Lessons from Russia
A Neo-Authoritarian Media System

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Current Critics

- Russia is one of five countries on the International Press Institute’s Watch List of countries ‘endangered with becoming repressive’ (International Press Institute).

- President Putin made the Committee to Protect Journalists’ “Ten Worst Enemies of the Press” list for 2001, joining an ignominious group including Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Liberian President Charles Taylor, Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe and Cuban leader Fidel Castro (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002).

- In its 2001 annual report, the media rights organization Reporters sans Frontières described Putin’s anti-media actions as ‘too grotesque to be true’, and they named him one of the world’s ‘predators of press freedom’.
Democratic Media Systems

- It is the responsibility of a mass political media system to provide information to citizens to participate in processes of governance.

- In such a system, the population must have access to the media; there must be a significant degree of pluralism in all media, either internal or external; the press should reflect different views and ideologies; and the press must not be under the control of the state or under the control of such a limited number of private owners that pluralism is limited.

Democratic Media Systems

Negatives Within Russian Media

- Increasing ‘soft news’ and infotainment, stultifying notions of objectivity, overreliance on ‘official sources’ and excessive cynicism. Many of these phenomena are linked to the growing media concentration in corporate hands and cumulatively, they are hypothesized to have a negative impact on civic engagement.

Democratic Media Systems

Positives Within Russian Media

- In pre-Putin Russia media concentration strengthened the capacity of commercial stations to ‘compete with, and challenge governmentally managed news’. It was the commercial stations ‘large enough and strong enough’ that maintained ‘a comprehensive newsgathering and broadcast capacity that best fulfills the medium’s public service obligations’.
Russia As A Neo-authoritarian Media System: Defined

- As in traditional authoritarian systems, such as Salazar’s Portugal, pluralism in the media is tolerated, but there are limits, particularly on issues that are of central importance to the regime, such as national security and elections (Seaton and Pimlot, 1980). As was the case in Franco’s Spain, in many Latin American dictatorships and in most of the countries of the former Soviet Union, the media is also used by the center of political power as a weapon to attack political enemies.

- To silence critics, the state does not resort to pre-publication censorship so much as economic pressure through selectively applied legal and quasilegal actions against owners, as well as broadly worded laws which prescribe criminal and civil penalties for journalists concerning such issues as libel, state interests, national security and the image of the head of state.

- In neo-authoritarian systems, the state asserts the capacity to control broadcast media, particularly television, because it is perceived to be the most important medium through which to communicate with the population. Because television is often the most important means of communication, particularly in countries like Russia, where there have been significant economic difficulties and the population’s purchasing power significantly curtailed, the government’s capacity to exert negative and positive control over televised coverage of important issues limits meaningful pluralism and undermines the capacity of citizens to ‘make political decisions and cast ballots on the basis of informed choice.”
Russia As A Neo-authoritarian Media System: Defined

- The unique feature of the neoauthoritarian media system is that while there are tight reins placed on television, there may exist, in spite of periodic harassment, violence and closures, a vibrant print media that is independently owned (by individuals, parties, or foreign corporations), relatively autonomous, accessible to the population and highly critical of the regime.

- Perhaps the best example of neo-authoritarianism is in Zimbabwe, where the state monopoly over broadcast media and harassment of independent print media are standard but where, prior to the extreme crackdown of the past year, the print media still functioned as a significant check on government.

Russia As A Neo-authoritarian Media System: Preview to the Putin Era

- ... to Yeltsin, media freedom was a baseline value. ... Yeltsin replaced Communist ideology with a supremely simplified version of democracy that boiled down to two tenets: He could not abide Communists, and he supported freedom of the press.

Russia As A Neo-authoritarian Media System: Preview to the Putin Era

- The press under Gorbachev and Yeltsin made substantial gains compared with the pre-glasnost era. During the period prior to Putin’s ascendancy there was pluralism in print and on television, criticism of the government, particularly on issues such as corruption and Chechnya, and relatively little government control over the press, including media in which the state maintained a controlling financial interest.
In his (Putin) state of the nation address in June 2000, he divided the media into state (государственное) and anti-state (антигосударственное) and attacked private owners for turning media into ‘mass misinformation outlets’ and ‘into a means of struggle against the state’.

The main ways in which the Putin era’s neo-authoritarian press differs from a democratic media system are in the areas of autonomy, legal protections, control of content and pluralism.

The most significant action under Putin was the attack on the Media-Most empire of Vladimir Gusinsky. Through the selective application of tax and criminal law — including the invasion of Media-Most premises by hooded and heavily armed tax police, the direct pressure of the Ministry of Press, Radio and Television and boardroom intrigue, Media-Most collapsed. The impact was devastating: NTV, the leading source of non-state broadcast news and the only station with a national reach that was not state-owned, fell into the hands of the government-controlled energy giant Gazprom.
Russia As A Neo-authoritarian Media System: The Putin Era

- Limit media autonomy is enhanced by three intertwined factors.
  
  1. The state continues to retain ownership of a tremendous amount of the media. In terms of television, it owns the two leading national broadcast channels, RTR and ORT.
  
  2. The degree to which the state is interlocked with Russian business.
  
  3. Legal protections for the media in Russia are minimal. In fact, ever-flexible laws and a pliant judiciary permit the government to take selective actions against media organizations.

Looking Back: Neo-authoritarian Vs Post-totalitarian Press

- In the pre-Gorbachev period the party/state controlled all access to the mass media, owned all print and broadcast facilities and exerted positive and negative control over the content of the entire legal press through an elaborate system of management which involved, among other things, power over appointment of personnel, and pre- and post-publication censorship.

Looking Back: Neo-authoritarian Vs Post-totalitarian Press

- As far as pluralism in pre-Gorbachev Russia is concerned, there were two types of diversity. The first is what can be called manufactured diversity, or small differences in press coverage encouraged by the state in order to appeal to audiences of different regions, education levels and occupations. This was a tool to make media messages more effective.
  
  The second was sanctioned diversity, which suggests the appearance of non-uniform press content that, although not explicitly endorsed by the leadership, was tolerated by it.
The Positives of the Present

- Print media’s coverage of the US in the period just before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11 reveals that the press offered a wider array of external diversity and even some degree of internal diversity.
  - Putin was depicted as being outfoxed by US President George W. Bush in diplomatic negotiations and was even shown to be physically and mentally the weaker (certainly something at odds with the well-honed Putin-as-judo-star image).
  - The diversity of views to which citizens are exposed on a daily basis, at least in the print media, vastly exceeds that of the Soviet period. Journalists, whose reputations have been sullied in the post-Soviet period, deserve more credit for continuing to challenge the state even when they may face retaliatory measures for their views.

Conclusions

- Clearly things are better than in the totalitarian or post-totalitarian periods.
  - Media personnel are no longer appointed by a monistic center of political power.
  - Access, at least for print media, is no longer strictly controlled, and ownership varies.
  - There is significant pluralism in the print media and real diversity, as opposed to a narrow range of ‘manufactured and ‘sanctioned’ diversity.
  - The diversity that now exists in the print media is no longer mediated by the regime, and the regime does not maintain the capacity to assert positive and negative control over the entire legal press.

Lessons Of The Russian Transition?

- The state remains the most important threat to the emergence of democratic media systems.
- Media concentration can help foster pluralism.
- The media should fear not only a strong state but also a weak state.
- There are substantial differences between different nondemocratic
- Mass political media systems...western media systems, grossly
- The countries of the former Soviet Union in which the totalitarian and post-totalitarian media system existed for the briefest time tend to have had the most successful transitions in the post-Soviet space.