news program "Vesti," with main anchor Andrei Gurnov, has easily won increasing viewership over recent months. While some claim to dislike Gurnov's haughtiness, the program relies on a range of independent news sources from Interfax to CNN, which make it far more informative than the newly revamped Novosti 1 (which now occupies "Vremya's" old slot on Channel 1).

VTRK has also introduced a competitor to "Vzglyad" in the form of a program called "Top Secret." A spinoff from the journal of the same name, the program is hosted by Artyom Borovik, best known in the West for his book *The Hidden War* (on his experiences in Afghanistan) and for his pithy post-coup report for "60 Minutes" on the Soviet institute which holds Lenin's brain. "Top Secret" has encompassed everything from a look inside a lifer's prison to faith healing and interviews with former Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin and American Sovietologist Dmitri Simes. Like most independent productions, "Top Secret" scrambles for the resources that it takes to make good television. When the show started production last fall, the producers did not even own a betacam camera and had little alternative but to lease one for R3,000 per day. They paid even more for editing late-night programs at an old Gostel facility located at Beria's former dacha. Although the program is doing quite well, Borovik and his production team are still anxious for work with foreign companies that will bring them the hard currency needed to purchase editing equipment and even such mundane but vital items as betacam tape. Quite apart from the politics, it is clear that making television requires more than a little perseverance when it comes to the assembly of resources.

While VTRK is introducing some interesting new Russian programming, Channel 1 continues to surprise viewers with its enterprising ability to obtain Western entertainment. This January, as part of an agreement with Lorimar Productions, television viewers watched movie favorites like "Being There" with Peter Sellers,
"Superman" with Christopher Reeves, and "The Postman Always Rings Twice." These movies, professionally dubbed into Russian, were a very welcome comparison to the faded blackmarket video dubs of "Star Wars" and "The Great Gatsby" which float around Moscow much to the disdain of the American motion picture industry.

If the formal devolution of Gosteleradio into Yel'tsin's VTRK on Channel 2 and what is now "Ostankino" television on Channel 1 has brought a more balanced assortment of material to television viewers, critics of the media continue to point out that the former remains too entrenched in bureaucracy and the latter too firmly tied to Yel'tsin to be truly independent and innovative. Most media professionals rely on increasing advertising funds to loosen the political ties and to launch more independent studios. Some believe that President Yel'tsin's understanding of the media is such that for the duration of his tenure he will ensure that neither channel drifts too far out of his control.

Television, it seems, like the rest of Russia, has far to go to meet the maximum expectations of those who would democratize it. But even the critics should bear in mind that it has come remarkably far, and remarkably fast, from the state-sponsored broadcasts of the USSR that were so familiar and seemed so permanent to viewers just one year ago.

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