

## **‘We need more hell’: Russian free speech and the market of attention**

**Maksim Orlov explores how free speech is not enough for effective communication.**



Today, when marketers, media and governments fight for every second of their audiences' attention, free speech faces a new kind of challenge: how to be heard, when the information landscape is dominated by formidable forces that deploy enormous resources to manipulate the attention economy of entire nations? Developments in the Russian media landscape following the events in Ukraine from 2013 onwards demonstrate that there is much more to genuine freedom of speech than just the ability to express one's opinion and the availability of information.

Unlike in many other countries that do not rank highly in terms of free speech, in Russia a great deal of information about the mechanisms of state propaganda is freely available on the internet. People who claim to have worked in state media give interviews and press conferences, and it takes only a couple of clicks to find sufficient evidence leaked from the back offices of state-owned

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media—primarily television—to see the extent to which the state is involved in shaping the media agenda. However, the availability of this data does not break the rising trend for television viewership: for the first time in contemporary history, and despite the continuous growth of internet usage, TV viewership in Russia increased, by 5.8 per cent in 2014. Also, despite the criticism aimed at state-owned television channels, the overwhelming majority of Russians still regard television as the main source of trustworthy information.

Propaganda in the Russian media increased sharply during the Euromaidan events in Kiev from November 2013 to February 2014, continued to develop throughout the Crimean campaign and peaked during the particularly turbulent phase of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. In the circumstances of economic decline, millions of people in Russia resorted to television as a source of affordable entertainment. Although the majority of TV viewers mainly watch entertainment shows, news broadcasts also became more prominent, Vremya (“Time”), the main Channel 1 news programme held the highest rating according to [TNS Russia](#). Instead of taking in routine information about politics, the economy and presidential visits, millions of people on a daily basis started to receive a large amount of terrifying information about the military actions and humanitarian crisis in the areas of eastern Ukraine claimed by separatists. The question of the actual sides in the conflict remained opaque: both the “goodies” and the “baddies” of the conflict changed names several times. The one stable element was the supply of strong, forceful emotion: refugees suffering, children dying, houses collapsing—a real inferno erupting from the television screen into living rooms all across Russia.

The notorious news story of the “crucified boy” was one of the extreme examples of this scaremongering campaign. It was broadcast on state-controlled Channel 1 on 12 June 2014 as a part of a primetime news programme. In this video a certain Galina Pyshnyak, who introduced herself as a refugee from the Ukrainian city of Slavyansk, reported that when the Ukrainian army entered the city the soldiers organised the public execution of a woman (“a volunteer’s wife”) and her little son. Her narrative was full of gory detail and the setting of the interview suggested that this mother of four was in real distress. The story was [debunked soon after by independent journalists](#) who interviewed witnesses and visited Slavyansk. A more balanced version of the events was presented in several articles. It had little effect. Sober analysis is of no help once the information bomb has gone off. There are journalists in Russia who are passionate about finding out the truth and reporting it. However, in the current situation, when the sensational value of news is exploited by key players in the media field to a grotesque extent, they will not be heard.

In the background commentary to this story the presenter said: “The mind fails to comprehend how this could be possible in the heart of Europe today”. This phrase summarises the result of this shock campaign: instead of treating the news as something that informs opinions, behaviour and political decisions, the news has become a sort of a horror film, dark “infotainment” that can be thrilling in a negative way, but cannot be acted upon. One of the whistleblowers, who claimed to be a former employee of the major state-owned television company VGTRK, [said in an interview](#) that his or her supervisor described the general approach to the news planning quite simply as “We

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need more hell!". This reveals one aspect of free speech that is often neglected: the mere availability of reliable information is insufficient for the practice of this freedom. The entire economy of information within society should be suited for it.

In the case of Russia, the principle threat to free speech is not the state's strong position, which is not unusual, especially at a time of economic and political struggle. The main threat comes from the chosen strategy of scrambling the principal sources of information, which results in the development of a social "learned helplessness". Therefore, the state infringes the right of free speech not by preventing people from expressing their opinions, but by preventing them from having any opinions at all. Needless to say, the loss of social and political agency by the majority of population is dangerous in a society in which many institutions, by their design, require social responsibility and informed opinions on principal issues of social and political life.

Another strategy that erodes opinions is presenting crucial events in a way that suggests there is no way to obtain true information. On 8 November 2015, when the news reports in Russia and beyond were dominated by the updates on the crash of an aeroplane in Egypt with Russian tourists on board, the head of the state news agency Rossiya Segodnya and the host of the most popular news show Dmitry Kiselyov, [presented a "version" of events](#) based on the involvement of western countries in the organisation of the terrorist attack. Without any clear evidence, Kiselyov did not offer any narrative. He was only discussing scattered details of past involvement of western forces in the conflict in parallel with the disaster, establishing an emotional connection between the Sinai tragedy and the operations of the US army against the so-called Islamic State. The manner in which this unfounded information is presented keeps the speaker free of any responsibility but insinuates a very disturbing idea of conspiracy that is inserted into the minds of his audience. In other words, without conveying much actual data it creates a meaning that, in the context of other similar messages, may crystallise into an opinion or attitude. The same "crystallisation" happens with actual, "affirmative" news reports. However, there is one crucial difference: in the case of regular news the opinion is based on certain facts that can be criticised or verified, while in the case of insinuation the resulting opinion is not falsifiable or verifiable.

### *Divide and rule*

One of the widely discussed paradoxes of the information society is that the abundance of information available to a person does not automatically mean that this person thinks objectively or at least is aware of other points of view. On the contrary, the immediate availability of almost any point of view makes it very appealing for us to congregate with like-minded people and consume the content that confirms our existing point of view. This paradox is one of the factors that propaganda works with on the internet.

Internet propaganda efforts in Russia have been more limited in their scale and [a few critics have made allegations](#) that they are driven by a corruption scheme, the participants of which are more

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interested in inflating expenditure than actual results. Although the number of internet users has steadily grown ([62 per cent of Russians used the internet in 2015 according to official statistics](#)), the actual efficiency of online propaganda is constantly questioned. Several people claimed to have worked for contractor media companies who employed hundreds of people to comment on social networks and produce various types of content that would appear genuine and “organic”, like something produced by an ordinary member of the public. Although these efforts are only supplementary to the louder voices on the television screens, they reveal another major obstacle for the practice of free speech in Russia. Ideological camps are not ready to get involved in a discussion that could lead to any actionable approach to the news feed. Instead, they are captivated in name-calling and putting labels on each other that choke any further discussion. Activists and investigative journalists are busy exposing what they find to be propaganda tricks, while the producers of propaganda do not fail to supply new heart-stopping stories. As a result, the struggle for the freedom of speech becomes largely a game of tilting at windmills.

This ideological segregation is to a large extent inspired by the atmosphere of suspicion and conspiracy created by official rhetoric. In 2012 the Russian Duma passed a bill that amended the federal law on non-profit organisations by introducing the category of “foreign agents”. It required all NGOs that engaged in “political activity” and received funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents” under the threat of large fines. It also entailed additional scrutiny and inspections that in some cases effectively brought the activities of such organisations to a halt. Although this term was not a new coinage (the term itself exists in other legal systems), its interpretation in Russia caused a massive shockwave throughout the NGO sector and beyond, because in public opinion the status of a foreign agent was inherently tainted. The population has been regularly reminded of the enemy within, who acts on his own hostile agenda, supported by western money. This paranoid attitude is widely adopted in internet discussions: if somebody speaks critically of the status quo, he or she can easily be branded as “an agent of the west”. Instead of speaking about current events and political developments, the participants of such discussions often get caught in the spiral of highly mythologised “holy war” conversations on “Russia vs the west”, “traditionalism v liberalism”, etc. Most of the time the participants are free to express their points of view without any reservation, and VKontakte—the most popular social network in Russia—has thousands of group discussions full of hatred and vast generalisations ranging in expression from polite to vitriolic. Although in doing so the participants of such discussions technically practise free speech, it has very little to do with real social issues. In other words, the statements are freely expressed, but not in a way that would create any meaning.

One important observation can be drawn from this state of affairs: freedom to speak and the effective practice of speech is not the same thing. In broader terms, the practice of free speech embraces both sides of communication—the expression and its meaning. It is completely normal that major institutions like government, businesses or NGOs pursue their agendas in information policy, but the situation in which the right to speak is abused to scramble channels of information hinders the practice of meaningful communication. Mass confusion has always been in the toolbox of propaganda, but today, when the attention of the audience has become a traded and technically

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manipulated commodity, it is not the expression itself but its meaning which requires protection.

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