Critical Dialogue

Television, Power, and the Public in Russia. By Ellen Mickiewicz. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 220p. $81.00 cloth, $29.99 paper.
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— W. Lance Bennett, *University of Washington, Seattle*

This book opens and closes with the puzzle of how Russian rulers can control, distort, and bend the news to their own ends without worrying about how the audience receives it. On its first page, Ellen Mickiewicz asks: "[W]ouldn't these political leaders want anxiously to know what viewers make of the news?" And on its last page (p. 206) we are told that "political leaders and broadcasters persist in imagining an undifferentiated, unsophisticated mass on the other side of the screen." While there is no direct evidence in the rest of the book to indicate that leaders do not know what to make of their audience, or that they assume it to be an undifferentiated, unsophisticated mass, these assumptions set up an interesting look at what audiences actually make of television news in Russia.

The analysis concerning how audiences do react to television news is based on a series of focus groups (16 groups in four very different cities, including Moscow) conducted in 2002, which was conveniently around the time that the last independent and critical news channels were closed by the Putin government. The 158 participants viewed videos of news stories and discussed their interpretation. They were also led by facilitators to offer more general reflections on the significance of closing independent channels and on the differences between Soviet and post-Soviet television. Television is the topic of interest here because it is shown to be far and away the most important common source of news. Mickiewicz's primary concern is not conventional effects, as there is little reason to think that audiences are somehow duped en masse by state propaganda (in addition, the focus group design makes it hard to generalize to broader populations about conventional effects). It is how, in the absence of conventional cues and heuristics (e.g., meaningful party and ideological differences), do Russian citizens process the news and derive some sharable understandings?

The information-processing framework used in the book is well established, drawing from work by Doris Graber, Shanto Iyengar, Arthur Lupia, Matthew McCubbins, James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, and others. However, as noted, the novel plot twist is that the kinds of heuristics that Americans derive from their party and ideological reference systems are missing in Russia due to a combination of corruption and instability in the political process, as well as the lack of reference and source diversity in the news itself. The book proceeds to look at different slices of Russian political life (such as election coverage and a pipeline story with environmental overtones) through the news lens, and to explore how members of the focus groups discuss them. Given that we are prepared to find different sorts of heuristics than described in much of the information-processing literature, it is surprising that there is very little attention paid to where these other heuristics come from. We learn later on, for example, that people rely heavily on available personal experience and knowledge. This is not automatically a socially shared or widely scaled heuristic, and we hear little about how this basis of information processing originates or translates into "public" (a term also in the book title). For example, we do not learn much about any other common, independent sources for personal knowledge that might produce some sort of coherent public opinion. We hear early on (p. 4) that "the Internet is protean," but never hear about it again. For some reason, the importance of reporters and operators of investigative news outlets (e.g., the murdered Anna Politkovskaya) who risk personal safety are not brought out in the group discussions, and they receive only passing mention in the book. The focus is kept squarely on television.

The data clearly show that people are practiced in gleaning independent insights from opaque state spin. They also recognize some differences between news on state-controlled and then independent channels. However, some noted that the independent channels also represented powerful interests (e.g., Boris Berezovsky and TV-6) that were no more committed to the public interest than were state media. This may explain why the groups who watched election news on both state and independent channels (but stripped of channel identifiers) generally had trouble detecting differences in the style or information value of the coverage. At this point, Mickiewicz deftly interprets this inability to differentiate among election news sources from different channels by introducing polls showing that most people say they rely on their own direct personal experience over the news when making voting choices. One of the real strengths of

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the book is the interspersing of polls and focus group transcripts in order to provide a richly textured look at information processing patterns. There is considerable insight here about when the polls are good indicators of public thinking and when they can be badly misleading.

The election choice polling offers some insight about what sorts of heuristics people do use to process information in Russia. Mickiewicz calls the most common basis for interpretation in the groups the "availability heuristic," which basically means independent personal information that people can bring to bear to interpret one-sided news. It is not clear that when put this broadly, Russian heuristics differ much from what any people would use in the absence of more compelling general political cues. And there is curiously little discussion of the implications of such an individualized basis for reaching political judgments. Personal experience is a different information-processing tool than, say, party identification or ideology. Yet I finished the book wanting more insight about what this means for the public sphere, civic engagement, sense of efficacy, or trust. There were passing references to these things, but not much clear insight. Is the nature of personal economic, social, or security experience so similar across different segments of the Russian population that people have the basis for common critical readings of the news? Or is life in Russia so diverse as to leave publics hazy and scattered in their heuristics and resulting public opinion formations? Mickiewicz points vaguely toward the latter, without developing much in the way of implications for Russian politics. Her interest seems more intently trained on showing that individuals are not duped by the brand of state news they watch on television. Yet it would be surprising in light of the earlier stories of life in the Soviet information regime if most Russians proved to be hypnotized by these dim flickers of events and pronouncements by rulers.

My own sense from the author's presentation of the focus group data is that while individuals had their own interpretations of the stories they watched, there was a great range and not much consensus on how to think about the issues and the politics of the time. Indeed, even when the discussion turned toward more general media topics, such as closing down the independent TV stations, people ran the gamut of reactions from fear about having their personal choices restricted, to worrying about democratic freedoms, to cynical comments about the owners of the independent channels having their own power agendas that made them more like the state channels than real voices of the people. One applauded the increase in sports programming that subsequently appeared on the channel. Another was resigned: "It's useless to fight with the government. If Putin decided, then he decided" (p. 171). Thus, even the closing of TV-6 (which was a case discussed in the groups) did not produce anything like a familiar democratic outcry.

One of the most interesting sections of the book is Chapter 5, which involves a recounting of memories of Soviet TV by members of the groups. The most interesting feature of this analysis is that it puts some perspective around poll findings showing that some three-fourths of Russian citizens today favor some degree of media censorship. Mickiewicz uses the discussions from the groups to show that this is more complicated than it may seem. Many of the group members were young children at the end of the Soviet era who recall fondly their favorite programs (e.g., *Good Night, Children*), which suggested that the government cared for the quality of media content outside the restricted domain of news. Today, it seems, all has become corrupted, and some sort of regulation would be welcome.

In the end, what is most perplexing about *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia* is the frequent return to the puzzle about why Russian leaders bother to produce such out-of-touch content that is so easily deconstructed by the audience. Despite promising in the title to address how television news fits into the power equation of Russia, the author leaves the reader with the same unanswered question at the conclusion that she raised at the beginning. In the end, the book fails to solve the puzzle of media power. Yet the pieces are scattered throughout the text. One way of constructing them goes like this: In authoritarian regimes (and, perhaps, in democratic ones, too), coverage of issues, elections, and events in the media *is* public opinion, particularly when there are few other outlets to express a common voice. Enforcement of this single public voice regime is generally assisted by intimidation, jailing, and murder. Mickiewicz notes in passing that Russia is one of the most dangerous places to be an investigative reporter, or to open a critical media outlet. Yet she somehow does not connect those observations with the rationale for the state to promote news that is so out of touch with the people.

Nevertheless, some of the focus group members seemed to have the answer worked out. For example, the Moscow group met just a week after the closure of TV-6. It seems that one person who got the connection between state control of the media, power, and public opinion was Ivan in the Moscow group, who said: "[H]ere the source of power is the people, the opinion of the people. And . . . it's necessary somehow to manage this opinion." When asked by another group member why it was necessary to close media outlets and make characters like Berezovsky heroes in the West, Ivan replied: "The purpose of power is power. And . . . power can get it . . . in the reelections if in the state there will be no oppositionist television, mass media which forms public opinion" (p. 171). Perhaps this puzzling media system accrues power to those who can use the media as a shield to prevent another, more independent public opinion from being expressed. In Russian pseudo-democracy, it seems that individuals are free to

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form their own views, perhaps even provoked by an absurdly controlled state media, but they are not free to have those views expressed and aggregated by the political heuristics through media outlets that typically give public opinion common meaning and power.

Response to W. Lance Bennett's Review of *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia*
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— Ellen Mickiewicz

Lance Bennett is rightly pessimistic about a state with government-run mass media, on the one hand, and unchecked corruption, on the other. The massive and partially acknowledged corruption operates menacingly at all levels of society, a phenomenon mainly of the post-Soviet period. And the situation is bound to worsen as the economic crisis grows. However, it is unlikely that this decade of rampant corruption is the source of most heuristics that Russians use, for the derivation and content of shortcuts to navigate news tend to be drawn from early experiences under Soviet rule.

Bennett's response is accurate in its understanding of the work done by Russian viewers to make sense of messages, but his understanding of Russians' store of heuristics is circumscribed, perhaps because he has drawn mainly from American applications. Soviet-era-derived heuristics are very widely in use there and have some powerful results. One such heuristic, in which Russians viewers appear more sophisticated than American counterparts, is the trade-off. Americans require prodding to consider it. Russians *expect* trade-offs, and if there are none in a news story, viewers supply them—a dozen or more. A second heuristic born in the Soviet era is the weakness of a "positive" news story. Positive stories lack credibility both with college graduates and viewers who have not gone beyond high school.

Election stories were universally detested in the groups, Viewers want coverage to show candidates' programs for the future and accountability after the election. They see all election stories over time and from local to national offices as the same incomprehensible bare-knuckle brawling.

Bennett notes the broad spread of opinions across the groups and that is a valid observation, as is his conclusion that the prevention of a more public opinion is a goal of the regime, something more openly and viciously imposed during the Soviet years. Yet in my book, there is a striking example showing a type of public opinion with no apparent formal organization. In polls in the 1980s, voters choosing the ballot line "against all" were rural, older, and with little education. Now, they are more young, urban, and at upscale jobs. Since 1997, "against all" votes received more than all but four parties, and in almost one-third of the single-member districts came in first or second. Even Vladimir Putin's pick in St. Petersburg was forced into a runoff. This mounting protest vote ended when the state Duma, led by the party favored by the president, removed the against-all ballot line in 2006 and abolished single-member constituencies.

Russians are graduates of the Soviet school of life. That life was supposed to be uniform throughout the country. Of course it was not, but the commonalities across a vast area and large population were such that it is not surprising that their heuristics were related to those many generations of experience.

When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina. By W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 278p. $22.50 cloth, $15.00 paper.
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— Ellen Mickiewicz, *Duke University*

It takes a vacuum for the American mainstream press to seize an opening to perform its vital role. And it takes a crack in what the authors portray as an edifice of official secrecy, lying, intimidation, and retribution for the mainstream press to do its job—holding public officials to standards of accountability.

W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston have written an accessible, valuable, and thoroughly cogent study of the American press during one of the most critical times in the history of the country. It is appropriate for academics, their students, and anyone who wonders why coverage of our foreign policy appears to be so close to the government's version. *When the Press Fails* convincingly displays the logic by which the elite press ceded its power, integrity, and mission as watchdog *voluntarily* to an administration bent on taking the country to an ill-advised war based on knowingly faulty evidence. With stories in the papers aligned with official policy, it was thus impossible to offer a counterframe—a strong challenging interpretation or characterization.

Framing research is a productive approach to the study of mass media, and it has been well applied to research about foreign policy by Robert Entman (*Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy,* 2003). Equally helpful is indexing research, developed by Bennett himself, which has provided the theoretical framework for studies of other wars. Jonathan Mermin, for example (*Debating War and Peace: Media Coverage of U.S. Intervention in the Post-Vietnam Era,* 1999), found the press similarly ordering its stories in light of government policy.

The chief players in this book are those who hold power and "the mainstream press [which] sets the tone for public discourse even though peripheral outlets often contain a diversity of competing and often more encompassing information" (pp. 58–59). Myriad sources of information surface

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