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Choosing Propaganda: Media Selection and Politics in Putin's Russia

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Choosing Propaganda:

Media Selection and Politics in Putin's Russia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

by

Ashley Katrine Blum

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Choosing Propaganda:

Media Selection and Politics in Putin's Russia

by

Ashley Katrine Blum

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Daniel Simon Treisman, Chair

The vast majority of Russians depend on state-controlled media as their primary source of information about politics and current events. These news outlets deliberately bias their reports to flatter the country's political leaders. They spread pro-Kremlin propaganda and suppress critical coverage of the regime. Given this distortion, what explains the popularity of these sources? In this dissertation, I draw on evidence from three original surveys about Russian media habits, attitudes toward news media, and political beliefs to examine demand for news in Russia. These reveal the complex ways in which Russians process social and political information. Preferences for different types of content, beliefs about sources, and differences in accessibility interact to shape their viewing choices.

The results of this dissertation suggest that most Russians are aware, at least to some degree, of the biases of state media. Nonetheless, they still consider these sources to provide valuable information. This, in part, stems from beliefs about the access these news outlets have to information and some distrust in available alternative sources. It is not the case that Russians are generally active supporters of the kinds of censorship that state news outlets

deploy. However, concerns about censorship must be traded off against news consumers' other priorities. In some circumstances, news audiences will even prefer a degree of censorship if information is framed as a threat to social stability. Overall, state news outlets have succeeded in producing a product that many Russian news consumers genuinely value, even if the contents are subject to bias and distortion. Russian news audiences find the content of state media to be interesting, important, and relevant. It encourages positive emotions such as pride and hope. It affirms those who are deeply attached to their Russian identity and feel positively about their leaders.

The results of this dissertation have important implications for understanding the way modern authoritarian regimes stay in power. It is easier for autocrats to stay in power if they are genuinely popular, and information control and propaganda can be important tools for turning public opinion in the autocrat's favor. When propaganda is genuinely popular, it can be far more useful as a persuasive tool. Maintaining total control over the flow of information is extremely difficult and attempts to do so can backfire. However, if people willingly consume state media, the state can reap the benefits of shaping public opinion without all of the associated costs.

The dissertation of Ashley Katrine Blum is approved.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As Russian troops amassed along the Ukrainian border starting in the late fall of 2021, Russian state television vehemently denied that the Kremlin was behaving aggressively toward its neighbor. As Western leaders sounded the alarm about preparations for invasion, Russian state television decried Western hysteria about any supposed Russian aggression. It was NATO and Ukraine's leadership, state television claimed, that was to blame for growing hostility and it was Russia who was playing defense. On the eve of the invasion, state television dutifully and uncritically broadcast President Vladimir Putin's falsehood-laden speeches regarding Ukraine's history and Kyiv's supposed atrocities toward Russian-speakers. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, state television denied that a war was even happening, and claimed that the "special military operation" was targeting only military structures. No cities were being attacked nor were civilians being killed. News anchors parroted the Kremlin's talking points that Ukrainian leadership was overrun by Nazis committing genocide against Russian speakers in the Donbas. As the war has progressed, evidence of mounting civilian casualties was either blamed on Ukrainian or Western forces or dismissed as "fake." The gap between reality and the depiction on state television seemed to grow wider and wider.

This latest propaganda onslaught is only the most recent chapter of a years-long effort to shape public opinion about Russia's neighbor and the West. Claims of widespread "Russophobia" and nationalist hostility toward Russian-speakers in Ukraine have been central fixtures of Russian state television since the Euromaidan in 2014. The government in

Kyiv was portrayed as illegitimate, its power attributable to a coup fomented by the West. Ukraine was depicted as merely a pawn in Western efforts to marginalize Russia.

Beyond the Ukraine case, Russian state propaganda, especially on television, has become a central tool of the Kremlin's efforts to shape public opinion in the Putin era. From demonizing social activists to spreading disinformation about opposition leaders, Russian state television distorts its depiction of reality to favor the Kremlin. While the preceding examples are among the most overt cases of propaganda, much of the coverage is slanted in more subtle ways. Those who criticize the regime are largely ignored. Blame for bad policy outcomes is shifted away from the president. Through these distortions on state television, the Kremlin is able to retain control of the political narrative.

Despite its biases, distortions, and outright lies, Russian state television is quite popular. Each evening, millions of Russians turn to one of the main state television channels to watch the evening news. Polling suggests that, while it has ebbed and flowed over the years, most Russians generally trust the reporting on state television news. This large audience is a key component of the Kremlin's information control strategy. Yet it has been largely underexplored. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by examining the interests, needs, and attitudes of Russian news consumers. I ask how the public in Russia navigates the media landscape and what explains the widespread popularity of state propaganda.

1.1 Information Control's Impact

Control over information channels can be a powerful political tool. It can allow elites to shape everything from the public's perception of the government's performance to its conception of national identity. Media outlets are a primary target for would-be autocrats. From Russia's Vladimir Putin to Hungary's Viktor Orban to Turkey's Recep Erdogan, strongman leaders in the process of extending and consolidating their power often prioritize ensuring that predominant media outlets are controlled either directly by the state or by elites loyal

to the government. Through this process of media capture, they can silence most of their critics and drum up popular support while, at the same time, stripping away democratic institutions. Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2020) model this new generation of authoritarian leaders as relying on information control rather than violent repression as their primary means of retaining power. Recognizing that it can be easier and cheaper to rule on the basis of being loved rather than feared, these "informational autocrats" use propaganda and censorship to persuade the public of their competence. In so doing, they are able to maintain genuine popularity among the public, placing themselves in a far more secure position from which to rule.

Why is controlling the information environment so important to leaders? Research on media effects suggests that its political impact can be quite powerful (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010; Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Boas and Hidalgo 2011; DellaVigna et al. 2014), sometimes with devastating consequences (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014; Adena et al. 2015). Pro-regime propaganda has been shown to reduce protest activity in autocracies (Carter and Carter 2021). Even propaganda that fails to persuade the public of a dictator's competence may serve to signal the regime's strength (Huang 2015). Although propaganda does not always work fully in the way dictators might hope (Bleck and Michelitch 2017), its record of past success explains why aspiring autocrats turn to it as a tool.

1.2   Strategies of Information Control

Controlling the flow of information for political purposes involves two components. The first is censorship: the suppression of information by those in power. The second is propaganda: the dissemination of messaging intended to persuade. The intention behind both censorship and propaganda is important. Both are aimed at convincing the audience to adopt a particular viewpoint in the interest of the propagandist or censor. Propaganda generally

implies messaging intended not only to persuade, but also to mislead. Censorship implies not merely not spreading information but also attempting to prevent people from learning the information.

Censorship and propaganda represent essentially two sides of the same coin. Drawing a conceptual distinction between them is often difficult and not always necessary. Effective censorship is often achieved through propaganda. In China, for example, a common tactic for suppressing information online is to bury it in other content (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017; Roberts 2018). Pro-government trolls in Russia similarly may be more effective at stopping conversations than in spreading pro-regime messaging (Sobolev 2018). These kinds of efforts cannot be clearly defined as either just propaganda or just censorship.

I define censorship as any action intended to reduce the likelihood of the public learning information. Censorship can be achieved through efforts to limit access to independent media. It can also be achieved through state-controlled news outlets intentionally not reporting on certain news stories for political purposes. In addition to censorship, state media can engage in other forms of distortion, from slanted coverage to outright lies, in order to manipulate the audience's understanding of current events.

Authoritarian regimes differ in the approaches they use to control the flow of information and the kinds of propaganda and censorship strategies they use. North Korea represents perhaps the most extreme end of totalitarian information control in the modern world, attempting to cut off its population entirely from information from outside the country's borders and feeding the public an information diet of extremely distorted propaganda. A somewhat less extreme information control approach is that of China. The Chinese government has developed an extensive censorship apparatus, which includes the "great firewall" that blocks access to numerous news outlets and social media platforms and an army of censors who police websites and take down content the state deems objectionable. Of particular concern to the Chinese government is information with collective action potential (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). In light of this extensive censorship system alongside China's rapid

economic development, China has developed essentially its own internet with its own social media platforms.

Russia has its own model of information control. Its approach has evolved substantially over the last few decades. In the early part of his tenure, Putin prioritized dominating television specifically. The internet, however, was largely free from government control. In the first three decades of post-Soviet Russia's history, explicit censorship was relatively limited. Instead, the Kremlin's approach to information management relied on a combination of more subtle tactics of information suppression in combination with state-controlled media, as will be discussed in greater detail.

1.3   The Limits of Audience Belief

While leaders may have a strong interest in using propaganda and censorship to manipulate public opinion and political behavior, their success depends on having an audience. Existing models of propaganda often assume audience disengagement from or disbelief in propaganda if the bias becomes too extreme and therefore the informational content falls too low (Besley and Prat 2006; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014). These models suggest that there is some true state of the world representing the government's performance. Audiences want to know this true value while the state wants the media to distort its reporting to suggest performance is better than it is. Other models of propaganda examine how audiences evaluate the plausibility of information reported by news sources. Audiences are generally assumed to rely on their prior beliefs or their direct observations to assess the credibility of news outlets (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Rozenas, Stukal, and Syunyaev 2018). When news outlets report information that is more consistent either with audience priors or with observable signals that might emerge ex-post, audiences tend to trust those news outlets more. Taken together, this literature suggests that audience incredulity places an inherent constraint on propagandists. If people know they are being deceived, propaganda should not work.

Can propaganda ever work if people know that media is biased? Drawing on evidence from a series of focus groups, Mickiewicz (2008) suggests that Russians are aware of state news outlets' lack of objectivity. While they generally believe that most of the facts reported by state news outlets are true, they nonetheless recognize that they may be presented with some bias. They also perceive it as the news consumer's responsibility to "read between the lines" when consuming media to extract useful information in light of bias. This suggests that audiences will not necessarily turn off the news when it becomes overly biased, but they may be somewhat more nuanced in their processing of information and updating of their own beliefs in light of expected bias.

1.4   The Power of Popular Propaganda

To understand how Russia's approach to information control can work, it is important to consider the motivations and preferences of potential news consumers. I suggest that part of why the Kremlin's approach to information management seems somewhat successful is that the state has facilitated the creation of a propaganda product that many in the population genuinely like. State-controlled television offers its audience a sufficient amount of information, entertainment, and emotional gratification to hold their interest. While recognizing that state news outlets are biased to some degree, most news consumers nonetheless trust state news outlets to report reliable information, at least most of the time. Even though alternative sources of information may be relatively easy to access, for most ordinary news consumers, state-controlled sources are sufficient to satisfy their needs.

Having a state media product that many people genuinely like or, at least, find sufficiently good and useful has allowed the Kremlin to control the flow of information and spread pro-regime propaganda even in the absence of the kind of extensive censorship apparatus seen in China. Compared to China, Russia's model of authoritarian governance relies on relatively democratic-looking institutions. In its approach to managing information, it has

similarly ostensibly protected press freedom while at the same time subverting independent media's influence. Popular propaganda is a key component of this approach. While allowing independent media to operate gives the regime some legitimacy (and potentially access to some useful information), creating a popular state media product can minimize independent media's audience. Moreover, if the state media is sufficiently useful or entertaining, people are less likely to simply turn it off. This allows the state to influence public opinion without having to invest in an extensive censorship system and without having to fully reveal its dictatorial nature.

Not everyone in Russia relies exclusively on state media. Independent news outlets do have an audience. Even as access to independent media has gotten more difficult, there are still those expending the effort to pursue alternative sources of information. However, this independent news audience has always been relatively small. Moreover, even many of those who do seek out independent news sources still sometimes watch state television.

How do Russians choose where they get their news and why do so many rely on biased state controlled sources? To answer these questions requires a careful examination of the preferences and beliefs of Russian news consumers and how these interact with the media landscape. The reasons that people choose to use or not use a given news source are complex. To understand these choices, it is necessary to consider what motivates people to follow the news, how different news sources can fulfill various needs and desires, and what structural barriers may limit choices.

1.5   The Costs and Benefits of News Consumption

People may be motivated to follow the news for a variety of reasons. The choices that people make about how much to pay attention to the news and how to choose among sources can be understood using an "instrumental utility" framework in which the benefits of a given instance of news consumption are traded off against the costs (C. Atkin 1973). There exists a

long literature on the "uses and gratifications" of media consumption that seeks to delineate all the ways that people use media consumption as a way of fulfilling a variety of needs (Katz, Haas, and Gurevitch 1973; Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973; Rubin 1983). These needs may include practical information for the purposes of decision-making, diversion and entertainment, affirmation and emotional gratification, and social integration. These benefits of news consumption must be traded off against the various costs associated with media consumption.

The most basic motivation for watching, reading or listening to the news is the pursuit of information. Knowledge of current events might have practical benefits if it is pertinent to an upcoming decision, such as how to commute to work on a given day or how much to invest into something. It may be important to stay up-to-date on local events such as natural disasters that might directly affect one's well-being. In democratic countries, one practical reason for following political news is that it might help people to decide how to vote in elections (Dahl 1989). Citizens can keep track of incumbent performance, gain greater exposure to the backgrounds and platforms of different candidates, and learn about various policies on the ballot. However, given the unlikelihood of being pivotal in an election or having meaningful influence over public affairs more broadly, many individuals may opt to remain rationally ignorant (Downs 1957; Hamilton 2004). In an increasingly authoritarian country such as Russia, where political efficacy among many is understandably low, people may feel even less compelled to stay up-to-date on the news for the purposes of voting. That said, for some people who perhaps feel a sense of civic duty to make optimal decisions on election day, knowledge of current events can be beneficial in making these decisions (Hamilton 2004).

In addition to useful information, news consumption can also have psychological effects on audiences. News may be a source of entertainment, offering audiences diversion and amusement (Vorderer 2001; Baum 2002; Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld 2004; Reinemann et al. 2011). Additionally, people may value the emotional gratification that news consump-

tion provides. They may experience a positive feeling of validation when they encounter information confirming their beliefs or suspicions (Hart et al. 2009). They may approach information with the goal not of learning the truth, but instead to better position themselves to defend their beliefs (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989; Kunda 1990). Some theories suggest that the defense motivation is especially strong when beliefs seem under threat.

A third motivation for following the news is the social benefit. Current events may be a frequent topic of conversation, and people may feel an obligation to have some understanding of what is happening to participate in such dialogues. C. K. Atkin (1972) describes the "anticipated usefulness of information for future informal interactions" as "communicatory utility." Awareness of current events may increase an individual's social prestige (Berelson 1949; Merton 1949; Wright 1960). The idea of communicatory utility can be extended to a broad range of actions in which it might be useful to have the same information as others. Mass media can serve as a powerful coordination device in its ability to create common knowledge (Chwe 2003). For example, when news outlets report on a government failure, this can serve as a useful accountability device not only because each individual viewer learns about this failure, but also they are aware that everyone else tuning in has learned this as well. While an individual viewer would likely have little capacity to act on this knowledge, their ability to respond seems significantly greater when they know that others have the same knowledge and may also respond.

These benefits of news consumption must be traded off against the costs. Of course, news consumers generally want to avoid or minimize any subscription fees required to access the news. Non-pecuniary costs matter as well. There are opportunity costs associated with the time required to follow the news. Temporal costs increase significantly when people have to search for and evaluate new sources. They are also increasing in the amount of advertising people have to watch. News consumption can also have negative psychological effects. In his theory of cognitive dissonance, Festinger (1957) suggests that people experience discomfort when their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are discordant with each other. Building on

Festinger's theory, Aronson (1968), argued that dissonance is particularly uncomfortable when beliefs are associated with one's sense of self. Individuals want to feel that they are competent, moral, aware, right, and good. They experience particular discomfort if these core beliefs about themselves are challenged. Just as news consumption can offer audiences positive feelings of validation, so too can it cause psychological distress when information challenges one's beliefs, undermines self-esteem, or threatens deeply held values.

Audience decisions about news consumption can be understood as maximizing the various benefits described and minimizing the costs. When news consumption is driven by information-seeking for the purposes of making a decision, a primary concern is the information's truthfulness and relevance. The informational value of news increases in its accuracy, clarity, and comprehensiveness. Information seekers want news that they can trust to reflect the reality of a given news event.

The psychological costs and benefits of media consumption yield a different set of preferences. Dissonance can be minimized and positive psychological effects can be maximized when news content confirms audience beliefs, bolsters self-esteem, and offers emotional gratification. That people tend to gravitate toward sources consistent with or supportive of their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes is well established in the literature on selective exposure (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Klapper 1960; Chaffee et al. 2001; Morris 2005; Fischer et al. 2005; Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas 2005; Kim 2007; Stroud 2008; Hollander 2008; Iyengar et al. 2008; Hart et al. 2009; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Valentino et al. 2009; Stroud 2010; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2011; Metzger, Hartsell, and Flanagin 2015; Stroud 2017). As Lipset et al. (1954) write, "most people expose themselves, most of the time, to the kind of propaganda with which they agree to begin with." Additionally, audiences may like news content they find entertaining and that encourages positive emotions (Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld 2004; Bartsch et al. 2006).

Social considerations depend on networks and beliefs about how others will engage with media. News sources and news content consumed by others within one's social network will

have greater communicatory utility. A given news story may be seen as relevant if it is likely to be a topic of conversation, even if it has no bearing on the individual news consumer's decision-making.

The desire to minimize material and temporal costs compels audiences toward sources that are inexpensive and readily available. As with other products, people may be especially inclined toward news sources that are free as opposed to arbitrarily cheap (Shampanier, Mazar, and Ariely 2007). To reduce the cognitive effort required to seek out and evaluate new news sources, people may engage in "satisficing" (Simon 1956)—sticking with the first source that comes along that seems sufficiently good rather than expending significant effort searching for sources that are optimal (Case and Given 2016). News consumption can therefore easily become habitual. When individuals do decide to seek out new sources, they can opt for the least cognitively-intensive means of evaluating those sources. Reputation among peers and consistency with priors might be relatively easy to assess compared to more thoroughly investigating a news source's informativeness. When choosing sources online, people may rely on news feeds and featured stories to determine what content they read as a means of reducing the effort required to search for stories. Even small amounts of "friction" encountered in the process of accessing news may deter many potential consumers (Roberts 2018). Situational determinants can play an important role in driving news choices (Barwise, Ehrenberg, and Goodhardt 1982; Webster and Wakshlag 1983; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, and Meurs 2011; Taneja and Viswanathan 2014). A news program that has the lowest access costs may be the television program that appears immediately following one's favorite sitcom (LoSciuto 1972).

News consumers aggregate all of these preferences together as they navigate the media landscape. No source is likely to be optimal for serving all of their needs and desires. They may have to prioritize. Importantly, news consumers are limited in their ability to assess every possible news outlet. This is due not only to their limited bandwidth but also to lack of information. As they choose among sources, they have to make judgments based on what

they observe and what they believe about the options available to them.

1.6   How Russian News Consumers Choose Sources

Distilling this broad literature on news consumption choices, I focus on three broad factors that shape how people navigate the media landscape and consume information about the social and political world. These factors derive from what consumers want, what consumers know, and what options are available. In the chapters of this dissertation, I examine in more detail how these factors compel Russian news audiences toward various sources.

a) Accessibility

News consumers gravitate toward those sources that are most accessible. These are sources that people readily encounter as they go about their days. Sources that are available for free are more accessible than those that charge a subscription fee. In Russia, state-controlled sources are easier to access than alternatives. In Chapter 2, I describe Russia's media landscape and give a short overview of the history of the state's management of information. In addition to providing relevant background for the rest of the dissertation, this chapter reveals how the state has established dominance over television and marginalized independent news outlets in order to retain this accessibility advantage. At the same time, it also shows that limiting the accessibility of alternative information, alone, has not historically been a sufficient strategy for persuading the public with propaganda.

b) Beliefs about the usefulness and reliability of sources

The beliefs that people have about various news sources can play an important role in their choices. In trying to evaluate the informational value of news, audiences often have to rely on their beliefs about the trustworthiness and reliability of sources, given their inability to observe the process of news outlets gathering, processing, and transmitting information. In Chapter 3, I analyze these beliefs in the Russia case. I draw on evidence from several surveys to examine how people perceive state and independent news outlets. I show that

many state consumers believe that state sources have some biases and distortions. However, they tend to trust state media more than independent alternatives. State and independent news consumers also differ in the beliefs they rely on to explain their news consumption choices. Independent news consumers attribute preferences to accountability and concerns about bias while state news consumers focus on sources' information access.

c) Content

The final factor influencing news source choices is the content that news outlets produce. If news consumers like the content that a news outlet produces—because it is interesting, relevant, affirming, emotionally engaging or seems important—they will consume it more often. On the other hand, if a news outlet is ignoring news stories that people care about, people may seek out the news elsewhere. In Chapters 4 and 5, I examine how the news products produced by state and independent media outlets in Russia align with viewer content preferences. I show that what state news outlets report and what they ignore may be more consistent with viewer preferences than might be expected. Many consumers of state news like state news reporting and do not place an especially high value on the kinds of information state news outlets suppress. In Chapter 4, I examine attitudes toward censorship. Drawing on evidence from a nationally representative survey, I find that most news consumers in Russia do not have a deep ideological objection to censorship. Their attitudes toward the suppression of information are contextual. When state news outlets suppress information regarding political dissent, this does not necessarily deter many in the audience. In Chapter 5, I examine how people evaluate and compare state and independent news content in the absence of accessibility differences and source information. I find that state news consumers still like state news content and prefer it to independent media even in a blind taste test.

The results from this dissertation provide insight into how the state was able to achieve its position of dominance within Russia's information sphere. It reveals the extent to which state news outlets have succeeded in creating a news product that people genuinely like. It

also examines when and why people are willing to tolerate a certain degree of distortion in the news they consume. Because state news reporting satisfies most consumers' needs, the state was able to dominate the airwaves for many years, even while tolerating some independent media. This has given the Kremlin a powerful tool to shape how Russians perceive the social and political world.

CHAPTER 2

Russia's Media Landscape

Russia's media landscape has evolved over time, but with the state always acting as a major player in the provision of information. This chapter reviews this history. In the early Soviet period, strict censorship policies tightly restricted the public's access to any information except that approved by the Communist Party. Mass media became a tool for inculcating the public with Communist ideology and loyalty to the regime. In the later Soviet period, the state's approach to information control shifted toward some degree of greater openness and the development of propaganda more suited to audience preferences. In the post-Soviet period, Russia at first experienced some degree of press freedom, with the emergence of several independent news outlets. Over the course of President Putin's tenure, however, the Kremlin has cracked down on independent news outlets whose coverage is seen as overly critical. As of 2021, state pressure had made independent journalism in Russia more difficult but not impossible. News consumers still had choices, but state media had become the most convenient choice.

The historical overview in this chapter reveals how the state has used various tools to limit the public's access to information, ranging from explicit censorship policies to more subtle efforts to marginalize independent media. It also discusses how the state has used media to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda throughout recent history, and the various strategies used to manage the problem of audience interest over time. State media outlets in the Soviet era learned that propaganda that was overly didactic, boring, or insufficiently informative proved to be less effective at drawing in and persuading the public than the state might

have hoped. The lessons learned from this period remain relevant to the Kremlin's present approach to propaganda and information control.

2.1 The Soviet Era

2.1.1 Propaganda and information control

Control over information was a central component of the Communist Party's grip on power in the Soviet Union. From the outset, the state developed an extensive censorship apparatus that restricted access to any information deemed counter-revolutionary or a threat to the regime's power. Before the Bolsheviks came to power, Vladimir Lenin had already adopted a hostile position toward the idea of press freedom. This hostility developed in the wake of the "July Days" of 1917, during which the Bolshevik newspaper Pravda was censored by the provisional government, and, according to Lenin, the "bourgeois" press propagated a series of lies about the Bolsheviks (Resis 1977). Lenin wrote, "The proletariat will never resort to slander. They will close down the bourgeoisie's newspaper after openly declaring by law, by government decree, that capitalists and their defenders are enemies of the people" (in McNair 1991). He rejected the value of the free exchange of ideas. Following the October Revolution, one of the Bolsheviks' first acts was to ban the bourgeois and non-Bolshevik socialist press. Within two days of taking power, the Bolsheviks implemented a Decree on the Press that shut down counterrevolutionary newspapers. Although presented as ostensibly a temporary measure justified by the ongoing war, the law was never really rescinded (Resis 1977; Skillen 2017). These restrictions only intensified under Lenin's successor, when information flows were controlled almost entirely by Joseph Stalin and his aids (Medvedev et al. 1971).

Alongside bans on the non-communist press and broad censorship policies was a substantial propaganda effort aimed at not only persuading the public of their leaders' competence but also instilling a great reverence for the state and the Marxist-Leninist ideology that permeated it. Lenin saw the newspaper as a "collective propagandist," "collective agitator,"

and "collective organizer" (Resis 1977). He rejected the notion that the press should or could ever be impartial, instead advocating that *partiinost* (variously translated as partisanship, party loyalty, or partiality) was the most important principle of Soviet journalism (McNair 1991). All cultural production was necessarily subjective and ideological.[1] In Lenin's view, press freedom as it was understood in liberal democracies was a false freedom due to the social conditions, including class distinctions, in which journalism was produced (McNair 1991). Instead, the Soviet press was envisioned as subservient to the Marxist-Leninist mission, and therefore to the Party. By 1919, the Bolsheviks controlled essentially all media within the country (McNair 1991).

Following Lenin's death, the state's control over information continued to evolve. When Stalin came to power, he used his control over information not only to promote the party and Marxist-Leninist ideology but also to strengthen his own position. While Lenin had insisted on the values of truthfulness and openness alongside "partiinost," under Stalin, these principles were ignored. Criticism of party apparatchiks was not tolerated (Medvedev et al. 1971). Media became a tool for constructing a personality cult around Stalin, in addition to explaining the state's policies and justifying their severity (McNair 1991).

2.1.2 The Thaw

In the Khrushchev era, modest liberalization of the media was an important component of the post-Stalin "thaw." Khrushchev called for some degree of reform aimed at not only dismantling the personality cult but also improving the quality of state media content. However, he still saw information control as critical to the state's achieving its objectives, describing the press as "our chief ideological weapon" (quoted in Inkeles 1968). Even after Stalin, all media, was tightly controlled by the state and seen, first and foremost, as a tool for the Party. For Inkeles (1968), the changes to the media landscape following Stalin's death were

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1. "Partiinost" is usually translated as "partisanship" or "party loyalty." McNair (1991) translates it as "partiality." *"Ideonost"* (ideology) was also central to the purpose of state propaganda.

minimal: "To revisit the Soviet press, radio, and cinema, is to renew acquaintance with thoroughly familiar terrain. The old features are very much in evidence. Some are worn smooth with wear; perhaps here and there a new stone has been turned up, but basically the structure remains unchanged, the landscape as unvarying, as dull and arid as ever."

Mickiewicz (1997) cites three central tenets of the Soviet model: "centralization of media organs and personnel, Communist Party control of information, and saturation." As new technologies emerged and the media landscape evolved, so too did the Soviet approach to information management. However, this central role of the state and the party in media persisted.

2.1.3 The Emergence of Television

In the later Soviet period, television would emerge as a primary information and entertainment source for most Russians. The television set became a central fixture of a Soviet household's living room, "a symbol of the new Soviet lifestyle" (Bönker 2020). In the 1950s and early 1960s, television sets were expensive for a lot of Soviet families and not always easy to obtain. They were an object of consumer desire for many. A household's purchase of its first television set was a major event for many families (Bönker 2020). The popularity of television skyrocketed in late 1960s and early 1970s. Between 1960 and 1975, the number of television sets jumped from 4.8 million to over 55 million. By 1974, 67 percent of Russian households had a television set at home (Mickiewicz 1981). From 1960 to 1986, the percent of the population that could watch television grew from 5 percent to 93 percent (Mickiewicz 1988). Television emerged as the most popular leisure activity. Although fewer people outside of major cities were able to afford a television set, those that were able to do so tended to spend an especially large amount of time watching television, given the lack of alternative leisure activities (Bönker 2020).

From the perspective of state propagandists, television was revolutionary. It allowed for broadcasting a single unified message from Moscow that could simultaneously reach almost

every corner of the Soviet Union's expanse at rapid speed. While newspapers had reached well-educated urbanites, television became popular among housewives, retirees, those without a college degree, and those away from major cities (Mickiewicz 1981). State propaganda could now easily reach the masses. The emergence of television as a tool for propaganda was particularly expedient in light of economic challenges the Soviet Union faced. Bönker (2020) writes, "Soviet television opened a new site of communication, sociocultural negotiations, and societal self-observation not only from the perspective of the regime but also for the audience. It did so because the failure to implement economic reforms during the Khrushchev period urged the regime to search for other strategies of mobilizing the population to win people's acceptance and support." In the context of the Cold War, television provided opportunities for cultural integration and the celebration of the Soviet way of life (Bönker 2020). However, there were still lessons to be learned about how the Kremlin could most effectively exploit this new tool. In particular, the state had to learn how to balance its objective of educating the masses about Soviet values with the imperatives of audience demand.

2.1.4   Engaging the Audience

State media always had to contend with the challenge of maintaining audience interest while still using the media as a tool for spreading propaganda. As Inkeles (1968) describes, "The most serious weakness of the Soviet press and radio continues to lie in its being unfree, a mere agent of government policy rather than a medium for conveying news and expressing opinion. This forces it of necessity to be tendentious, repetitive, arid, and often palpably insincere and untrue." Television, to some degree, offered new opportunities for engaging audiences. However, it took some time to learn how to exploit this new technology.

The state initially managed audience inattentiveness using a variety of approaches, including ignoring it as if it did not exist, dismissing it as a problem confined to a small and unimportant subset of the population with poor tastes, and incorporating entertainment

content instrumentally to draw audience attention (and keep it away from any foreign media) (Evans 2016). As early as the 1940s, Central Television had begun engaging in minimal efforts at audience research, including holding meetings with viewers. These efforts accelerated under Khrushchev. However, no effort was made at drawing a representative sample of viewers to these meetings and the meetings often focused more on educating viewers about television programming rather than allowing television producers to learn about audience preferences (Evans 2016). Letters from viewers responding to television content also served as a useful metric for gauging audience size and interest. In 1965, a state report urged attentiveness to the problem of audience engagement:

> "For a long time a 'theory of imposition' held sway, and the ability to impose your will was seen as the best quality of an executive. The logic went as follows: if a person does not understand that something is being done in his best interest there's no reason to wait until he reaches that understanding... later he'll get it and thank us for it. This is an extremely primitive and false view...with one quick gesture the TV viewer and radio listener can get out from 'under the influence' of a program that's boring him...He can just turn off the set and go play dominoes..."
> (in Evans 2016).

The ease with which audiences could turn television and radio off and redirect their attention elsewhere posed a challenge to the state's ability to use it as a persuasive tool. In response, the state began studying audience preferences more systematically using surveys. The consistent finding from these surveys was that demand for more entertainment content was high, and interest in the more serious politically oriented content was low (Evans 2016).

One clear lesson that emerged was that the didactic, direct propaganda programs, such as lectures aimed at educating the public about politics or philosophy, were especially ineffective at satisfying audiences. The 1965 Krokodil cartoon in Figure 1 captures the public sentiment toward these notably boring programs. The cartoon suggests an individual waiting to be

woken up when the lecture ended and, perhaps, more entertaining programming would start. While hockey games and series drew large audiences and, to some extent, served the state's interest in both making life more enjoyable and affirming Soviet culture, it was more difficult to engage audiences in more serious programming (Bönker 2020). Among the serious political content, news programming proved to be much more palatable than lectures and the state shifted its focus toward more news programming at the expense of direct propaganda. Still, the early news programs, such as *Television News,* were notoriously slow and dull (Evans 2016).

An additional challenge for state media in managing audience attention was competition from abroad. Surveys from the late 1960s revealed that more than half of respondents were regularly listening to foreign radio broadcasts (Evans 2016). These broadcasts were seen by many as more timely and concrete than Soviet news programming. The slowness of Soviet news programming was due, in part, to the slow process of state censorship (ibid). Although listening to "imperialist" radio was forbidden, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe were popular, especially among highly educated individuals. That said, it was not necessarily the case that those who listened to foreign radio did so at the expense of watching Soviet television. They also did not necessarily believe foreign radio to always be more credible than Soviet media (Bönker 2020). Based on interviews with former Soviet citizens, Bönker (2020) finds that many consumers of foreign radio saw value in hearing multiple perspectives, and did not always have a clear sense of what narrative was the most true. Those with strong ideological commitments to the Communist Party or who were wholly disinterested in politics neglected foreign radio altogether. The threat posed by foreign radio was part of what motivated significant investment in the development of more engaging Soviet television content. Sergei Lapin, head of Soviet radio and television under Brezhnev, wrote, "We should not forget that we no longer have a monopoly on the airwaves, and that if our programs do not satisfy, then listeners can tune in to foreign broadcasts. But on television too we need to be careful that viewer do not turn off their sets, that our programs
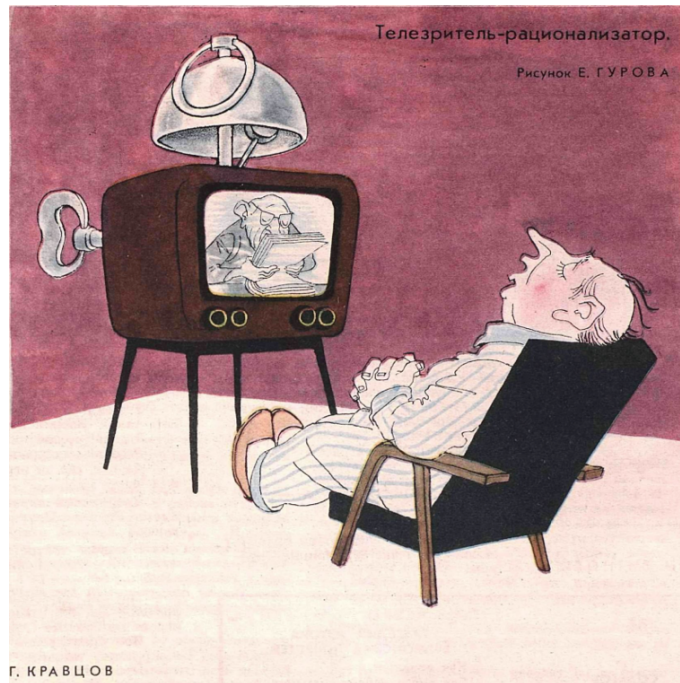
Figure 2.1: "Television viewer-innovator." E Gurov, Krokodil 17 (June 1965). The cartoon captures the soporific qualities of some Soviet television programs, especially the overtly propagandistic didactic content.

not put them to sleep" (Lapin, "Tribuna lieudie truda," Zhurnalist, 1972, in Evans 2016).

The launch of primetime news program *Vremya* in 1968 on Channel 1 was intended to rectify the problem of boring television news. With *Vremya*, state media focused on improving the aesthetics of the program by accelerating the pacing to mimic the style of Western television news broadcasts such as those of the BBC. On the program's launch, the chief editor of Central Television's news desk, Nikolai Biriukov, announced to viewers, "We named this program Time because we want it to be as dynamic, interesting, and saturated as our time" (quoted in Evans 2010). The initial rollout of the new news show featured news clips that were much shorter than audiences were accustomed to, and the coverage moved much more rapidly between subjects. While the goal of these changes was to keep audiences engaged, Evans (2016) suggests that the effect was merely disorienting for viewers and did not make the content as exciting and enticing producers might have hoped. Further changes

were necessary. Despite its initial shortcomings, *Vremya* would remain a central component of state media.

In the Brezhnev era, under Lapin's leadership, a new effort was launched to expand the state's control of information. Censorship and centralization of media expanded (Mickiewicz 1988). Lapin also prioritized making changes to the *Vremya* program in the hopes that it would become the preeminent information source and a new tool for persuasion. Under the new reforms, the goal was for *Vremya* to exceed other information sources, such as newspapers, in its ability to provide comprehensive, timely information (Evans 2016). Reconciling the need to inform, entertain, and persuade was not easy, however. One of Lapin's major initiatives was to focus much of the news content on human interest stories that would portray an idealized vision of the Soviet worker in a way that would connect with audiences on an emotional level (Evans 2016). The problem was that this content still did not provide the kind of information about current events that audiences wanted (ibid). In the coverage of domestic news, it was hard to keep audiences engaged, given the lack of conflict (ibid). The second shift was greater attention to foreign news, which Lapin saw as essential for countering foreign radio. While domestic news was relatively dull, foreign news provided opportunities for dynamic coverage with the kind of tensions and conflict that could keep audiences engaged (ibid). It also provided opportunities for experimenting with the use of expert commentary analysis by journalists, which was politically infeasible with domestic news (ibid). In the 1980s, when allowances became greater, Evans suggests that state media drew on the lessons learned from its successful foreign news coverage in the ways that it started covering domestic affairs.

Despite some of the limitations in programming and the lack of dynamism in the coverage of domestic affairs, state television news programming still drew large audiences. *Vremya* increased its audience share by 20 percent from 1979 to 1984 (Mickiewicz 1988). By 1984, 80 percent of adults were regularly tuning in to state news programs (ibid). These programs had become a primary tool for the state's dominance of information.

2.1.5   The Opening of the Soviet Information Space

Some of the most dramatic changes to the Soviet information space occurred in the mid to late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev implemented one of his signature reform policies, glasnost. Gorbachev and the politburo recognized that the Soviet economic and political system, including media and control over the information space, needed reform. This reform was not intended as a path toward liberal democracy but rather as a means of improving the Soviet system, from which many in the public felt alienated. "Wide-ranging, up-to-date, frank information is a testimony of trust in people, respect for their reason, feelings and capacity to work things out for themselves. Glasnost in the work of party and state organs is an effective means of struggling against bureaucratic distortions," Gorbachev said in a 1984 speech (in Skillen 2017). Glasnost opened the door to a certain degree of critical coverage in the news media that had previously been forbidden. Surveys had shown high levels of demand for news media that represented diverse perspectives and access to foreign news coverage (Mickiewicz 1988). When Gorbachev rose to power, the state media apparatus began to respond, albeit partially, to this demand. Debates on policy issues began airing on television. Some effort was made to increase credibility by allowing for some criticism.

Although the beginning of Gorbachev's tenure as general secretary saw some partial loosening of restrictions on information, the extent of openness and transparency was still quite limited. The efforts the state took to suppress information about the explosion at Chernobyl in 1986 were a clear example of these limits. News on the accident did not appear on television for three days and, even then, the story was brief and buried amidst more positive news. This censorship approach slowly evolved over the course of the next several months, however, with more extensive coverage of the destruction the explosion had caused appearing in newspapers and on state television. Attempts at strict limits on information had generated backlash both at home and abroad and the public began learning about what had happened from foreign news sources. This, perhaps, prompted the eventual change in approach toward one of greater openness (Jones and Woodbury 1986). According to McNair

(1991) the failure of the Soviet media in responding to the Chernobyl disaster in a timely and open fashion accelerated the already declining authority of Soviet media and precipitated a much more rapid and transformative opening of the Soviet information space in the years leading up to the Soviet Union's collapse.

2.1.6 Soviet Media's Present Significance

The history of information control and propaganda during the Soviet era provides context for understanding both the present media landscape and the post-Soviet news consumer. It reveals the long history of state control over media and the familiarity of the Russian news consumer with state-controlled television in particular. At the same time, this history reveals the challenges a state faces in using information control to manipulate public opinion. Propaganda could only work if the public chose to pay attention to it. While television had the potential to revolutionize propaganda, it was easy for people to turn off. This necessitated creating content that would hold audience attention. Stylistic changes to presentation and pacing as well as instrumental usage of entertainment content represented attempts to satisfy audience demand without having to open up the information space. The state media apparatus also shifted its attention to news media rather than the older, didactic programming, which proved to be a more effective and popular tool for peddling propaganda. Older programs had aimed to educate the public about Communist ideology and values but, instead, seemed to put people to sleep. These improvements to the state media's product, however, proved eventually insufficient to satisfy the demands of audiences. When competition from foreign news rendered it impossible to maintain a monopoly on information and when the public perceived a great personal need for full and accurate information, as was the case in the wake of Chernobyl, the Soviet system of information management began to collapse.

2.2 The Post-Soviet Era: From Freedom of the Press to State Capture

In the wake of the Soviet Union's disintegration, Russia enjoyed a period of relative press freedom and transparency. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press were enshrined in the 1993 Russian constitution. Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, declared in 1993, "Freedom comes from a free press; that's not an exaggeration, the freedom of our society depends on it" (in Skillen 2017). In 1993, Media Most, headed by Vladimir Gusinsky, emerged as the first major independent company in Russia, and its television channel NTV provided the state channels with real competition for audiences for the first time. In addition to offering audiences, even beyond Moscow, access to independent information, "NTV also achieved a new level of post-Soviet professionalism, quality, and style that its rival channels, ORT (Channel 1), and RTR (Channel 2) lacked," according to Lipman and McFaul (2001). Through Media Most, Gusinsky additionally helped to launch independent radio station Ekho Moskvy and newspaper Segodnya. Meanwhile, while the state still retained full control of Channel 2 and majority control of Channel 1, another oligarch, Boris Berezovsky, had purchased a stake in Channel 1 and had, more or less, taken control of the channel.[2] It continued to broadcast many of the channel's Soviet era programs, including *Vremya*.

The change to Russia's media landscape with the advent of independent television became especially clear during the First Chechen War. NTV's reporters broadcast the brutality and destruction wrought by the war into viewers' living rooms. The surprising ineptness of Russia's military was also on display. Lipman and McFaul (2001) attribute the unpopularity of the war in part to NTV's coverage of it. With Yeltsin's reelection campaign looming, the domestic political consequences of public opinion on the war were a serious concern for the administration.

While NTV's coverage of the First Chechen war was relatively critical—far more critical

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2. From 1995 to 2002, Channel 1 was known as ORT.

than what Russian television news audiences had ever seen—the way the independent news network opted to depict the Yeltsin administration changed significantly in the lead-up to the 1996 presidential election. Media companies recognized that they and Yeltsin shared a common enemy: the most viable competitor for Yeltsin was the Communists, who also posed a threat both to press freedom and to the oligarchs who controlled media companies. Recognizing this threat, NTV not only temporarily ended its critical coverage but also reported on the campaign with a strong pro-Yeltsin bias, as the state channels did. The sheer volume of coverage that Yeltsin received compared to Communist candidate Zyuganov compelled the Communists to complain to the Central Election Commission, but the charge was disallowed (Mickiewicz 1997). This biased coverage may have played a significant role in the evolution of public opinion in Yeltsin's favor. Despite his unpopularity in the months prior to the election, he managed to secure a second term.

NTV's strong pro-Yeltsin bias and the lack of critical coverage ended quickly after the election. Lipman and McFaul (2001) attribute this reversion to critical coverage, in part, to Gusinsky's personal vendetta against Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais. In the sale of telecommunications company, Svyazinvest, which Gusinsky hoped to acquire, Chubais changed the privatization rules away from the corrupt system established under the loans-for-shares program, instead offering the company to the highest bidder. This rule change prevented Gusinsky from acquiring the company.

When the Second Chechen War began in 1999, NTV, again, highlighted the brutality wrought by the Russian military. The Kremlin accused the channel of bias. The channel earned particular scorn from Vladimir Putin, who called the network unpatriotic. Putin's hostility toward NTV grew during the 1999 and 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections. In the 1999 Duma elections, newly formed party Unity, which was aligned with Putin, faced Yevgeny Primakov and Yury Luzkhov's newly created bloc Fatherland-All Russia. While news anchor Sergey Dorenko at ORT was heavily biased in his coverage of the election in Putin's favor (for example, by trying to highlight Primakov's age), NTV's reporting

was skewed in the opposite direction (Treisman 2011; Skillen 2017). A later study of the parliamentary election provides some evidence that having access to NTV persuaded some voters away from Unity and to opposition parties (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011). In the 2000 presidential election a few months later, ORT threw its support behind Putin, offering him far more airtime while at the same time demonizing Yavlinsky, one of several candidates running against him (Skillen 2017). According to Skillen, NTV was not biased in its coverage to favor Yavlisnky, although ORT suggested as such. NTV actually allotted more time to Putin (29 percent) than to Yavlinsky (14 percent).

Putin's animosity toward Gusinsky and NTV would lead to the oligarch and the channel's downfall shortly after Putin became president. As Hoffman (2011) described, "In Putin's world, Gusinsky was a marked man." The new president's public commitment to taking down oligarchs perhaps provided a useful pretense for acting on his deep hostility toward independent news media. In 1996, state-owned gas giant Gazprom had bought a 30 percent stake in NTV. Gazprom also agreed to guarantee a loan for Media Most and paid it when Gusinsky was unable to do so (Hoffman 2011). Gusinsky also had other significant debts to Gazprom. In 2000, as Putin's presidency started, Gusinsky quickly became a target. First, his offices were raided by armed, masked men who said they were tax police. Then, Gazprom demanded that Gusinsky repay Media Most's debt in cash, as opposed to equity as had been planned. This was something Gusinsky could not do. Shortly after Gusinsky made a statement criticizing Putin and his treatment of the free press, he was arrested on fraud charges. While awaiting trial, Gusinsky was offered a deal: sell Media Most and NTV to Gazprom for $300 million and have the charges against him dropped, his debts forgiven, and the ability to leave the country (Hoffman 2011). Gusinsky accepted the deal and fled the country. Regretting the deal, he tried, unsuccessfully, to renegotiate. In April, 2001, Gazprom seized control of NTV's headquarters. Editors and reporters quit en masse (Glasser and Baker 2001).

The story of NTV reveals the Kremlin's new strategy for managing the flow of information

under its new leader. Despite vague statements in support of free speech, Putin would not tolerate a major news outlet that threatened the state's control over the narrative, particularly with respect to an issue as politically sensitive as Chechnya. His efforts at information control were especially focused on television, as he recognized its particular power over Russian audiences. However, the efforts to gain control of information did not rely on explicit censorship laws. Instead, the state's approach to media capture involved legal and financial harassment alongside cooptation. Although there were protests at the time in support of independent NTV, this method of information control may have been more palatable than alternative, more explicit, approaches.

Between 2000 and 2004, all of the major television networks fell under Kremlin control and began to toe the Kremlin's editorial line. In 2000, Berezovsky, the head of ORT/Channel 1, invited the journalists who had resigned from NTV to come work at his other channel, TV6. By this time, Berezovsky had fled Russia after falling out with the Kremlin and was managing his businesses from abroad. TV6 then became a Kremlin target. In 2001, pension fund Lukoil-Garant, which had a 15 percent stake in TV6, used its position to force TV6 into bankruptcy. A court found in Lukoil's favor, and forced TV6 to be liquidated in 2002 (Whalen 2002). Lukoil-Garant's action was hard to justify from a business perspective, and was almost certainly motivated by politics. Meanwhile, despite its takeover by Gazprom, for a time, NTV still engaged in some critical coverage. In 2002, when the Dubrovka Theater was seized by Chechen terrorists, the coverage on NTV notably differed from that of the two main state networks, and was far more critical. This earned the ire of the Kremlin, and the management at NTV was replaced a few months later. By the time of the Beslan hostage crisis in 2004, NTV had fully subsumed to Kremlin control and its coverage and distortions closely reflected those of the state channels (Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker 2018).

Over the next few years, new news outlets emerged that offered a counterweight to the main federal television channels. *Dozhd* (TV-Rain) was launched in 2010 as an independent internet and cable television channel. Marketing itself as "the optimistic channel," its target

audience was young and well-educated urbanites (Skillen 2017). Then president Dmitri Medvedev spoke highly of the channel, and even paid a visit to the headquarters for a tour. In 2011 and 2012, Dozhd became especially well-known for its coverage of the large protests that swept across Russia in the wake of elections considered to be rife with fraud and as Medvedev and Putin essentially swapped positions such that Putin could return to the presidency. State television gave little coverage to the protests until they grew so large that they could not be ignored. Dozhd was on the ground with the protesters throughout. With the contrast in protest coverage between state and independent media so stark, people talked about living in "parallel realities" depending on their news consumption (Skillen 2017). NTV, by then functionally like any other state-controlled channel, broadcast a two-part documentary alleging that protesters were being paid by the U.S. State Department.

In 2014, Dozhd's power as an independent voice in a state-dominated media landscape quickly changed. In January, on the 70th anniversary of the Siege of Leningrad, Dozhd conducted a live survey in which it asked respondents whether the Soviet Union should have surrendered Leningrad during the Great Patriotic War in order to save hundreds of thousands of lives. In a country where national identity is deeply tied to the great victories and sacrifices sustained during the second world war, the question was extremely controversial and offensive to many. After intense criticism, the channel removed the poll and issued an apology. Cable and satellite providers quickly dropped the channel, leaving the network in a precarious position. In justifying pulling the channel, cable provider NTV Plus cited the opinion of viewers who were deeply offended by the survey. However, Dozhd's then director-general Mikhail Zygar said he had been privately informed by network operators that pressure to remove the channel had come from the Kremlin (Walker 2014). Dozhd pivoted to becoming an exclusively online channel, providing content on YouTube and its website. The channel lost 90 percent of its viewers.

Several other independent news outlets in Russia were similarly brought to heel under Putin. RBC was a business oriented publication also known for its investigative reporting.

Its publications on the Panama Papers and on Putin's daughter earned the ire of the Kremlin. In 2016, Onexim Group, the majority owner of RBC headed by Mikhail Prokhorov, saw its offices raided by Russian law enforcement (Reiter and Lyrchikova 2017). In 2017, Prokhorov sold a majority stake in the RBC media holding company to Grigory Berezkin's ESN group. The editor-in-chief of RBC left the country and news managers were brought in from a state-owned news agency (Reiter and Lyrchikova 2017). Editors and journalists resigned in protest. In 2020, another business news outlet, Vedomosti, suffered a similar fate when a new Kremlin-aligned editor was brought in and immediately began censoring coverage critical of state-owned oil company Rosneft and prohibiting critical coverage of Putin (Times 2021). Again, journalists and editors who disagreed with the new editorial line resigned in protest. RBC and Vedomosti continue to report on business affairs. While the content does not feature the most extreme pro-Kremlin propaganda that can be found on state television, nonetheless, there is evidence of censorship and alignment with the Kremlin. For example, during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Vedomosti adopted the Kremlin narrative that this was a special military operation with limited aims. It did not describe what was happening as a war or an invasion.

An additional tool for the Kremlin's marginalization of independent media has been the law on foreign agents. When it was originally passed in 2012, the law had become an instrument for sidelining NGOs that received foreign funding. Later, it was expanded and used as a means of targeting independent media. In 2017, in the process of investigating Russia's interference in the 2016 election, the United States designated the Kremlin-controlled English-language news outlet RT a foreign agent. In retaliation, the Kremlin amended its existing foreign agent law to include media outlets receiving any amount of foreign funding. Under the expanded law, U.S. government affiliated news outlets such Radio Svoboda were designated as foreign agents. As a result, they were required to publicize this designation on their websites and in their broadcasts or face fines. In 2019, the law was expanded further such that any news outlets receiving any amount of foreign funding could be designated

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a foreign agent. The expansive new law targeted news outlets, individual journalists, and individual bloggers, including those based abroad and those based in Russia. In the years since the expanded law passed, several prominent independent news outlets have been labeled foreign agents. The selective enforcement of the law has clearly targeted those news outlets which are critical of the Putin regime.

While the foreign agent label could possibly deter some potential news consumers, the most significant consequence is the threat it poses to the designated news outlets' business models. Any news outlet that is labeled a foreign agent must include the label in all caps on every single news article or social media post. The label is long enough that it takes up the entire allotted text space for a tweet on Twitter (news outlets have creatively used images of text to circumvent this problem). Most importantly, the label is a major deterrent to potential advertisers, and therefore poses a threat to the primary revenue stream for most independent news outlets. In June, 2021, VTimes, an independent news outlet formed by editors and journalists that had resigned from Vedomosti, was forced to close shortly after receiving the foreign agent designation. Latvia-based Russian language news outlet Meduza was labeled a foreign agent in April, 2021. Dozhd was labeled a foreign agent several months later.

In spite of the increasingly hostile conditions for independent media in Russia over the course of Putin's tenure, independent journalism, nonetheless continued. To survive, independent news outlets and journalists had to constantly adapt to changing conditions. When Dozhd lost most of its viewers after becoming an online channel it also lost most of it advertising revenue. As a result, it adopted a subscription model. In 2014, Galina Timchenko the editor-in-chief of online newspaper Lenta.ru, was fired shortly after the publication received a warning from Roskomnadzor regarding an interview in the publication with Ukrainian nationalist Andrei Tarasenko. In response, 39 editors and reporters at Lenta.ru resigned. Under Timchenko's leadership, the group launched a new independent news outlet targeting Russian audiences called Meduza. To evade harassment, the publication based its offices in
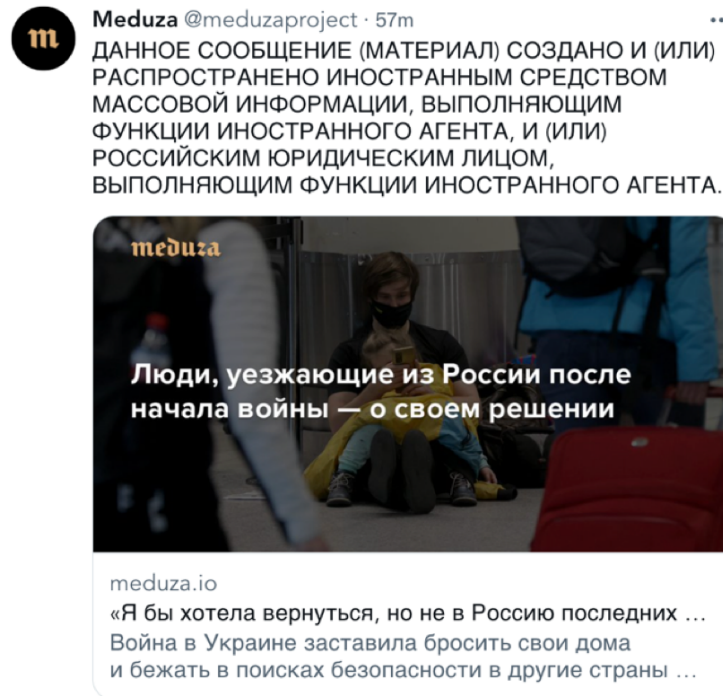
Figure 2.2: An example from Twitter of the text that news outlets designated as foreign agents are required to include in all posts. The text of the required label reads: "This message (material) is created and (or) distributed by a foreign mass media performing the functions of a foreign agent and (or) a Russian legal entity performing the functions of a foreign agent."

Latvia. When Meduza was labelled a foreign agent in 2021 and lost much of its advertising revenue, it launched a campaign to solicit donations in order to stay afloat. While Dozhd, Meduza and a handful of other independent news outlets were able to survive through these kinds of adaptations, the fate of VTimes highlights the precarity of independent media's position.

2.3   Russia's Media Landscape

For many Russians, television remains the primary means of learning about current events and politics. However, its dominance has been declining. In 2015, 85 percent of Russians

cited television as a primary source of news. By 2021, that percentage had fallen to 62 percent (Levada Center 2021. Internet publications have become more significant over the same time period, rising from 21 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2021 (ibid). Social media has also gained in significance. In 2015, 13 percent of Russians listed social media as an important source of news, while in July 2021, it was listed by 37 of people (ibid). These changes in how people are accessing the news have important implications for what news they are able to access. As discussed, television news is all directly or indirectly controlled by the state. Online news outlets, however, are more mixed. State-controlled news outlets, independent news outlets and everything in between can be found online. As of 2021, television and online sources were, by far, the predominant sources of information. Only 9 percent of people listed newspapers, 2 percent listed magazines, and 12 percent listed radio as primary sources of news (ibid). It is worth noting that these other, less popular, types of media also include a mix of state and independent news outlets.

The internet has been essential in providing Russians with relatively easy and affordable access to alternative news sources to that provided by the state. As of 2020, 85 percent of Russians between the ages of 15 and 75 had access to the internet (Melkadze 2022). Importantly, this means that many of the people who got their news from state-controlled television and other state-controlled sources had access to independent news had they chosen to pursue it. Russians, especially young people, are also active users of social media, including Russia-based social networking site VK and US-based sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. As discussed, social networking sites are an important source of news, in addition to entertainment, for many people.

Although the internet provides access to independent news content, that independent content also tends to be somewhat more difficult to find. Many Russian online news consumers find their news through news aggregators such as Yandex News. Yandex always features top news stories on its website. However, because of state pressure, these featured stories are never those by critical news outlets such as Dozhd, Meduza, or Novaya gazeta

but, instead, are either state-controlled sources such as Ria Novosti or independent news outlets aligned with the Kremlin (Soldatov and Borogan 2015; Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker 2018; Kravets and Toepfl 2021). This bias renders it far less likely that users will happen across the independent news content that the Kremlin does not want them to see.

2.4   State Media's Accessibility Advantage

Even as Russia became increasingly authoritarian over the course of Putin's tenure, it continued to ostensibly tolerate media freedom. In the period from 2019-2021, when the data for this dissertation was collected, explicit censorship laws were relatively limited and focused on prohibiting the dissemination of hate speech and extremist content. While these laws could, in some cases, be interpreted broadly as a means of suppressing criticism or blocking opposition materials, these were not the primary tools for marginalizing independent media. The alternative methods of controlling the information environment instead rendered it harder for independent news outlets and journalists to operate without banning them outright and increased the costs to consumers of trying to access independent media. Some of these new costs to consumers were in the form of subscription fees. Most of these costs, however, were in the form of added "friction" in the process of locating and accessing independent news. As Roberts (2018) finds in China, relatively small increase in the effort required to access independent information can be enough to deter many casual information consumers. By far the most significant accessibility advantage in Russia has been the state's dominance over television. Older Russians, in particular, tend to be habitual television consumers both for news and for entertainment. For television viewers, accessing state news is seamless. On the other hand, finding alternative sources of information online requires effort.

Manipulating accessibility has been a useful tool for the Kremlin in controlling the information space. However, as the lessons from the Soviet era make clear, suppression of information, alone, can still be insufficient for molding public opinion in the way the state

would like. Extensive censorship is costly, hard, and unpopular. When audiences place a high value on suppressed information, they will often find ways to access it and will resent efforts to keep the information suppressed. Moreover, even if it is hard for people to find alternatives to state propaganda, they also have the option of turning it off or tuning it out, rendering it less effective as a persuasive tool. Limiting the accessibility of independent information can, therefore, be more effective when combined with other propaganda strategies aimed at holding audience attention.

CHAPTER 3

State Media as a Valued Information Source

State-controlled controlled news outlets in Russia have a strong incentive to be biased in their reporting. These news outlets make no secret of their state affiliation and the perspective they aim to represent. This inclination toward bias would seem to potentially pose a threat to audience trust in state news. Yet state news outlets in Russia are quite popular—far more popular than any independent alternatives. This popularity could suggest that many Russians perceive state news as a valuable source information, despite the potential for bias.

Information reported by news media can have significant implications for audience decision-making on topics ranging from health care to investments. In choosing whether to use a given news source, information-seekers have to consider whether they expect the source to report reliable and useful information. Audience beliefs about news outlets' incentives and capabilities may factor into these judgments. They may also pay attention to the consistency between news outlets' reporting and their own observations.

News outlets' political biases could undermine the quality of the information that they report. Biased news outlets may sometimes report information that is inaccurate, incomplete, or misleading. The extent to which audiences discount news sources based on bias depends on the extent to which they are aware that it exists and the form they expect the bias to take. In addition to bias, the quality of a news outlets' reporting also depends on its access to information. Even a relatively objective news outlet will report low quality information if its reporting capacity is too limited.

In the case of Russia, the close relationship between major news outlets and the state

creates a high potential for bias. However, it may also enhance these news outlets' access to information and resources. News consumers may know, to some degree, that the information reported by state news outlets is subject to some degree of distortion due to political biases. Yet they may still believe the information has some value. Even if a state news outlet suppresses some information or slants its coverage, some audiences may still expect it to report relatively accurate information most of the time. On the other hand, independent news outlets lack many of the material resources of the state channels. Some new consumers may distrust independent and, especially, foreign news outlets based on a belief that these news outlets are also biased. Perhaps the bigger challenge for the independent media, however, may be its perceived lack of reporting capacity and information access compared to the much larger and better connected state channels.

In this chapter, I draw on evidence from two original surveys to examine the extent to which Russians perceive state news outlets as valuable sources of information and the bases of these beliefs. I show that most people recognize, to some extent, the distortions and biases of state media. Nonetheless, they consider these state-controlled news outlets to be relatively useful sources of information on some topics. The results also provide insight into how people judge the reliability and usefulness of information reported by state and independent news outlets. The perceived usefulness of information reported by state news outlets stems primarily from beliefs about the access these news outlets have to information rather than concerns about bias. Additionally, news audiences show relatively higher levels of trust in reporting on topics when they are less likely to encounter information that contradicts it. Interest in reporting by independent news outlets, by contrast, stems from concerns about the biases and lack of accountability of state news outlets.

3.1 The Value of State and Independent News as a Source of Information

One reason to watch or read the news is that information pertaining to current events can be practically useful. Those who are up-to-date on current events may be better positioned to make optimal decisions in response to political, economic, social, and environmental developments (Downs 1957; Nimmo 1990; Hamilton 2004). The usefulness of information for the purposes of decision-making depends on the extent to which it reflects the truth. News consumers have to rely on news outlets to accurately, comprehensively, and clearly convey the most important information about relevant current events. One explanation for the popularity of state news in Russia is that people may value it as a source of useful information. Moreover, they may consider it to be a relatively more valuable source than available alternatives.

H1) Russians consider state news outlets to be a valuable source of information.

How do audiences evaluate the reliability and usefulness of news reporting? Sometimes, they have the opportunity to compare what the news media reports to their own observations of the world (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006). They may perceive information as relatively unreliable if it seems to be clearly inconsistent with what they observe. If news audiences tend to trust information reported in the news unless they have evidence from their observations contradicting it, then there may be substantial variation in the perceived reliability of news depending on the topic. Audiences may tend to perceive the reporting on news topics that are more remote and difficult to observe, such as news related to foreign affairs, as especially reliable. By contrast, they may be especially likely to notice when news reporting is inaccurate or misleading when it relates to topics directly concerning people's lives, such as people's socioeconomic welfare and the domestic economy more generally. Highly sophisticated news consumers might be cognizant of the freedom that state news outlets have to distort their foreign affairs coverage without viewers knowing and, therefore, might discount

foreign affairs coverage. However, this kind of reasoning is likely relatively uncommon.

H2) The perceived credibility of state news reporting will be higher for foreign policy and global news than for news pertaining to the global economy or social welfare.

Opportunities to fact-check information based on direct observations are relatively limited. Moreover, audiences are arguably most dependent on news outlets as sources of information that cannot be attained through other means and, thus, is harder to verify. Audience beliefs about the incentives and capabilities of news outlets are, therefore, important as well.

One concern for information-seekers may be that political bias could undermine the quality of information that news outlets report. Distortions in reporting due to bias often take the form of slant (the analysis, contextualization and framing of true facts in such a way as to lead respondents to a particular pre-determined point-of-view) and censorship (the intentional exclusion of information). More extreme forms of distortion may include outright fabrication. Theories of propaganda often presume that the extent to which a news outlet can report with bias is constrained by the audience's realization that it is being misled. When news outlets captured by the state lie or distort too much for political purposes and audiences are aware of it, they may tune out, as bias reduces the amount of information that people can be learn from news (Besley and Prat 2006; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014). The challenge for audiences is that they may not always be aware of the extent to which news outlets are biased. Additionally, some forms of bias do not render a news outlet useless as a source of information. Drawing on evidence from focus groups, Mickiewicz (2008) suggests that many Russian news consumers recognize some amount of bias in the news media, but believe it is the responsibility of the audience to "read between the lines" and extract useful information from biased sources.

A second concern for information-seekers is the reporting capacity of news outlets. News outlets vary in the resources they have at their disposal and their access to information. People may expect relatively small or under-resourced news outlets to not always have access to the most important information.

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Bias and access to information may not be completely independent. If a news outlet has more information at its disposal, it might have more opportunities to slant its coverage without fabrication (Xiang and Sarvary 2007). Additionally, having a close relationship to the subjects on which it reports might increase a news outlet's potential for bias, but also might allow it have greater access to information. In choosing which news sources are likely to provide reliable information, news consumers may have to think about these tradeoffs.

In the Russian case, state-controlled news outlets seemingly have a strong incentive to report with bias. Reporters, editors, and producers ultimately are dependent on the state's support for their continued employment. It is possible, however, that many Russian news consumers are unaware of the close affiliation between the main federal television and the state or expect this to minimally affect content. One reason that audiences might perceive state news to be a valuable source of information may, therefore be that they consider it to be relatively objective and unbiased compared to available alternatives.

H3) State news consumers believe state news outlets to be relatively unbiased.

Beliefs about reporting capacity and information access may also matter. State news outlets in Russia have far more resources at their disposal than any domestic independent news outlet, allowing them greater access to information. Their larger budgets allow them to maintain large staffs of reporters around Russia and abroad. News consumers cannot directly observe the quality of the information that news outlets receive. However, they can observe when news outlets are able to quickly cover breaking news events in remote regions. They can observe the relatively high production quality of state news broadcasts. These provide evidence of the large reporting capacity these news outlets have, which may suggest that they have ready access to information more generally. News audiences might also recognize the close relationship between the state and these news outlets as an asset in that these outlets have greater access to state information than the adversarial independent outlets. This greater access to information makes these news outlets a useful of information on certain topics, even if they are somewhat biased.

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H4) State news consumers believe state outlets have greater access to information than available alternatives.

For the small group of news consumers who seek out alternative information sources to those aligned with the state, political bias by state news outlets is likely a paramount concern. Independent news consumers may be those who perceive state news as least reliable due to bias.

H5) Independent news consumers distrust state news because of their perceived bias.

3.2   Empirical Analysis

To examine the beliefs of Russian news consumers about the reliability of news outlets, I draw on evidence from two surveys. The first survey is an original nationally representative survey conducted in partnership with the Levada Center, an independent polling firm based in Russia (n = 1610). The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews across Russia in November, 2019, as part of Levada Center's regular Omnibus survey.[1] It included a series of questions related to news habits, beliefs about news outlets, and attitudes related to censorship and the value of the independent press.[2] In the survey, respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements related to the three main state news channels (Channel 1, Rossiya-1, and NTV). Some of these statements concerned the perspective that state news represents and whether these channels sometimes engage in censorship. Other statements concerned the reliability of the information state news reports on a variety of topics.

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1. For a detailed discussion of the sampling methodology used by the Levada Center, see `https://www.levada.ru/en/methods/omnibus/`. The sample is approximately nationally representative except for a small subset of the population which is excluded: those currently doing their conscription service, those incarcerated, homeless people, and those living in remote regions of Siberia and the Far North or in rural settlements with fewer than 50 inhabitants. Sampling weights provided by the Levada Center are used in all analyses of these data.

2. This chapter will focus specifically on news habits and beliefs about news outlets. Other aspects of the survey will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The second survey was conducted online in January, 2021 via Qualtrics. Respondents were drawn from existing panels of participants who agree to complete surveys in exchange for compensation. A quota sampling method was used to recruit respondents into the panel, with quotas for gender, age, federal district and education to ensure that different subgroups of the population were represented and to try to approximate Russia's internet-using population. Given that the survey was conducted online through an opt-in process using existing panels, the survey results cannot be treated as representative of the population as a whole. However, the results still may provide useful insight into the opinion of Russia's internet users, a demographic of particular interest, given their greater awareness of and access to independent media. 1050 respondents participated in the survey. Because attentiveness is a particular concern in online surveys, respondents who completed the survey unusually quickly (less than 500 seconds) or whose responses obviously followed a particular pattern unrelated to the substance of the questions were removed. This left a final sample of 1005 respondents.[3]

In the online survey, respondents were asked which kind of news outlet they would expect to provide the most useful information about a specific news topic. They were given the choice between three kinds of news outlets: state news outlets (Channel 1, Russia-1, Russia-24, NTV), independent news outlets (Dozhd, Echo of Moscow, Novaya Gazeta etc.), and foreign news outlets (BBC Russia, Euronews etc.). They could also indicate that none of the three sources would provide useful information on the topic. In a follow-up question, respondents were asked to explain their choice. They could choose as many of the following options as they wished: 1) State/independent/foreign sources have the best access to information on this topic 2) State/independent/foreign sources are more accountable to the public 3) State/independent/foreign sources will be less biased in their reporting on this topic. 4) Other. If the respondent selected that none of these sources would provide useful information on this topic, the follow up question included the following options: 1) None of these sources have access to information on this topic, 2) None of these sources are ac-

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3. Removing these 45 individuals from the survey had little effect on the findings.

countable to the public 3) All of these sources are biased in their reporting on this topic 4) Information on this topic is not useful 5) Other.

The survey was conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first topic respondents were asked about was news concerning vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. This topic was expected to be of high interest to many people, given the high practical utility of the information. The second topic was how well Russia and its leaders had responded to the pandemic compared to other countries and their leaders. This topic was also expected to be of high interest. The framing is more politicized than the first topic, creating more potential for bias to affect the reporting. The final topic did not concern COVID-19 but instead related to opposition activist Alexei Navalny. On August 20, 2020, Navalny became suddenly extremely ill on board an airplane. After an emergency landing in Russia, he was treated by Russian doctors and then ultimately transferred to Germany to receive further treatment. German doctors determined that he had been poisoned with a powerful nerve agent. In December, 2020 (a few weeks prior to the survey), Navalny appeared to have tricked a Russian agent into revealing how he was poisoned, generating substantial attention in online media (Lister, Ward, and Shukla 0020).[4] The topic of Alexei Navalny's poisoning is far more controversial and politicized than the other two topics. Coverage surrounding Navalny also diverged significantly between state and independent media, with independent news sources providing extensive coverage of Navalny's poisoning and evidence linking the poisoning to the FSB,[5] and state sources providing less coverage of the Navalny incident overall and suggesting that Navalny's claims of being poisoned by the FSB do not match the

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4. On January 17, 2021, Navalny returned to Russia and was arrested at the airport, sparking large protests across Russia and international condemnation. The survey was underway at this time, but most responses had already been collected. Prior to January 17, 913 respondents had already completed the survey. An additional 137 respondents completed the survey after Navalny's arrest. The survey question refers only to Navalny's poisoning and not to his subsequent return and arrest.

5. See an example of such coverage from Meduza at https://meduza.io/feature/2020/12/14/navalnogo-otravili-novichkom-sotrudniki-spetsgruppy-fsb-nazvany-ih-imena-i-psevdonimy.

evidence.[6]

3.3 Results

News Habits

In the nationally representative survey, respondents were asked which news outlets they had used in the previous two weeks and were offered a list of 24 news sources. Respondents could list as many sources from the list as they wished, could mention any source not listed, or could indicate that they had not followed the news. The results show widespread reliance on state media, with 72 percent of people reporting use of a state news source in the previous two weeks. By contrast, only 8 percent of people report using one of the adversarial independent news outlets, such as Dozhd, Vedomosti, Novaya gazeta, Meduza, BBC, Ekho Moskvy, Nezavisimaya gazeta, or Radio Svoboda. Notably, most people who report using these independent news outlets also report using state news sources. Among the independent news consumers, about 64 percent also report using a state news source. That independent news is primarily consumed as a supplement rather than an alternative to state news provides evidence of the value of state news even to those most expected to object to its coverage. Only 8 percent of people say they have not followed the news in the previous two weeks.

News sources are not easily divided into state and independent. The news aggregator Yandex News was mentioned by 29 percent of respondents.[7] As discussed in Chapter 2, Yandex tends to feature content by news outlets that are either directly state-controlled, such

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6. See an example of Channel One's reporting on Navalny at `https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-11-06/396323-genprokuratura_rf_snova_napravila_germanii_zapros_o_veschestve_kotorym_yakoby_otravlen_aleksey_navalnyy`.

7. It is unclear whether respondents who indicate using Yandex News also list the specific news outlets to which they were referred by the aggregator. It is possible and, indeed, likely that some respondents do and some respondents do not. In the 2021 surveys, Yandex News was not included in the list of news outlets but instead was included in a separate question about means of accessing the news.

as Ria Novosti and TASS, or that are privately owned but pro-government such as Gazeta.Ru and Lenta.Ru. It does not tend to show content from the adversarial independent news outlets but will show some stories from non-state news outlets that are at least somewhat loyal to the Kremlin, such as RBC and Kommersant. As discussed in Chapter 2, RBC previously operated as a fully independent business-oriented news outlet that also engaged in some investigative reporting related to politics and other topics. Its independence was partially compromised, however, when it was sold to a pro-Kremlin publisher.[8] Kommersant was similarly acquired by a pro-Kremlin oligarch and saw changes to its editorial line.[9] The 2019 survey finds 4.6 percent of people recently read RBC and 0.7 percent of people recently read Kommersant. Among the RBC readers, 77 percent also report recently using a state news source and 33 percent report recently using an independent news source.

In the online survey, independent news consumers are over-represented, with just under one in four respondents indicating that they regularly use a fully independent news source. The vast majority of respondents to the online survey use state news, with 79 percent of respondents reporting regularly using a state news source. As in the nationally representative survey, most of the independent news consumers (82 percent) report watching, reading, or listening to state news as well.

Perceptions of the Reliability and Bias of State News

The first question to examine is the extent to which Russian news consumers perceive state news to be a useful sources of information. The results suggest that most Russians perceive state news as a useful source of information, at least on certain topics. In the nationally representative survey, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement that

8. In announcing his intention to purchase a majority stake in RBC, Grigori Berezkin said he wanted journalists to "avoid conflicts" and "write the truth without hurting people's feelings" (Seddon 2017).

9. Vedomosti would face a similar fate, though not until 2020. For the purposes of analyzing the 2019 survey data, Vedomosti is treated as a fully independent news outlet. For the purposes of analyzing the 2021 survey data, Vedomosti is treated as neither state-controlled nor fully independent.

state news channels provide reliable reporting on each of five news topics 1) the socioeconomic welfare of the Russian population 2) the Russian domestic economy 3) Russian foreign policy 4) current events around the world and 5) Ukraine, Georgia, and other former Soviet republics. The distribution of responses among state news consumers is shown in Figure 3.1. The modal response, regardless of the topic, is "somewhat agree." More people tend to agree that state news outlets report reliable information than disagree.
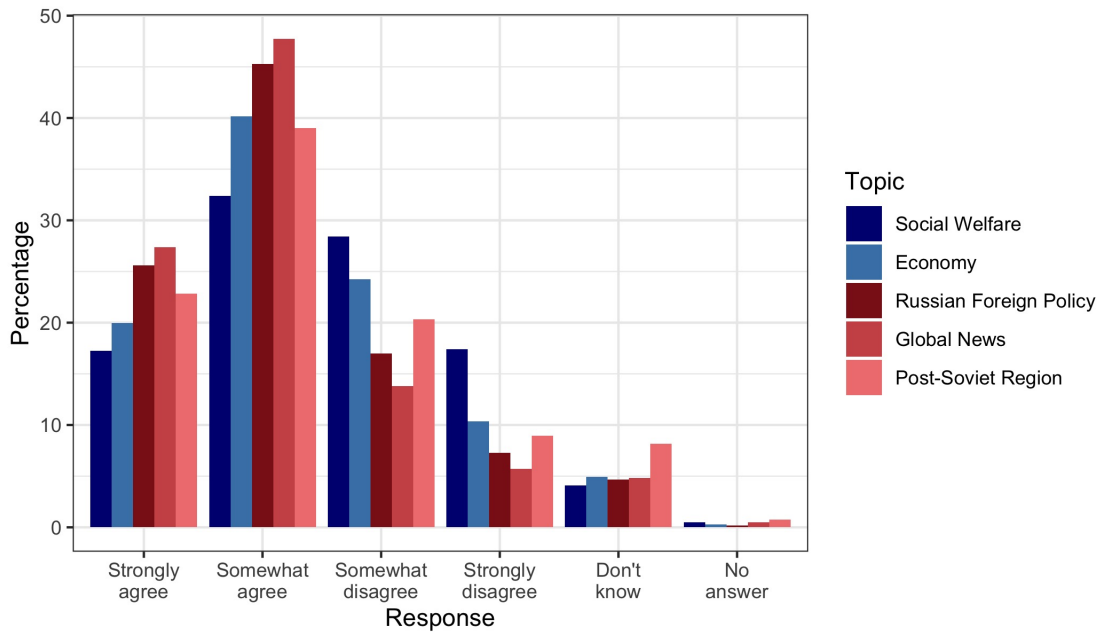
Figure 3.1: Agreement with the statement that state news channels report reliable information on a given topic.[10]

Converting responses to numeric values allows for easier interpretation and comparison across population subgroups and topics. I construct a perceived reliability scale by scoring "strongly disagree" responses as 0, "somewhat disagree" as .33, "somewhat agree" as .67,

10. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with each of several statements about the three main state news channels (Channel 1, Russia-1, NTV). Among these statements were the following: 1) "These channels present reliable (*dostovernyy*) information about Russian foreign policy." 2) "These channels present reliable information about the Russian domestic economy." 3) "These channels present reliable information about the social-economic welfare of the Russian population." 4) "These channels present reliable information about current events around the world." 5) "These channels present reliable information about Ukraine, Georgia and other former Soviet republics."

and "strongly agree" responses as 1 (other responses are dropped). Table 3.1 shows the responses across topics and audience groups. The results show that state news consumers tend to trust state news more than they distrust it. There are notable differences across topics, which will be discussed in the analysis of H2. Overall, the results are somewhat consistent with H1. Most Russians seem to perceive state news as a valuable source of information, at least on some topics. However, the perceived credibility of state news is not overwhelming, even among those who rely on it exclusively.

Topic	All	State Consumers	State Only Consumers	Independent Consumers
Social Welfare	0.46	0.51	0.52	0.31
Economy	0.53	0.58	0.59	0.36
Russian Foreign Policy	0.59	0.65	0.66	0.42
Global News	0.62	0.68	0.68	0.48
Post-Soviet Region	0.55	0.61	0.62	0.41

Table 3.1: Average perceived credibility of state news by topic among different audience groups. Scores are constructed from responses to the survey question asking if respondents agreed that the main state news outlets reported credible information on a given topic. Responses were scored as follows: strongly disagree: 0, somewhat disagree: .33, somewhat agree: .67, strongly agree: 1.

A second question from the nationally representative survey asked respondents to consider a hypothetical situation in which the state television channels, Channel 1 and Rossiya-1, reported on an event differently than Dozhd and RBC. Respondents were asked which they would believe. A slight majority said they would tend to trust the state channels (33 percent definitely, 23 percent probably). Notably few said they would tend to believe RBC and Dozhd, with 10 percent saying they would probably believe the non-state sources and 5 percent saying they would definitely believe the non-state sources. Instead, about 30 percent say they would not believe any source.[11] The results provide some support for H1, but not overwhelming. Many Russians seem to perceive the non-state sources of news—

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11. These percentages are among those who answered the question. 103 respondents (6 percent of the sample) did not answer.

even a source like RBC that is somewhat aligned with the Kremlin—as relatively unreliable sources of information. Combined with the previously discussed survey responses, the results suggest that many people may see state news as a useful source of information, even if they do not perceive it as completely reliable all the time, in part because they see weakness in the alternative sources of information available.

The results from the online survey provide stronger support for H1. The online survey has an over-representation of people who are aware of and have easy access to independent news. However, when it comes to information related to the pandemic—potentially highly consequential for personal decision-making—respondents overwhelmingly prefer state news as an information source than alternatives. The distribution of responses to the question asking respondents which news outlet they expected to provide the most useful information on a given topic can be found in Figure 3.2. Responses suggest that, even among this pool of respondents that actively uses the internet, most people would tend to seek out state news sources for information on these highly salient news topics. The preference for state news is especially high with respect to news on COVID-19. State news is the most popular source for news on Navalny as well, though to a lesser degree. However, while slightly more respondents said they would turn to independent news outlets for news on Navalny than for news on the pandemic, the far greater difference is in the tendency to choose no news source with respect to news on Navalny.

The next set of analyses concern the bases for people's beliefs about the reliability of state news. H2 suggests that people may evaluate the reliability of news differently depending on the topic. They may be more likely to notice distortions in reporting on the topics

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12. Respondents were asked: 1) "Concerning the news about the development and accessibility of vaccines and treatment methods for COVID-19 in Russia, from what source do you expect to get the most useful information?" 2) "Concerning the news about how well Russia and the Russian government (including President Putin and regional governors) are handling the pandemic compared to other countries and their governments, from what source do you expect to get the most useful information?" and 3) "Concerning the news about the alleged poisoning of opposition activist Alexei Navalny, from what source do you expect to get the most useful information?"
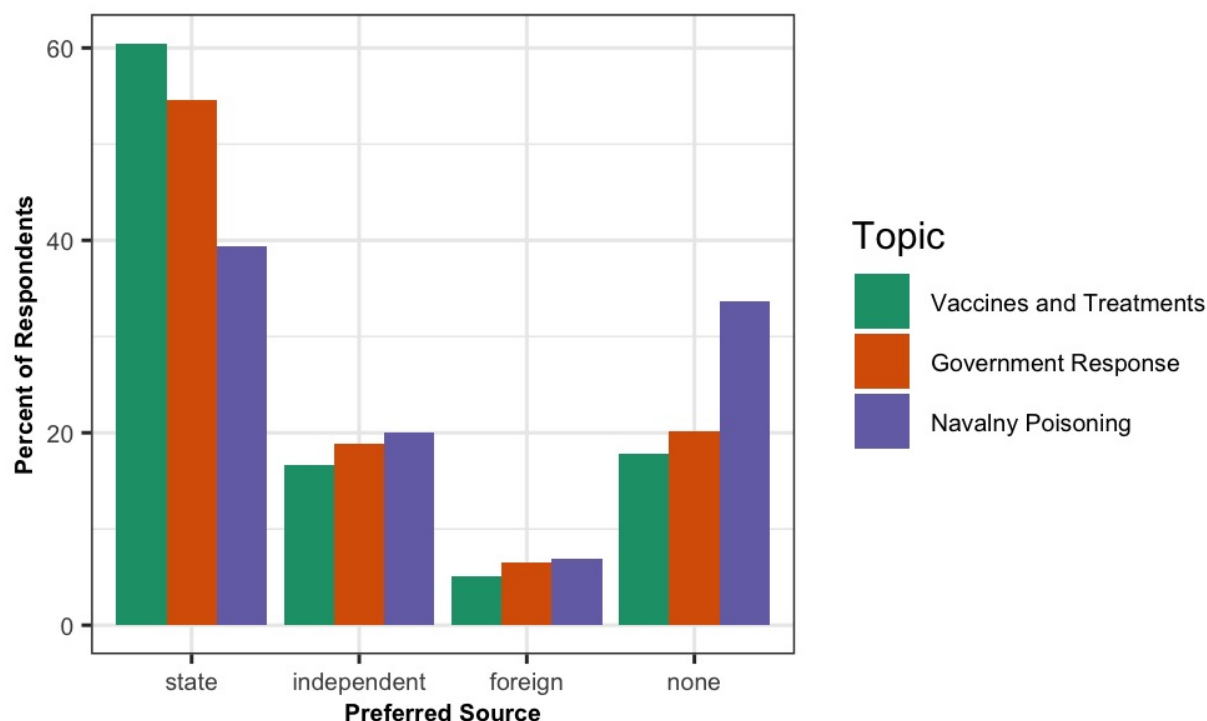
Figure 3.2: Source respondent believes would provide the most useful information on a given topic.[12]

that most directly affect their own lives and are easiest to observe. The results shown in Figure 3.1 and Table 3.1 are consistent with H2. Of all the topics listed, audiences have the greatest opportunity to draw on their own observations to verify the reporting on news about socioeconomic welfare. The relatively high skepticism toward the state's reporting on this topic seems to reflect a perceived disconnect between what people experience and what they see reported on state news.[13] The overall high levels of trust in reporting on global news and foreign affairs suggests that people do not discount the state's reporting when they

13. The perceived reliability of social welfare news is significantly lower than the perceived reliability of news any other topic at the 99% significance level. The perceived reliability of economic news is also significantly lower than for any other topic except social welfare. The substantive difference between the perceived reliability of economic news and the perceived reliability of news on Georgia and Ukraine is quite small. It is possible that, compared to other foreign affairs related topics, news audiences have slightly more exposure to alternative information with respect to the post-Soviet region and therefore are more cognizant of discrepancies.

are unable to verify with their own observations.[14]

The next two hypotheses concern the beliefs that people have about news outlets' incentives and capabilities and how these factor into beliefs about the usefulness of news content. H3 suggests that audiences might not perceive state news as biased and therefore believe that it will report useful and reliable information. The survey results, however, do not support this. In the nationally representative survey, respondents whether they agreed that three main state television news channels (Channel 1, Rossiya-1, and NTV) represented Putin's perspective. Overwhelmingly, people agreed either strongly (40 percent) or somewhat (39 percent) with this statement. Only 7 percent somewhat disagreed and only 5 percent strongly disagreed. Responses were similar when people were asked about whether these channels reflected the government's perspective. Respondents were also asked whether they agreed that the main state channels sometimes censor important information. Again, most respondents tended to agree with this statement. The distribution of responses to this question can be found in Figure 3.3. The results show that the vast majority of people, including those who rely exclusively on state-aligned news sources, agree at least somewhat that the main state channels sometimes engage in censorship. These results do not offer strong support for H3. Rather, they suggest that most people who rely on state news outlets do so despite an awareness that they are biased. The results do provide evidence in support of H5. Independent news consumers overwhelmingly agree that state news outlets engage in censorship. Their responses are stronger than those by state news audiences. More than half of the news independent news consumers strongly agree that state news is censored.

The online survey provides more insight into what beliefs factor into the choices people make about where to seek information. Respondents were asked directly to explain why

14. A separate question asked respondents were asked whether they believe they are able to determine what is true and what is not when state news reports on a given topic. Half of respondents were asked about reporting on the Russian economy and half were asked about reporting on foreign policy. Although there was wide variation across respondents, there was no significant difference between topics. This suggests that respondents are not necessarily thinking through which topics are easier and harder to verify and discounting accordingly.
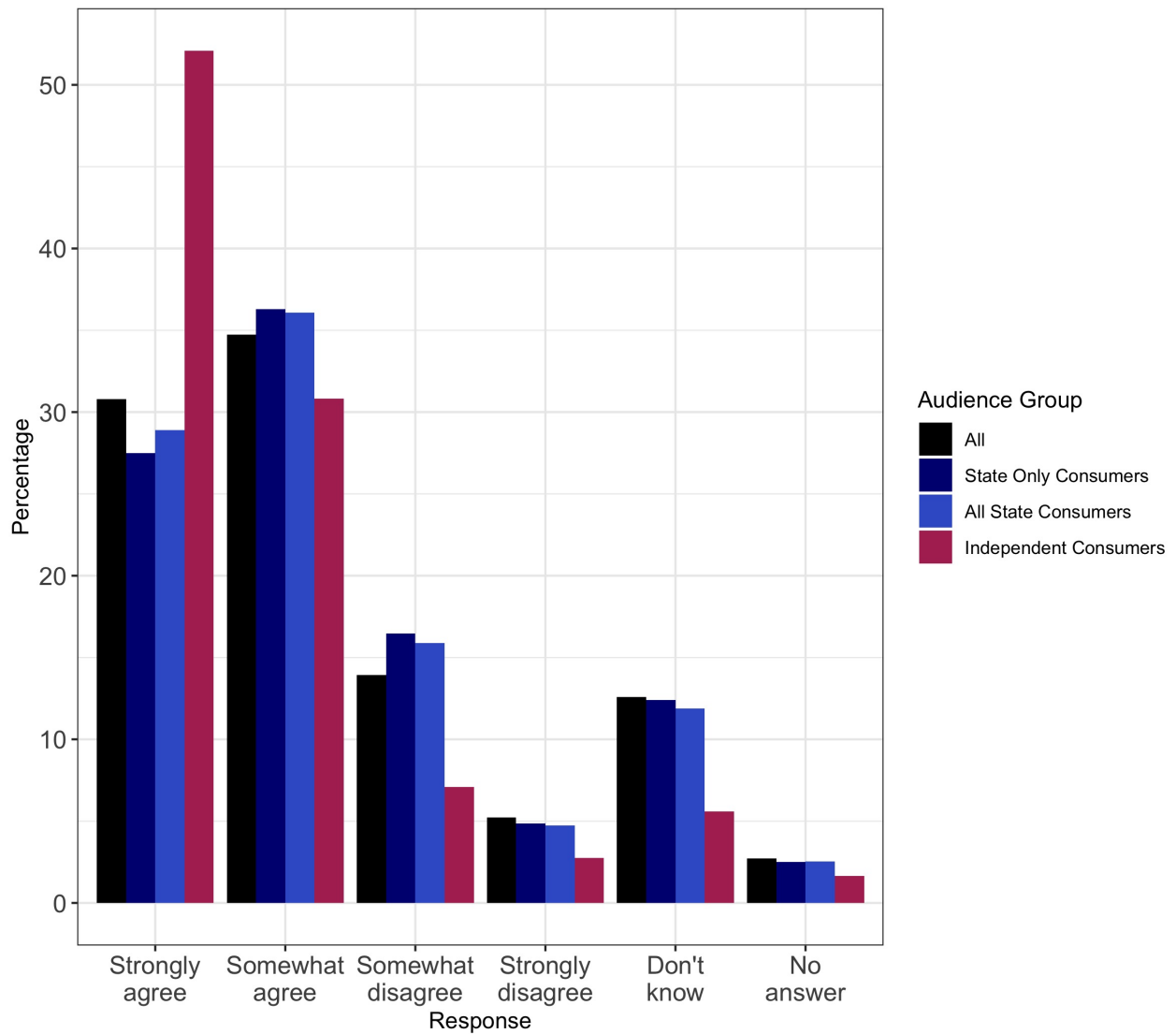
Figure 3.3: Agreement with the statement that the three main state television channels "sometimes censor important information."

they believed a given source would provide the most useful information on a given topic. As discussed, most respondents to this question were inclined to trust state news information more than foreign or alternative news. When asked to explain this choice, respondents overwhelmingly cite beliefs about the greater access state news outlets have to information, rather than concerns about bias and accountability. Table 3.2 shows the distribution of responses to the follow-up question among those who selected state news for each of the

three topics. The results provide strong evidence in support of H4. By contrast, H3 finds little support. Even among those who cite bias as a concern, most also cite information access.

	Vaccines and Treatments	Govt. Pandemic Response	Navalny Poisoning
Information access	85%	85%	84%
Accountability	23%	26%	28%
Bias	14%	18%	20%
Other	2%	1%	2%

Table 3.2: Distribution of explanations given for choosing state news. Respondents were asked "Why do you believe that state news sources provide the best information on this topic?." Respondents could select as many reasons as they wished. Therefore, percentages sum to more than 100 percent.

Among those who chose independent or foreign news outlets, the pattern of explanations for their choices is very different. Table 3.3 shows the distribution of explanations given for choosing either foreign or independent news outlets. Respondents were far more likely to cite accountability and, especially, bias in explaining their preference for independent or foreign news reporting on these three topics. Again, there is minimal difference in the explanation given across the three topics. The tendency to cite bias as a concern provides strong support for H5.

	Vaccines and Treatments	Govt. Pandemic Response	Navalny Poisoning
Information access	27%	25%	29%
Accountability	46%	41%	45%
Bias	56%	61%	59%
Other	1%	<1%	1%

Table 3.3: Distribution of explanations given for choosing independent or foreign news sources for a given topic.

Many of the respondents who did not choose state news as a preferred source indicated that they did not think that any of the listed sources would provide useful information on

	Vaccines and Treatments	Govt. Pandemic Response	Navalny Poisoning
Information access	17%	13%	15%
Accountability	14%	15%	6%
Bias	52%	58%	47%
Info. is not useful	29%	23%	43%
Other	8%	6%	6%

Table 3.4: Distribution of explanations given for selecting "none" in the initial question. Respondents were asked, "Why do you think none of these sources can provide useful information on this topic?"

the topic. This was an especially common response for news on Navalny. The explanations given for this choice of no source can be found in Table 3.4. The most common explanation, regardless of the topic, is the belief that all of these types of news outlets will be biased in their reporting. This is consistent with the results from the nationally representative survey, which found that many of those distrusting of state news were also dissatisfied with the alternatives. The second most frequently cited explanation is that information on the given topic is not useful. This was an especially common response with respect to news on Navalny. This may reflect a lack of interest in Navalny among those disengaged from opposition activity and politics. It might also stem from how people perceive the word "useful" with respect to news. Some may not view news on Navalny as directly related to their own decision-making, and therefore might not consider the information useful, regardless of whether they think the information is trustworthy.

3.4 Discussion

The survey results presented in this chapter reveal some of the complexities in Russian news consumers' beliefs about the informational value of various news outlets. They show that most people in Russia, including those who rely primarily or exclusively on state news, recognize the pro-Kremlin perspective that state news represents and the existence of censorship

in state media. Their perceptions of the reliability of state media reporting is mixed. State news consumers tend to agree more than disagree that state television news outlets report reliable information. However, their responses still show some degree of skepticism. This skepticism is most pronounced with respect to news concerning the socioeconomic welfare of the Russian population. The variation in trust across news topics provides some insight into how people evaluate news content and news outlets. A popular Russian expression suggests that there is a battle between television and the refrigerator: State propaganda depicts a world of prosperity while the contents of the family's refrigerator suggests otherwise. The results of the study suggest that audiences seem to be at least somewhat aware of the disconnect between state news and reality when they have evidence from their own observations that contradicts what state news reports. The high trust in reporting on global news and foreign policy may suggest that the default position toward state media reporting when verification is more difficult tends toward trust. It might also reflect a closer alignment between state media reporting and audience beliefs on these issues.

The results of the second survey provide some insight into how beliefs about news outlets relate to the choices people make about where they look for information in specific cases. The results suggest that the rejection of state media either in favor of independent or foreign media or against media altogether is often rooted in concerns about bias in reporting. On the other hand, for most people turning to state media for information on highly salient topics, concerns about the bias of alternative information sources does not seem to be a central concern. Instead, these state news consumers justify their choices based on beliefs about the access state news outlets have to information.

A limitation of this analysis is that people may come up with an explanation for their choice of news outlet post-hoc. It is possible that people indicated a preference for state news information on a given topic simply because state news outlets are how they regularly follow the news. In the follow-up question, only a small number of justifications were given from

which respondents could choose.[15] Respondents who might not have had a clear reason for choosing a given source might have simply chosen a response that fit best from those listed. Nevertheless, the difference in the pattern of responses depending on the source chosen is so stark that it is highly unlikely that respondents were simply choosing at random. Even if respondents had not had a clear reason for choosing a given source beforehand, they overwhelmingly seemed to find information access to be a better explanation than accountability or bias.

3.5   Conclusion

Taken together, the results of this chapter suggest that Russian news consumers are not unaware of the bias of state news. Nonetheless, many people expect to find at least somewhat useful information from state news outlets. When it comes to news directly related to decision-making, such as information pertaining to health, most people trust state news more than any other source. This trust in state media, albeit lukewarm, seems to be due, at least in part, to the perception that these news outlets have relatively significant reporting capacity compared to the alternatives. Independent news consumers show a particularly high level of concern about the bias of state news. It is worth noting, however, that even independent news consumers overwhelmingly seem to consume independent news as a supplement rather than an alternative to state news. This is consistent with an interpretation that even those sufficiently concerned by state news outlets' biases to seek out alternative information sources nonetheless perceive at least some of the information that state news outlets report as useful.

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15. Although respondents could select "other," respondents might not have wanted to be prompted to offer further explanation.

CHAPTER 4

The Value of Information and Censorship Tolerance

4.1 Introduction

One puzzling aspect of media consumption in Russia is that many people seem to rely on news sources that choose not to report on certain events. State television news programs often censor material that might reflect poorly on the regime or contribute to unrest. Meanwhile, at least until March, 2022, varied and much more objective alternatives were available via the internet, though their audience remained relatively small. If the goal is information, then choosing sources that intentionally omit key facts for political reasons—when uncensored sources are available—seems to make little sense. The value of information lies in its accuracy and completeness. Why, then, would consumers settle for incomplete and misleading coverage?

Understanding these preferences requires considering the motivations and priorities of individual news consumers. Censorship has clear costs at a societal level, depriving citizens of useful information and thereby rendering it harder for the public to hold the government accountable. However, not all news consumers place a high value on having comprehensive information individually on some of the topics that state media tries to suppress. Even if news consumers oppose censorship in an abstract sense, they may still find that state news outlets that engage in censorship nonetheless satisfy their individual information needs. When choosing news sources, the perceived value of the missing or distorted information must be traded off against the other factors that shape news source choices, such as convenience. In

the case of Russia, where, largely due to state interference, access to state news is easier than to independent alternatives, the value placed on information missing from state news must be substantially high to compel people to seek out alternatives.

For the individual news consumer, censorship tolerance is contextual. The costs of censorship to a given individual will vary across particular subject areas. Accurate information matters more when the context is directly relevant to the recipient's personal decision making. However, when the subject is far removed from the viewers' direct experience or concerns symbolic issues, they may care less about accuracy and completeness. The perceived scope of personal decision making itself depends on political context. In authoritarian states, if individuals realize that they have little power to influence government decisions, they may place lower weight on comprehensive information about public affairs. Thus, people living in autocracies may be relatively tolerant of news outlets that censor critical coverage of the regime. Not only can censored news outlets retain large audiences, but also the perceived importance of independent media access may be low.

When the perceived usefulness of the information is sufficiently low and the perceived threat posed by the information is sufficiently high, news consumers may actually prefer a degree of censorship. News content that challenges deeply held beliefs, values, and identities can impose a psychological cost on audiences. Beliefs about how such content could negatively affect others and society as a whole may further serve to justify such preferences. Therefore censorship, particularly with regard to symbolic issues, may be not merely tolerated but actually demanded.

Taken together these complex attitudes toward censorship help to explain the popularity of distorted news outlets. Especially when state news outlets are strategic in the way they suppress information, many news consumers may find that these censored state news outlets satisfy their information needs. This makes it easier for autocratic regimes to retain dominance in the information environment, even when people have access to alternative sources.

When news consumers find that state news outlets satisfy their information needs, they may also place a lower value on having access to an independent press. Public opinion surveys suggest that, while most Russians place at least some value on independent media, the perceived importance of the free press is relatively low compared to in other countries. A 2019 Pew Global Attitudes survey asked respondents about whether it was important for media to be able to report the news without censorship. In Russia, 38 percent of respondents considered this very important, 39 percent consider it somewhat important, 11 percent consider it not too important, and 5 percent consider it not at all important. By contrast, in the United States, 80 percent of respondents consider the ability for the media to report without censorship to be very important and 15 percent consider it somewhat important. In Ukraine, which shares Russia's Soviet history but also has transitioned to democracy, 63 percent considered this very important and 29 percent considered it somewhat important (P. R. Center 2019).[1] Among the 34 countries included in the survey, Russia showed the fourth lowest support for press freedom. As one of the only autocratic countries included in this survey, these results could reflect a relative lack of interest in objective news due to political disengagement. Additionally, it could reflect a reasonably high level of satisfaction with existing state options compared to independent alternatives.

How the public perceives censorship and the value that people place on accessing suppressed information can have significant consequences for the effectiveness of an autocratic regime's efforts to control information. If the public has a strong interest in the kinds of information that the state wants to suppress, limiting access to that information will be more difficult. If the public has a deep ideological objection to censorship in general, then any effort to restrict the flow of information could also be costly. Understanding the attitudes of the public toward specific kinds of censorship is, therefore, critical to understanding

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1. For full results of the Pew survey, see https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/democratic-values/pg_10-15-19-europe-values-02-02/. Unfortunately, the survey was conducted in very few autocratic countries (Russia and Turkey are the only two, based on Freedom House scores), and, therefore, systematically comparing attitudes across regime types is a challenge.

when and why information control strategies work. In this chapter, I examine the contextual nature of such attitudes in Russia and how these attitudes relate to news consumption. Drawing on survey evidence, I show that attitudes toward censorship are nuanced and depend on how censorship is framed and what it targets. Even when censorship is opposed in the abstract, it does not necessarily deter most potential viewers of news outlets that engage in such censorship. Censorship tolerance and support are higher with respect to affectively charged subjects. Attitudes toward the specific kinds of censorship deployed by state news outlets in Russia vary widely across Russian news consumers and this variation is strongly correlated with news habits and the perceived value of the free press.

4.2   Soft Censorship in Post-Soviet Russia

Censorship describes the intentional suppression of information by those in power. In some authoritarian countries, censorship is codified in law, with explicit prohibitions on the dissemination of information the state does not want published. In post-Soviet Russia, such explicit prohibitions on speech and the press had been relatively limited until the adoption of wartime censorship in the midst of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Nonetheless, the Kremlin has long worked to limit the public's exposure to certain information. Like many other modern authoritarian and hybrid regimes, it has applied methods of "stealth censorship" or "soft censorship" that limit information access without overt laws (Bennett and Naim, Jan./Feb. 2015).

The first tool of soft censorship is controlling the flow of information disseminated by popular state news outlets. Editors from state news outlets meet weekly with Kremlin officials to discuss events of the week, as understood by the Kremlin (Kovalev 2021). These meetings provide an opportunity for the Kremlin to influence what does and does not appear in the news and how news stories are framed, even if editors are not necessarily given explicit instructions about what to report. Journalists at state-controlled news outlets recognize

that their jobs are linked to the alignment of their reporting with the Kremlin's views and, therefore, have an incentive to engage in self-censorship (Schimpfossl and Yablokov 2014). They report selectively on issues relevant to politics and policy. Opposition activity, criticism of the president and his policies, and stigmatized social groups are primary domestic targets for censorship and distortion (*BBC News Russian Service* 2011; Schimpfossl and Yablokov 2014; Walker and Orttung 2014; Yablokov 2014; Kovalev 2021).

Alongside this intentional obfuscation of information by state news outlets, the second tool of soft censorship is the marginalization of independent news outlets. The Kremlin's attacks on the free press have escalated over the course of Putin's tenure, beginning with the takeover of NTV by Gazprom shortly after Putin came to power. The Kremlin's marginalization of independent news has centered on rendering it more difficult for independent journalists and news outlets to operate through a combination of financial and legal harassment. These practices have often resulted in independent news outlets either closing or being taken over by Kremlin-friendly elites. Television, the most popular medium for consuming news, is now essentially all directly or indirectly state-controlled. However, the internet has offered access to alternative information sources to that of the censored state media. These news outlets reported regularly on the kinds of issues intentionally avoided by state news outlets, including opposition activity and critical coverage of government activities. For regular internet users in Russia in 2019, the effort required to access independent media online was relatively minimal. There were no blocks on most independent news outlet websites, and, therefore, there was no need to use a VPN to access such content. However, truly independent uncensored news content was still harder to find online than state-aligned censored content without knowing where to look, given the bias in the selection of news outlets featured by news aggregators such as Yandex News (Soldatov and Borogan 2015; Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker 2018; Kravets and Toepfl 2021). Even before the Kremlin's most intense crackdown on independent media, the audience for these independent online sources remained small. This small audience may be part of why such critical media was, until more

recently, tolerated (Slavtcheva-Petkova 2018; Kovalev 2021).

4.3 The Value of Information and Censorship Tolerance

A primary motivation for following the news is that information can be useful (C. Atkin 1973). Awareness of current events may facilitate better decision-making (Hamilton 2004). In a democracy, the presence of a free press supports political decision-making, including at the ballot box (Dahl 1989). If information-seeking is the goal, then it seems puzzling that individuals would knowingly choose sources that engage in censorship or favor greater restrictions on the flow of information.

Attitudes toward censorship depend on how individuals perceive the value of the missing information. State-controlled news outlets can retain audiences even when they engage in censorship if the excluded information is relatively unimportant to viewers. Research on China has found that, even when given the tools to easily and cheaply circumvent censorship, most people do not bother to do so, as the demand for the censored information is low (Chen and Yang 2019). Low levels of interest in suppressed information means that authoritarian governments can sufficiently control the information environment even when it is possible to circumvent censorship.

In 2019, when the data for this study was collected, the kinds of soft-censorship deployed by state news outlets frequently targeted protest activity, social movements, government criticism, and policy failures and corruption at the highest levels of government. State media did not avoid reporting bad news entirely. For example, research by Rozenas and Stukal (2019) found that state news outlets would report accurately on the state of the economy, including bad news. However, they would distort their coverage of political responsibility for such outcomes, attributing positive outcomes to Putin and negative outcomes to external forces. The authors suggest that this selective distortion was useful because economic outcomes were observable and therefore harder to distort, while political responsibility for such

outcomes was easy to hide. I suggest that an additional benefit of such an approach from the perspective of state propagandists is that, for most Russians, the outcome is likely the more important information to know. There is less practical utility in knowing the right person, institution, or country to blame. This, combined with the lack of observability, means that viewers are less likely to punish state news outlets for this kind of distortion.

Comprehensive and accurate information is most important when it is actionable. The scope of what may be considered actionable depends on context. In the case of Russia and other authoritarian countries, that scope may be quite limited, reducing the value of information pertinent to political responsibility. As Roudakova (2017) argues, a deep cynicism about politics that has developed during the Putin era has reduced people's interest in truth-seeking. Low political interest results in disengagement from political information (Alyukov 2022). When options for political participation are limited and political efficacy is low, critical coverage of the regime or coverage of opposition activity may seem to have little use for most people. Some news consumers may find such coverage to be inherently interesting or may feel a sense of civic or social obligation to know such information. However, this group of politically engaged information seekers may be relatively small in an autocratic setting.

News consumers who place a low value on suppressed information may still be opposed to censorship in the abstract. All else equal, they would prefer having more information rather than less. However, because of the Kremlin's interference in the media landscape, news consumers encounter more friction when trying to access suppressed information, and this friction effectively imposes a tax on independent news consumption (Roberts 2018). This means that news audiences have to place an especially high value on the suppressed information to justify pursuing it.

In addition to considering the costs in time and effort required to access different kinds of media, news consumers also have to weigh the value of information against the potential negative psychological and social consequences of news consumption. News audiences may experience negative psychological effects such as cognitive dissonance when encountering

information that counters their deeply held beliefs (Festinger 1957; Stroud 2017). They may find such information particularly discomforting if it seems to threaten their identities or deeply held values (Aronson 1968). News consumers may also worry about the negative social consequences of information. Research suggests that "third-person effects"— concerns about how media will affect others perhaps deemed more susceptible than oneself — can be a principle reason that people will actively support censorship in some cases (Gunther and Hwa 1996; Esberg 2020). Not wanting others to see information deemed immoral or likely to cause unrest, people will support policies to restrict access to such information. The psychological and social threat of information is likely to be especially high with respect to symbolic, affectively charged subjects. When this sense of threat is activated, audiences may tolerate more censorship. Beliefs about the social harms of information can also serve to justify existing preferences for censored information.

When news consumers highly value specific information, they may be willing to tolerate the material, psychological, and social consequences of retaining access to it. Some individuals may also have a deep ideological objection to any efforts to suppress information. For many news consumers, however, the value of information targeted by censorship is often sufficiently low that it is not worth the costs required to access it. This hetergeneity in attitudes should affect how people navigate the media landscape. News consumers who place a relatively low value on suppressed information should tend to consume state sources. Those who place a relatively higher value on censored information or who have deeper ideological objections to censorship should be willing to put in the effort to seek out alternative media and should place a higher value on retaining access to independent media.

4.4 Empirical Analysis

The value of information and tolerance of censorship are important quantities of interest. The first part of the empirical analysis focuses on measuring such attitudes across the Russian

population. I focus specifically on the value of information pertinent to political responsibility, including opposition activity and criticism of government leaders and policy. I use survey questions specifically designed to capture the contextual nature of such attitudes and how people consider the tradeoffs of information access. I then discuss the heterogeneity in such attitudes across the population.

The second part of the empirical analysis examines the relationship between the value of information, the tolerance of censorship, and news habits. Because the kinds of censorship discussed in this study are those that are deployed most often by state outlets, those that are more tolerant of such censorship should be more inclined to watch state news. More specifically, those who perceive the value of the missing information to be relatively low compared to the costs associated with information consumption should be more likely to watch state news.

H1) Higher levels of censorship tolerance are associated with consumption of state news.

By contrast, those with a low tolerance for censorship are those that would place a higher value on the missing information and feel more compelled to put in the added effort to seek out alternative sources of information.

H2) Lower levels of censorship tolerance are associated with consumption of alternative news.

The third part of the analysis examines the extent to which Russians value access to non-state sources of information and the relationship between such attitudes and censorship tolerance. Those who have a higher censorship tolerance should consider access to independent media to be relatively less important.

H3) Higher levels of censorship tolerance are associated with lower interest in having access to independent media.

4.4.1 Survey Data

The data for this paper comes primarily from an original nationally representative survey conducted in partnership with the Levada Center, an independent polling firm based in Russia (n = 1610). The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews across Russia in November, 2019, as part of Levada Center's regular Omnibus survey.[2] Additional data is drawn from other Levada center polling data that has been made publicly available. A similar sampling design is used across Levada Omnibus surveys.

4.4.2 Measuring Censorship Tolerance

Existing surveys provide some insight into how Russians view censorship across news topics. A March, 2017 poll by the Levada Center asked respondents about whether censorship was ever acceptable for certain news topics in the mass media. About half of respondents listed at least one topic that should sometimes be censored (Volkov and Stephan 2017). The topics mentioned most frequently concerned either the personal lives of civil servants (16 percent) or information related to the activities of the special services to protect order (18 percent). Approximately 41 percent mentioned at least one other topic relevant to political accountability and about one in four mention at least one topic related to domestic politics and policy or the economy.[3] Only 6 percent of respondents listed protests. On the other hand,

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2. For a detailed discussion of the sampling methodology used by the Levada Center, see `https://www.levada.ru/en/methods/omnibus/`. The sample is approximately nationally representative except for a small subset of the population which is excluded: those currently doing their conscription service, those incarcerated, homeless people, and those living in remote regions of Siberia and the Far North or in rural settlements with fewer than 50 inhabitants. Sampling weights provided by the Levada Center are used in all analyses of these data.

3. The topics related to political accountability include military spending by the state (12%), participation of the country in military operations abroad (10 %), criticism of Russia's foreign policy by Western countries or the opposition (8%), the state of affairs in foreign policy (7%), natural resource reserves of the country (7%), the state of the economy (7%), protests (6%), speeches by opposition politicians (5%), the inflation rate (5%), government plans for unpopular reforms (5%). The last six topics are treated as topics related to domestic politics/policy/economy. 37% of respondents said that censorship in the mass media was unacceptable while 15% of respondents refused to answer the question.

only 37 percent of respondents said expressly that none of the topics should be censored, while 15 percent did not answer the question. These results suggest that only a minority of respondents have a deep ideological objection to censorship. For most people, the context matters and censorship is preferable in situations where the potential harm of information is seen as greater than the potential benefit.

Another question from the same 2017 survey provides additional support for the argument that opinion on censorship is nuanced and that people weigh the costs and benefits of information access. The question asks respondents whether they agree that, for most Russians, knowing the whole truth is not necessary if the subject does not concern them directly. The vast majority of respondents either somewhat agreed or somewhat disagreed (39 percent and 38 percent, respectively). Very few respondents either strongly agreed (10 percent) or strongly disagreed (13 percent). Interestingly, these attitudes are only weakly correlated with responses to the other question on when censorship is acceptable. Only 41 percent of those who fully or somewhat disagreed that always knowing the truth was unnecessary also said that censorship was unacceptable. For those who agreed that always knowing the truth was unnecessary, 33 percent said that censorship was unacceptable.

In the present survey, I more closely examine the nuances in attitudes toward information suppression with a particular focus on what specific content is being censored and how this intentional exclusion is framed. To measure censorship tolerance, I rely on four survey questions related to attitudes toward the intentional exclusion of information. These questions are specific both to Russia and, in part, to the time during which the survey was implemented. The goal in designing these questions was to measure attitudes toward the kind of censorship that state news outlets were regularly engaging in at the time of the study. Although the questions focus on the exclusion of information, they do not use the word "censorship" (senzura). This may mitigate the problem of social desirability bias causing some not to reveal a sincere preference for information suppression. Additionally, particularly given Russia's Soviet history, the word censorship may evoke a more explicit in-

stitution responsible for redacting information from the press rather than the more informal soft censorship in place in 2019.

The first two questions ask about whether the respondent's interest in watching a news outlet would be affected by the news outlet's decision not to report on specific topics. The first topic was criticism of the government's proposed changes to pensions. In the summer of 2018, the Russian government had proposed increasing the retirement age. The proposed policy was widely unpopular, including among Putin's supporters. That summer, there were several protests against the proposed reform. Nevertheless, Putin signed a slightly softened version of the law in late 2018 and it came into effect in 2019. The second topic was large scale protests against the government. The kind of protest was not specified. As discussed, criticism of government policies and opposition activity have been primary targets of censorship by state news outlets. These two topics also differ in important ways. Pension reform policy was unpopular even among those typically supportive of the government. Pensions also have direct economic consequences for ordinary people. Therefore, the expected level of tolerance for censorship related to this topic might be especially low, even among those who tend to watch and like state news. Anti-government protests, on the other hand, might matter more to those inclined to have a negative view of the government and less to those who generally support the government. These two questions focus not on whether respondents would support the decision to censor news on these topics. Instead, the questions focus on to what extent respondents think that these kinds of censorship choices would affect their consumption. In this way, the questions aim to measure tolerance for censorship rather than support for censorship. Even those who might oppose censorship on one level may not care about it enough for it to affect their behavior.

The third survey question, by contrast, asks about support for censorship. Respondents are asked about whether they would agree with a news outlet's decision not to report on a large protest against the government. The question additionally includes a justification for this kind of censorship. One of the reasons that state news outlets choose not to report

on protests is to prevent drawing larger crowds. The view among state news outlets is that reporting protests is essentially advertising them and could plausibly contribute to greater unrest.[4] In the survey, respondents are told that television news outlets often choose not to report on protests for this reason. They are then asked whether they agree with the news outlets' decision.

The fourth question asks respondents about their own support for excluding certain topics from the news. Respondents are given a list of topics and can select as many as they wanted that should be excluded. All of the topics pertain to either protest activity or criticism of policy or leaders. The object of the protest or criticism or the group engaging in the protest or criticism varies. This variation may change the perceived benefit or cost of the information.

4.4.3 The Extent of Censorship Tolerance

The results of the survey reveal a lot of heterogeneity in tolerance for censorship across people. Responses to the first two questions on whether a news outlet self-censoring its coverage of pension reform policy criticism or protests would affect viewing behavior show a lot of variation across respondents. A slight majority of respondents said they would not be deterred from watching a news outlet if it censored either anti-government protests or criticism of pension reform. The distribution of responses for the two questions can be found in Figure 4.1. Interestingly, there is no evidence that the topic matters for most respondents. Most respondents give the same answer to both questions. The correlation between the responses to the two questions (when categorical responses are converted to numeric responses) is 0.66. To the extent that there are differences, there is no evidence across the sample as a whole that censorship of one topic is consistently more tolerable than censorship of the other topic, even when limiting the analysis to Putin supporters. Table **??**

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4. This is according to an interview with a Rossiya-24 reporter, Jul. 1, 2019.

shows some of the predictors of attitudes across demographic groups. The most meaningful predictors are gender, income, and living in a large city. Men, urbanites, and higher income individuals tend to express lower censorship tolerance in this case. In Models 2 and 4, approval of Putin is included as a predictor. Unsurprisingly, the president's supporters are less deterred by the censorship of policy criticism or protests.
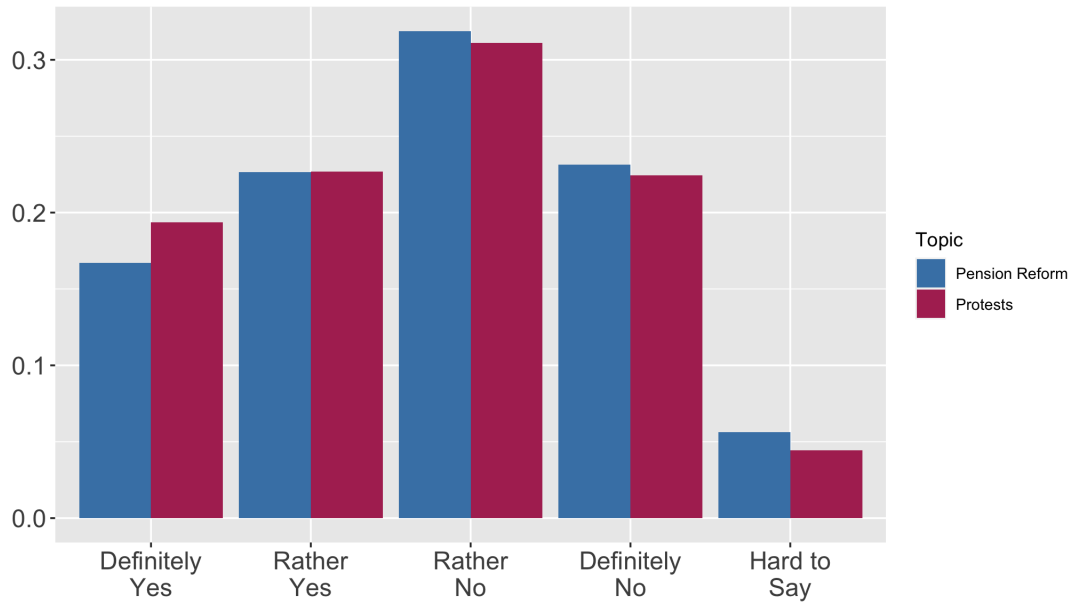
Figure 4.1: Distribution of responses to survey question: "Suppose a news channel decided not to report on [criticism of pension reform/large-scale anti-government protests]. Would that affect your interest in watching the channel?"

The remaining questions reveal the heterogeneous attitudes toward the censorship of specific news topics. Table 4.2 shows the distribution of responses to the question asking whether certain topics should be excluded from the news. While there were no individual topics that a majority of respondents believed should be excluded, 53 percent of respondents did mention at least one topic from the list that they wanted excluded. The most frequently listed topics for exclusion relate to two stigmatized groups in Russia: LGBT protests and feminist protests. The demand for censorship of these groups is not surprising; both are seen by many in Russia as immoral and a threat to traditional, Orthodox values. Unlike the other topics on the list, censorship directed at LGBT people was actually codified in law

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	Dependent variable:			
	Deterred: Pension Reform		Deterred: Protest	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age	0.001*	0.001**	−0.0002	0.0001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	−0.056***	−0.049***	−0.061***	−0.052***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
log(Income)	0.039**	0.041***	0.028*	0.031**
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.016)
University	0.004	0.003	0.002	0.001
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Large City	0.081***	0.081***	0.092***	0.091***
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Internet	0.010	−0.001	0.019	0.005
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.027)
Putin Approval		−0.094***		−0.117***
		(0.020)		(0.021)
Sampling weights	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	1,610	1,591	1,610	1,591
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table 4.1: Predictors of the deterrent effect of censorship re: pension reform and protests. Higher values indicate stronger beliefs that censorship would deter the respondent from watching. Dependent variable converted to a scale from 0 (definitely no) to 1 (definitely yes). All covariates except age and income are binary. All models are OLS.

in 2013.[5] The so called "gay propaganda" law was popular among many in Russia. It is possible that, when asked about feminist protests, respondents were reminded of the activist group Pussy Riot. Likely Russia's most famous feminist protesters, Pussy Riot is well-known for its dramatic stunts not only in support of feminism but also against the Putin regime. Their most famous protest (for which participants were arrested and handed long sentences) took place in an Orthodox church and was deeply offensive to many in Russia. The feminist group became a symbol of radical ideas imported from abroad that threatened traditional values (Smyth and Soboleva 2014; Yablokov 2014). As Table 4.2 shows, the level of support for censoring most other topics is relatively low individually. However, 31 percent list at least one topic other than LGBT or feminist protests that they would like censored. Support for censoring at least one type of protest is 33 percent and support for censoring at least one example of leadership or policy criticism is 28 percent.

Table 4.2: Topics People Think Should Be Excluded from the News

Topic	Proportion of Respondents Supporting Exclusion
LGBT Protests	0.21
Feminist Protests	0.19
Criticism of Putin	0.13
Criticism of Russian Policy in Ukraine	0.10
Criticism of Joining of Russia and Crimea	0.10
Criticism of Russian Relations with the West	0.06
Pension Reform Protests	0.04
Anti-Corruption Protests	0.04
Criticism of Local Officials	0.03
Environmental Protests	0.03
Criticism of Russian Economic Policy	0.03
Nothing	0.46
Do Not Know	0.05

The results suggest that demand for censorship is higher with respect to topics that are

5. In 2013, Russia enacted a law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values" which restricted positive media coverage of LGBT lifestyles and events such as Pride parades.

more affectively charged. In addition to the two stigmatized groups, demand for censorship is relatively high for criticism of Putin and criticism of Russian foreign policy. When aggregating responses, 18 percent of people support censoring at least one of the three topics related to Russian-Ukraine relations and Russia-West relations. By contrast, the support for censoring criticism of or protests against domestic policies that are not affectively charged is quite low. The results also show that, even though a reasonably large number of people said they would not be deterred from watching a news channel that censored news on pension reform criticism or large-scale protests, there does not seem to be a lot of active support for this kind of censorship either.

Responses to the final question show that demand for censorship of protest activity is even higher when respondents are offered a justification for such censorship. The results in Figure 4.1 show that about half of respondents agree with the decision by news outlets to censor protest activity in order to prevent greater unrest. As is the case for other measures of censorship tolerance, responses are strongly positively correlated with attitudes toward Putin.

Taken together, the results suggest that attitudes toward the exclusion of information are highly nuanced. Consistent with the results of the 2017 Levada poll, a majority of respondents are willing to actively support some degree of censorship. The results of this survey suggest that censorship tolerance may be even higher than what was found in the 2017 poll. While that survey found that only 6 percent of people believed that protests should be censored, the present survey reveals that support for such censorship can be far higher if the protest is conducted by a disliked group or if censorship is framed as a means of reducing unrest. Additionally, even those who might not actively support the censorship of protests may not be deterred from watching a source if it decides to censor activist activity.
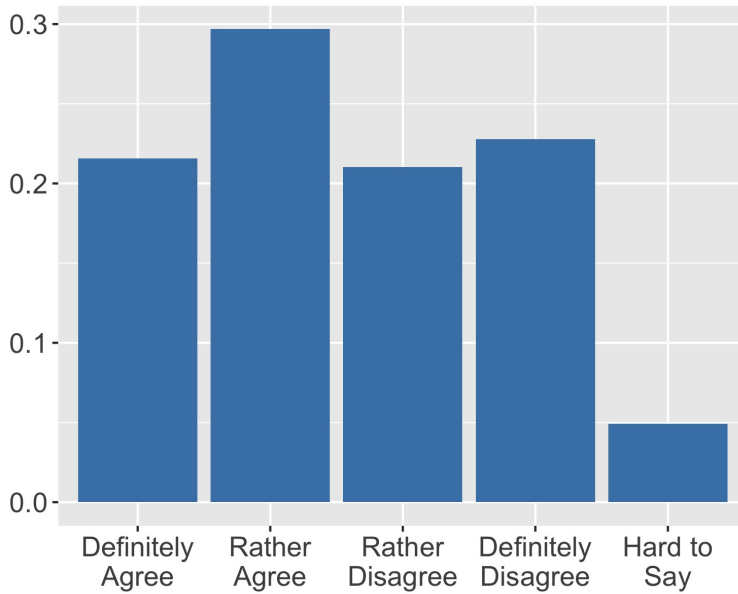
Figure 4.2: Support for the censorship of protests to prevent disorder. Respondents were asked the following: "Television news networks sometimes do not report on protests so as not to promote people to join them, which could cause unrest. Do you agree with these news channels' decision?"
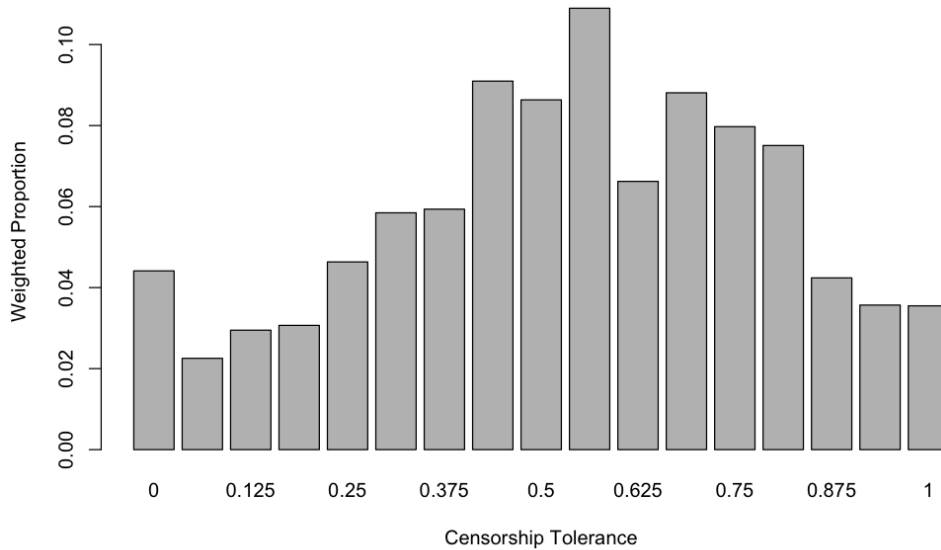
Figure 4.3: Distribution of censorship tolerance index

4.4.4   Index of Censorship Tolerance

To further examine variation in censorship tolerance across the sample and the relationship between censorship tolerance and news habits, I construct an index variable aggregating the responses from the four questions discussed above. To construct the index, the three Likert scale questions are converted to numeric values ranging from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating greater censorship tolerance.[6] The question on topics that should be excluded is treated as binary. Responses are scored as 1 if at least one topic is listed and 0 otherwise.[7] The index variable is then the mean of the 4 rescored questions and ranges from 0 to 1. The mean censorship tolerance score is .54. Censorship tolerance is correlated with approval of Putin (r = .25). Table 4.3 shows the correlation in responses for the four measures included in the index. Figure 4.3 shows the distribution of the censorship tolerance index. The distribution suggests that respondents are not easily divided into censorship supporters and opponents. Only 4.5 percent of respondents have a censorship tolerance score of exactly 0. These are individuals who want no topics excluded from the news, strongly disagree with censoring protests to prevent disorder, and say they definitely would be deterred from using a news source that censored pension reform criticism or anti-government protests.[8] Arguably these individuals could be considered those most ideologically opposed to censorship. The overwhelming majority of people have views that are less extreme. Responses are concen-

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6. For the two questions on censorship deterring viewing, the response "definitely no" implies greater censorship tolerance and is given a value of 1 while "definitely yes" responses are given a value of 0. For the question on censoring protest activity to prevent unrest, the response "strongly agree" is associated with greater censorship tolerance and is given a value of 1. For the purposes of constructing the composite scale, "do not know" responses are given a score of .5. This is to prevent having to drop respondents from the analysis in the event of one skipped question. The middling responses (rather agree/rather no, rather disagree/rather yes) are scored as .75 and .25 respectively.

7. An alternative way of scoring this question would instead be to count the number of topics listed. The difference in using these two approaches may not be that significant. The correlation between choosing at least one topic and other related questions on censorship tolerance is very similar to that of the number of topics chosen and other related questions on censorship tolerance.

8. If, instead, a binary version of all the questions is used to construct the index by collapsing all the "somewhat" and "strongly" responses, the percentage at exactly 0 increases to 11 percent.

trated in the middle of the distribution. People tend to tolerate, to some degree, censorship in specific circumstances.

Table 4.3: Censorship Tolerance Correlation Matrix

	Exclude 1+ Topics	Undeterred: Pension Reform Censorship	Undeterred: Protest Censorship	Agree: Censor Protests
Exclude 1+ Topics	1.00	0.10	0.07	0.16
Undeterred: Pension Reform Censorship	0.10	1.00	0.66	0.19
Undeterred: Protest Censorship	0.07	0.66	1.00	0.16
Agree: Censor Protests	0.16	0.19	0.16	1.00

4.4.5 Censorship Tolerance and News Habits

The preceding results reveal highly varied attitudes toward various kinds of censorship commonly used by state news outlets in Russia. The second part of the analysis examines how these attitudes toward censorship correspond to news consumption habits. Table 4.4 shows the relationship between news habits and censorship tolerance. The dependent variable in models 1-3 is a binary indicator of reporting use of a state news source in the prior two weeks while in models 4-6 it is reported use of an independent news source in the prior two weeks. Hypothesis 1 predicts a positive relationship between higher censorship tolerance and consumption of state media. The first two models show a strong relationship between higher censorship tolerance and higher likelihood of using state news. However the results for Model 3 show that the relationship is substantially weaker when controlling for approval of Putin (which is strongly correlated with censorship tolerance.) Trying to disentangle such attitudes is both methodologically and conceptually a challenge. Still, the results offer weak evidence in support of Hypothesis 1.

The results are clearer in the relationship between censorship tolerance and consumption of independent media. Hypothesis 2 suggests that independent media consumption will be higher among those with lower censorship tolerance. Models 4-6 show that those with lower censorship tolerance are far more likely to consume independent media, even when controlling

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| | Dependent variable: | | | | | |
| | Use State News | | | Use Ind. News | | |
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Age	0.043***	0.040***	0.040***	−0.014**	−0.013	−0.012
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)
University	−0.164	−0.146	−0.162	0.220	0.212	0.195
	(0.140)	(0.140)	(0.143)	(0.216)	(0.219)	(0.221)
Female	0.245**	0.251**	0.208*	−0.429**	−0.431**	−0.350*
	(0.119)	(0.119)	(0.121)	(0.192)	(0.191)	(0.194)
log(Income)	0.070	0.088	0.051	0.360*	0.349*	0.394**
	(0.100)	(0.101)	(0.104)	(0.189)	(0.187)	(0.191)
Large City	−0.281	−0.267	−0.168	0.801***	0.795***	0.749***
	(0.188)	(0.187)	(0.196)	(0.243)	(0.243)	(0.245)
Internet		−0.221	−0.123		0.117	0.025
		(0.185)	(0.187)		(0.319)	(0.321)
Putin Approval			0.719***			−0.519***
			(0.129)			(0.195)
Tolerate Censorship	0.759***	0.755***	0.412*	−1.907***	−1.902***	−1.690***
	(0.233)	(0.233)	(0.243)	(0.402)	(0.401)	(0.390)
Constant	−2.106*	−2.019*	−1.955*	−4.767**	−4.800**	−5.051**
	(1.110)	(1.109)	(1.133)	(2.102)	(2.108)	(2.149)
Observations	1,610	1,610	1,591	1,610	1,610	1,591

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4.4: Predictors of news source consumption. All models are logit. Dependent variable is a binary indicator of reported use of state (models 1-3) /independent media (models 4-6) in the previous two weeks. Putin approval is binary. Censorship tolerance is an index variable ranging from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating greater tolerance of censorship.

for demographic differences, internet usage, and attitudes toward Putin. Based on the Model 3 results, the probability that a person with a censorship tolerance at the maximum uses alternative media is .03 while the probability that a person with a censorship tolerance at the minimum uses alternative media is .15. This provides strong support for Hypothesis 2. Only those who highly value the information missing from state television or are ideologically opposed to censorship bother to put in the added effort to seek out alternative sources.

4.4.6   The Value of Independent Information

In addition to influencing their own news consumption choices, censorship tolerance might also relate to attitudes toward information access policies. In the survey, respondents were asked a question reminding them that the most popular news outlets in Russia are controlled by the state and then asked about how important it is for people to have access to non-state controlled news sources. The results suggest that, for a lot of Russians, having access to independent information sources is not a top priority. Only 30 percent of respondents indicated that having access to independent information sources is very important, while 44 percent described it as somewhat important, and 27 percent described it as unimportant.

Table 4.5 shows the predictors of the belief that access to non-state information sources is very important. The results show that this belief is more common among younger people, men, and those living in urban areas. Disapproval of Putin is, unsurprisingly, a strong predictor of this belief. Only 22 percent of Putin supporters consider access very important, while 44 percent of non-supporters consider it very important. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, low censorship tolerance is also predictive of the perceived value of independent media, even when controlling for attitudes toward Putin. Based on the Model 4 results, increasing censorship tolerance from 0 to 1 while holding all other values constant reduces the predicted probability of viewing independent media access as very important from 41 percent to 20 percent.

	Dependent variable:			
	Access to Independent Media is Very Important			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age	−0.012***	−0.011**	−0.014***	−0.013***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Female	−0.330***	−0.251**	−0.274**	−0.219*
	(0.119)	(0.123)	(0.121)	(0.124)
log(Income)	−0.0004	0.042	−0.050	−0.004
	(0.100)	(0.103)	(0.100)	(0.103)
University	0.209	0.225*	0.179	0.201
	(0.131)	(0.133)	(0.134)	(0.135)
Large City	0.530***	0.453**	0.442**	0.389**
	(0.176)	(0.179)	(0.178)	(0.180)
Internet	0.340*	0.188	0.327*	0.193
	(0.178)	(0.183)	(0.182)	(0.185)
Putin Approval		−0.884***		−0.734***
		(0.123)		(0.128)
Censorship Tolerance			−1.439***	−1.102***
			(0.234)	(0.242)
Observations	1,494	1,480	1,494	1,480
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4.5: Perceived importance of access to independent media. All models are logit and sampling weights are used in all analyses.

4.5   Discussion

The results of this analysis of public opinion suggest that attitudes toward the soft censorship deployed by state media vary substantially across the Russian population, and that such attitudes are strongly related to news consumption habits. Most Russians do not regularly consume independent media. Those that do, however, tend to have a substantially lower level of tolerance for the kinds of soft censorship that state news outlets regularly deploy. State news consumers, by contrast, tend to tolerate a certain level of censorship in the mass media and place a relatively low value on some of the information that is suppressed. Moreover, the perceived value of independent media access is strongly associated with attitudes toward state media censorship practices.

Survey responses suggest that attitudes toward censorship and news outlets that engage in censorship are nuanced and contextual. Those with a deep ideological objection to all censorship in the mass media are a minority. For most people, some suppression of news content is acceptable when the informational value is perceived to be relatively low and the costs—material, psychological, and social—of retaining access to the content is relatively high. Given these tradeoffs, the tolerance for censorship tends to be higher when the object of censorship is symbolic and affectively charged. There is higher demand for censoring LGBT activism, feminist activism, criticism of Putin, and criticism of relations between Russia and Ukraine and Russia and the West than for censoring other topics. In general, priming people to think about the costs of information access, either by evoking a threat associated with information or by asking people to consider changing their own news habits in response to censorship, reveals greater tolerance for censorship and more variation in attitudes across people than asking about support for censorship alone. This explains why this study is able to reveal substantial tolerance of and support for censoring protest activity and other expressions of dissent in particular circumstances, even though earlier surveys suggest that only a very small portion of people actively demand the censorship of information about

protests.

The results of this study also reveal who tends to be more tolerant of censorship. In general, tolerance for censorship is lower among higher income individuals and those living in Moscow and St. Petersburg. This may stem, in part, from the extent to which people are able to prioritize post-material concerns associated with pro-democracy values. It may also relate to exposure to critical information. There is some suggestive evidence that women are more tolerant of censorship than men. However, the relationship is not consistently robust when controlling for approval of Putin and is not consistent across survey questions. Women are less likely than men to say they would change their news consumption behavior in response to censorship but are not more likely to actively demand censorship. This could possibly reflect different costs of switching sources if, for example, there are structural reasons that women are more reliant on television.

Unsurprisingly, attitudes toward Putin are strongly predictive of attitudes toward censorship. Those who approve of the president are less discouraged from consuming news sources that suppress information, are more likely to list at least one topic that should be excluded from the news, and are more likely to agree with the view that state news outlets should sometimes censor protest activity so as not to encourage others to join and cause unrest. There are many plausible causal explanations for this relationship, among which the present data cannot differentiate. When state media is concealing criticism of or protests against government leaders and policies, it is primarily concealing information about dissent toward the president. The president's critics would, unsurprisingly, be less tolerant of this suppression while his supporters may even appreciate not encountering information challenging their beliefs. Putin's critics may also be more likely to have stronger pro-democracy values and a stronger ideological objection to censorship. As discussed, attitudes toward censorship might also influence information consumption, which could, in turn, shape attitudes toward the president.

This study focuses primarily on attitudes toward censorship aimed at concealing political

discontent. I focus on political discontent because it has been a primary target for censorship in Russian state media. Expressions of discontent, especially protests, also can make dissent newsworthy. The suppression of information about events like protests is therefore easy for people to recognize as suppression. At the same time, news on expressions of discontent, rather than the cause of the discontent, may represent a case where the informational utility is relatively low for many people. Future research could further examine how attitudes toward the censorship of expressions of dissent compare to attitudes toward the censorship of information about the source of that dissent.

4.6 Conclusion

The ability to suppress information can be a useful tool for autocrats. Dictators have a particular interest in controlling information about dissent, given the potential for information to exacerbate perceived grievances, facilitate coordination, and stoke further unrest. However, controlling information entirely is not always easy and can be costly. If people have a strong interest in knowing about such information, they may find a way to get it. Moreover, if people have a strong objection to censorship generally, they may punish efforts to suppress information.

This chapter offers some insight into why efforts to suppress information can work, even when they are only partial and even when audiences are aware they are happening. While some people have a deep objection to censorship, this group is a minority. Most people tolerate some degree of information suppression, particularly if they view such information as threatening either to their core beliefs or to social stability. Even when people do not actively support a specific case of censorship, they may still find that the censored source gives them the information they need. The results presented here suggest that, when state news outlets ignore opposition activity and various expressions of dissent, this may not be a major deterrent for most viewers. In fact, when the dissent is carried out by a disliked

group or by those who people perceive as threatening the social order, audiences might prefer censorship.

One pernicious feature of censorship is that, when information is suppressed, the value to an individual of having that information is often reduced. Little (2017) shows that it can be rational for individuals to act in accordance with propaganda, even if they are not persuaded by it themselves, because they expect it to persuade a sufficient number of other people. The theory examined here suggests something similar with respect to news consumption choices. People might not generally think that protests and criticism of the government and its policies should be censored. However, if they are censored, it becomes less useful for an individual to have information about these events. If no one else will be talking about a news story or acting in response to a news story, there may be little benefit to the individual news consumer for having read or watched the story.

In general, the attitudes toward censorship captured by this survey are endogenous to the information and political environment in which people have been socialized. It is an environment in which groups such as LGBT people and social activists are regularly demonized when they do get coverage in the media. It is also one in which protesters are regularly arrested and protest organizers are treated as a threat to the social order by the predominant state propaganda outlets. In such an environment, it is perhaps, unsurprising that many ordinary news consumers develop a level of tolerance for censorship and will rely on sources they know suppress some information.

CHAPTER 5

The Preference for Propaganda: The Roles of Content and Branding in News Demand

5.1 Introduction

The decisions people make about where they get their news depend on a variety of factors. Convenience, costs, topic selection, framing, bias, branding, and reputation are just some of the factors that may affect people's media choices. State media's popularity in Russia may depend on a combination of preferences related to any of these factors. This poses a challenge for understanding what people's preferences are and which ones really matter.

Part of the explanation for state media's popularity almost certainly could be the successful efforts by the state to marginalize independent media. Since 2014, television news in Russia has been restricted essentially entirely to channels owned directly or indirectly by the state. For those committed to watching the news on television, state news has been the only option for several years. State news is also available on the radio, in print, and online. State restrictions on independent media have gradually intensified over the course of Putin's third term, forcing some news outlets to either close, adopt subscription models, or solicit donations. The gradual attacks on the free press intensified drastically in March, 2022, when wartime censorship enacted in Russia resulted in the closure of most remaining independent media and the exodus of many journalists. Even before this crackdown, however, accessing independent media already required more work and, sometimes, money than accessing state news.

However, the demand for state news may not be due entirely to these differences in costs and accessibility. State television viewers might actually value the content that state news outlets produce and prefer it to available alternatives. The pro-Kremlin framing of state news coverage may appeal to supporters of the Putin regime. The celebratory coverage of Russia's actions on the world stage and overt appeals to patriotism on state television may also attract audiences that are deeply attached to their Russian identity. Beliefs about the reliability and reputation of different news outlets may also matter. Audiences might perceive state sources as higher capacity, more reliable, and more reputable than independent alternatives.

Understanding all of the reasons that people watch state media is critical to understanding the effectiveness of the Kremlin's propaganda and information control strategy, the vulnerability of that strategy to changes in technology, media markets, and current events, and the conditions under which the state's strategy might change. If state television's popularity is driven entirely by accessibility and convenience, then the Kremlin's information dominance may be more vulnerable to technological changes that increase the accessibility of alternative information sources. Even in the absence of alternative information, people who see no value in state media may simply ignore it. Additionally, retaining state dominance of information channels may come at a higher political cost. On the other hand, if a sizable portion of the public genuinely likes state media, then the Kremlin may be less threatened by alternative messaging and may avoid some of the political costs associated with restricting access to independent media.

In this chapter, I draw on evidence from a survey designed to help isolate the distinct preferences that motivate people to consume state and/or independent news. I focus on identifying the role of content-based preferences—those that relate to the substance of the news product itself—and beliefs about news outlets in shaping the demand for news. To measure content-based preferences, I ask respondents to evaluate a selection of news content from state and independent news outlets with all information identifying the source removed.

News excerpts are selected randomly for each respondent from a large pool of news content produced by these sources over the course of ten days. I then conduct an experiment to measure the effect of revealing the source of a news report on how people evaluate the report.

The results suggest that state television news consumers generally like state news content. Even in a blind taste test in which source information is concealed and accessibility is held constant, they prefer it to the content produced by alternative independent news outlets. They find it more interesting, more important, more relevant, and less biased than independent news content. Moreover, they are more likely to have an emotional reaction, especially a positive emotional reaction, in response to state news content compared to in response to independent news content. Even those who regularly consume independent news show a high level of interest in state news content, similar to their interest in independent news content. These results suggest that the state television news outlets have succeeded in producing a product that many people genuinely like.

What explains this high level of interest in state news content? In additional analyses, I examine the role of consistency with priors, topic selection, and framing in shaping how people respond to news content. I show that interest in state television content is predicted by attitudes toward President Putin and emotional attachment to Russia. Additionally, I find that many state television news consumers show relatively low levels of interest in reporting on highly politicized and controversial subjects such as opposition activity and state repression, which are prominently featured in independent news reporting. The topic focus of state television news more closely matches their preferences.

This chapter contributes to two largely distinct literatures. First, it contributes to a growing body of literature on the role of information control in autocratic regimes by examining how audiences navigate a constrained media landscape. Audience attentiveness to different information sources plays a key role in determining the effectiveness of any information control strategy, yet it has been relatively under-explored in existing studies. Second,

this research contributes to a long literature in political communications and psychology on selective exposure. Existing research on selective exposure focuses almost entirely on advanced democratic countries (especially the United States). I consider the extent to which these theories also apply to an authoritarian context in which state-controlled news sources are predominant.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows. I first discuss the existing literature on news source choice and my theory of how content and beliefs about sources affect demand. I then consider the empirical implications and present the hypotheses to be evaluated in this study. In the following section, I describe my research design. Next, I briefly discuss the survey sample. I then present my analysis, including a description of my estimation strategy and the results. In the discussion section, I provide a summary of the results and discuss the study's limitations and opportunities for future research. The final section concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of this research.

5.2 Theory

Control over the flow of information is thought to play an important role in helping modern authoritarian regimes consolidate and maintain power. Guriev and Treisman (2020) argue that, rather than relying on violent repression, modern dictatorships use censorship and propaganda to persuade the public of the dictator's competence, thereby maintaining genuine popularity that allows them to stay in power and retain legitimacy. However, as captured in Guriev and Treisman's model, maintaining total control over information is difficult, costly, and, in some ways, counterproductive. The public can often learn about the regime's performance through other means, including their direct observations of policy outcomes and any remaining independent media. It seems that a key component of any successful propaganda strategy is that the public pays attention to and absorbs what the propaganda says, even in the face of alternative information.

There is evidence that people do pay attention to propaganda, yet the reason for this attention is puzzling. People should seemingly have reason to distrust or ignore news that has an overt political bias or that seems inconsistent with observable reality (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2015; Guriev and Treisman 2020). Propagandists can adopt clever strategies to conceal their manipulations (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Rozenas and Stukal 2019). However, a rational, consumer of information might also reasonably expect such strategic distortions, and discount state information accordingly.

Given the apparent weaknesses of biased state information sources, what determines the information sources to which the public pays attention and why are state-controlled news outlets so popular? I suggest that individuals' choices to use or not use a given news source stem from preferences along three dimensions: 1) the source's accessibility 2) the content itself and 3) the audience member's beliefs about the news outlet. To understand both why people use the news sources they do and what might cause those choices to change, each of these dimensions of preference must be considered.

5.2.1 Accessibility and costs

Part of the appeal of state news in Russia almost certainly is that it is so easy to access. For many Russians, television is the preferred way to access the news and, as discussed, the Kremlin has worked hard to ensure that television news is entirely state-controlled. Moreover, the ubiquity of state news online, on the radio, and in print ensures that no matter what mode people prefer for accessing the news, a state-aligned source is easily accessible. While, for regular internet users, independent news outlets were often almost as accessible as of 2021, even small amounts of "friction" could compel users to choose the easier option (Roberts 2018). The privileged position of state-aligned sources on online news aggregators such as Yandex News may have given these sources a significant advantage in attracting audiences (Soldatov and Borogan 2015).

A related factor is the costs of accessing the news. While some independent sources were—like state news outlets—free to access, others, such as *Dozhd*, charged subscription fees for full access to their content. Of course, all else equal, audiences should tend to prefer news outlets that are free to those that cost money.

5.2.2 Preferences over Content

People might also choose a given news source because they like its content. I define content-based preferences as those that depend only on the observable qualities of the news product itself and not on any information or beliefs about how the news product was produced or how others perceive it. Some content-based preferences are stylistic; an individual may simply like the way a news broadcast is delivered or an article is written. Other preferences may be more substantive, and depend on what a news outlet chooses to report, how it frames stories, and what evidence it draws upon to support its claims. Content-based preferences apply to specific news reports. Audiences may like or dislike a given report based on its style, relevance, usefulness, reasonableness, and emotional impact. Audiences may prefer sources that tend to produce more content that suits these preferences.

Information-seeking news consumers might be expected to generally prefer news content that seems to them more plausible and relevant. Judgments about the accuracy of news reporting depend mostly on beliefs about the reliability of the source. Still, reports that conflict with priors are likely to seem more implausible than those with fit with viewers' expectations. Conversely, reports that are supported by convincing evidence will appear more credible. Relevance is easier to evaluate than accuracy on the basis of content. In Russia, the selection of topics frequently differed between state and independent news outlets. State news outlets often focus on providing an overview of government activities, including meetings between President Putin and various ministers, regional government officials, and foreign officials. Foreign policy is featured prominently on state television news. Adversarial independent news outlets, by contrast, reported more frequently on opposition activity,

opposition activists, and corruption. Audiences were able to observe these differences in content, and may have preferred those sources that tended to report on stories that they considered interesting or important. I suggest that perceptions of importance depend on three factors. First, individuals should be more interested in topics that affect them personally or their family and friends (personal relevance). Second, they may believe they have a particular civic responsibility to know about news events that are likely to affect the society as a whole (civic relevance). Third, they may care about whether a given news report is likely to be a topic of conversation (social relevance). Audiences can evaluate each of these qualities by assessing the substance of what a news outlet reports. However, as will be discussed, judgments of importance, especially civic and social relevance, might also depend on beliefs about who is doing the reporting.

The propagandistic qualities of Russian state television might deter some viewers who either prefer neutral coverage of politics or coverage that is more critical of the current regime. However, although independence and objectivity are often touted as central pillars of journalism, (Ward 2009; Steele 2013) for some viewers, the pro-Putin, pro-Russian framing of state television news might actually enhance its appeal. An extensive literature on selective exposure suggests that people tend to prefer messages that conform to their priors, particularly when it comes to deeply held political beliefs (see Stroud 2017 for a review). This preference for confirmatory content may stem from a preference to avoid information that could provoke cognitive dissonance and seek information that resolves existing dissonance (Festinger 1957; Aronson 1968). People may experience a positive feeling of validation when they encounter information confirming their beliefs or suspicions (Hart et al. 2009). They may approach information with the goal not of learning the truth, but instead to better position themselves to defend their beliefs (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989; Kunda 1990). Such preferences could result in demand-driven bias in the media even in the absence of producer-driven bias (Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005; Xiang and Sarvary 2007). In the Russia context, these preferences also suit the interests of the state-controlled media.

In democratic countries, preferences over news content often align with partisanship (Morris 2005). In Russia, where party identification is not particularly strong, the more relevant political division may be in attitudes toward Putin. Strong supporters of the president may like state television because it never criticizes the president and consistently celebrates his accomplishments. Adversarial independent news outlets, by contrast, highlighted evidence of government failures and provided more discussion of those seeking to challenge the existing regime. Such messaging may have appealed to Putin's detractors but deterred his supporters.

In addition to its more positive depiction of Putin, state television's appeals to Russian patriotism and celebratory coverage of Russia's status on the world stage might also attract audiences. As Aronson (1968) suggests in his extension of dissonance theory, dissonance may be most concerning to people when it threatens their self-concept. For those deeply attached to Russia that see Russianness as core to their identity, the relatively positive coverage of Russia on state television may be more appealing than the coverage by independent and, especially, foreign news outlets. Not only is the coverage on state television more positive about Russia, but also it frequently includes messaging about anti-Russian bias on the part of the West and western media. Such coverage may be vindicating to those who feel Russia and Russians are frequently belittled.

Several scholars have posited that emotions, particularly emotional appeals to Russian identity, are central to state television's popularity. Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker (2018) argue that state television news is designed to play into audiences' feeling of humiliation by the West and bolster their sense that the tables have now turned. State news outlets tried to encourage a feeling of pride in their viewers, which audiences actively sought:

> Contrary to the claim that inaccurate 'news' drives viewers away, the raw and aggressive propaganda on pro-Kremlin TV attract[s] larger audiences than before. Our explanation is that what the state channels were selling was not accurate information but emotional gratification. They offered versions of reality that—

although not infrequently untrue—made Russians feel good about themselves and their country.

Greene and G. B. Robertson (2019) and Greene and G. Robertson (2020) similarly argue that emotions, especially positive emotions such as pride and enthusiasm, are central to the product that state television provides. They describe audiences glued to their televisions in the wake of the Crimean annexation, joining in the experience of "collective effervescence" as they watched the triumphant extended coverage of the events unfold on the evening news.

5.2.3   Beliefs about Sources

Finally, people might choose where they get their news based on their beliefs about news sources. While preferences over content affect how people react to specific news reports, beliefs about sources affect how people consider all of the reporting by a given source. Such beliefs may include the perceived reliability, trustworthiness, allegiances, biases, reputation, or social relevance of a given news source. When individuals aggregate these beliefs, they may become attached to specific sources, and develop essentially a brand loyalty.

Audiences rely on news outlets to gather, select, organize, distill, and distribute information. Unable to observe this process in full and lacking some of the contextual knowledge to make sense of the information environment, news consumers have to rely on their beliefs about how well news outlets are performing these tasks when judging the quality of the news that is produced. Audiences may judge news outlet credibility based on the extent to which they expect a source to report the news correctly and without bias (Hass 1981). Such expectations may be informed by perceptions of the trustworthiness and expertise of news outlets (Ibelema and Powell 2001). If audiences have strong beliefs about news outlets, those beliefs might affect their reactions to news content depending on the source to which it is attributed (Greer 2003).

Although it seems sensible that the audience's beliefs about sources would affect their

perceptions of news trustworthiness, previous research on the effect of source information on perceptions of news content has shown mixed results. Some studies suggest that source information affects people's trust in information (Baum and Groeling 2009; Berinsky 2017; Foundation and Gallup 2018). However, other studies have found that source information has little effect on audience belief in news and that the content of the message is far more important (Austin and Dong 1994; Jakesch et al. 2018; Dias, Pennycook, and Rand 2020).

Russian news audiences might expect political bias by both state and independent news outlets to undermine the reliability of reporting. They may recognize that state-controlled news outlets have an incentive to distort their coverage in the Kremlin's favor. Given that the reporters and editors of state news outlets owe their jobs to the Kremlin's support of state media, audiences might question their ability to cover political affairs, especially at the national level, objectively. These beliefs may be further solidified over time when state news outlets consistently avoid negative coverage of Putin even when the public can observe negative policy outcomes. On the other hand, audiences might consider adversarial independent news outlets to be biased against the Kremlin, biased against Russia, and supportive of the opposition. The "foreign agent" label attached to many of these sources and regular criticism of these outlets by elites may add to such suspicions.

Audiences might also have beliefs about the expertise of different news outlets. They may perceive state news outlets as having greater resources and access to political elites, enhancing their expertise. Independent news outlets might be seen as having greater access to opposition activists or may be perceived as experts in particular types of reporting, such as investigative reporting.

Taken together, these beliefs might affect how people perceive the value of the news product that these different types of news outlets produce. Source attribution could affect the perception that news reporting is biased. Additionally, given that news audiences rely on news outlets to select and distill information in addition to collecting and distributing it, perceptions of news outlets might also affect the extent to which a given news report is seen

as interesting, important, and relevant. Finally, news audiences may recognize the social value of information, and therefore might consider information to be more valuable if the information is expected to reach a larger audience. Expectations about the societal reach of news may depend on beliefs about the popularity of sources.

5.3 Empirical Implications

The theory described above suggests that the popularity of state news outlets in Russia may be driven by 1) the low costs and effort required to access it, 2) specific features of its content that appeal to audiences or 3) the beliefs that people have about its credibility and reputation. Because state sources were so much easier to access than independent sources, it is difficult to know the extent to which the other two factors mattered to audiences and influence their news source choices. In this chapter, I focus on empirically evaluating the extent to which people prefer the content of the news sources they use and the additional effect of revealing the source of information on how audiences perceive it.

5.3.1 Content-based preferences

The first set of hypotheses concerns the role of content-based preferences. If these preferences determine news source choice, then people should tend to evaluate the content produced by the outlets they regularly use highly, even when they do not know its source. Regular consumers of state news should tend to find the content produced by state news outlets to be interesting, important, relevant, and emotionally appealing in an absolute sense and in comparison to available alternatives. Independent news audiences, on the other hand, should react positively to the content produced by independent news outlets and prefer it to that of state news outlets.

H1) State news consumers find the reporting of state news sources to be:

(a) more interesting,

(b) more important,

(c) more relevant,

(d) less politically biased, and

(e) more emotionally appealing

than reporting by independent sources.

H2) Independent news consumers find the reporting of independent news sources to be:

(a) more interesting,

(b) more important,

(c) more relevant,

(d) less politically biased, and

(e) more emotionally appealing

than reporting by state sources.

5.3.2 Beliefs about sources

Audiences may also have preferences over news sources that are distinct from assessments of the content produced on a given day. If audiences have strong beliefs about sources, then the perception that a given news report is interesting, important, or biased may depend on who produced the content in addition to or instead of the content itself. If people choose news outlets because of their prior beliefs about sources, then they may respond differently to news content depending on the source to which it is attributed. Evaluations of news content should generally be more positive when it is attributed to a preferred source and

more negative when it is attributed to a non-preferred source. The gap between how people evaluate state news content and independent news content should be greater when the source is known.

H3) State news consumers will find a given report to be more (less)

(a) interesting,

(b) important,

(c) relevant,

(d) politically biased, and

(e) emotionally appealing

when its source is revealed to be the state (independent) news media.

H4) Independent news consumers will find a given report to be more (less)

(a) interesting,

(b) important,

(c) relevant,

(d) politically biased, and

(e) emotionally appealing

when its source is revealed to be the independent (state) news media.

5.4 Research Design

To evaluate each of these hypotheses, I conducted on online survey of 1020 Russian respondents. The survey was conducted via Qualtrics beween August and September, 2021.

Respondents were recruited from existing panels of participants who agree to take surveys in exchange for compensation. The survey included several different modules designed to measure people's preferences over news and isolate the distinct roles of content and beliefs in shaping preferences. In addition, respondents completed a brief general survey about their news habits and political beliefs. The details of the design for the different survey sections are described below.[1]

5.4.1 Modules A and B

In Modules A and B, respondents were presented with a series of excerpts from recent news reports by prominent state and independent news outlets and asked to answer several questions about each one. In Module A, the "blind taste test," news excerpts were presented without source attribution. This allows for assessing what content audiences prefer when they cannot be influenced by their prior beliefs about sources. In Module B, news excerpts were presented with their true source revealed. Comparing responses in Module B (revealed condition) to Module A (concealed condition) allows for identifying the effect of prior beliefs about sources on how people evaluate the news. The design additionally controls for differences in accessibility between state and independent news outlets that exist in the real world.

Respondents saw three news excerpts of approximately the same length from a state news outlet and three from independent news outlets in each of the two conditions (concealed, Module A, and revealed, Module B).[2] Respondents were asked seven questions about each

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1. A pre-analysis plan for this study can be found at `https://osf.io/euarn`.

2. An image accompanied the text if there was any imagery or video in the report. The average length of state news excerpts was 99 words and the average length of independent news excerpts was 100 words. In almost all cases, the excerpt included the headline and the first few paragraphs of the report. Some full reports were shorter than the target length of 100 words. Occasionally, an unusually long excerpt was included because the excerpt included a long quote that could not be abbreviated without potentially changing its meaning. Texts were minimally edited except for length. Phrases were occasionally removed from the text if they provided or appeared to provide information identifying the source of the news report. For example, if a news report includes a statement such as "he told *Ekho Moskvy*," the phrase was edited to

news excerpt.[3] The first question asks about the respondent's overall interest in the news report on a scale from 0-10 (H1a, H2a). The second asks about the importance of the news report on a scale from 0-10 (H1b, H2b). The next four questions asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with several statements about the news report on a scale from 0-10. The first three statements pertain to different dimensions of relevance (H1c, H2c). The first statement concerned a civic duty to know about such issues. The second concerned the personal significance of the story to the respondent. The third concerned the likelihood that the story would be a topic of conversation. The last statement asked about the extent to which the news report was politically biased (H1d, H2d). In the final question, respondents were asked to indicate how the news excerpt made them feel (H1e, H2e).

The representativeness of the sample of news excerpts used in Modules A and B was essential to the design. These excerpts were collected over the course of a 10-day period immediately prior to the launch of the survey. Although each respondent saw only 12 excerpts in Modules A and B, these excerpts were randomly sampled for each participant from a larger pool of excerpts. The state news excerpts were all taken from *Perviy kanal* (Channel 1), one of the two most popular state television news outlets in Russia. All of the news reports included in the channel's primetime evening news broadcast, *Vremya*, over the course of the 10-day period were included in the study (109 excerpts total). The independent news content was drawn from four relatively well-known independent news outlets: *Ekho Moskvy* (Echo of Moscow), *Dozhd* (Rain), *Meduza*, and *Novaya gazeta* (New Newspaper). Including several independent news outlets was important, given that there is some variation across independent news outlets in what they choose to report and, potentially, how they are perceived by audiences. These four sources were chosen because of their popularity and focus on general interest social and political issues. However, they may not be representative of

simply say "he said." All excerpts were given identical formatting.

3. The full text of the questions and an example news excerpt from Module A can be found in Appendix A. Example Module B excerpts, which include the news outlet's banner at the top but are otherwise identical to the Module A excerpts, can be found in Appendix B.

the full independent media landscape. In particular, these four sources have been described as "critical" news outlets based on their adversarial reporting on the Kremlin and Russian politics. The news excerpts drawn from the four independent news outlets were those that were featured as top news by the news outlets either in daily newsletters or in the featured news sections of their websites (221 excerpts total). The choice to use news stories featured as top stories by the news outlets was to obtain a sample of stories most comparable to those featured in the prime time news broadcast by the state news outlet.[4]

Each respondent completed Module A prior to Module B. This was to reduce the likelihood that respondents would be thinking about the lack of source attribution when completing Module A. A given news report appeared in the Module A pool for approximately half of the respondents and the Module B for the other half of respondents. This ensures that there is no systematic difference in the pool of excerpts in Module A and Module B across the sample and allows for identifying the effect of revealing the source at both the respondent and report level. News excerpts were grouped by date such that each respondent would see one state and one independent news excerpt from the beginning of the news collection period, one each from the middle, and one each from the end.

5.4.2   Module C

Module C is intended as a complement to Module A as an additional means of measuring content-based preferences. In Module C, respondents were presented with two brief excerpts drawn from a state source and an independent source on a given topic in which the source of the excerpt was excluded. They were asked then asked to simply choose which news story they would be more interested in reading. The purpose of Module C was to measure

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4. *Perviy kanal* includes approximate transcripts of its television news content on its website, which were used in the study. *Dozhd* and *Meduza* send daily newsletters that feature top stories, all of which were included in the sample. *Ekho Moskvy* includes a daily "Top 7" list of news stories, all of which were included. *Novaya gazeta* publishes a daily news summary each day highlighting top news stories, all of which were included.

preferences for the framing of news stories, holding the topic selection constant. Unlike in Module A, the content used in Module C was not intended to necessarily be representative of the news content state and independent news outlet produce. Instead, news excerpts were specifically chosen to focus on framing differences on prominent political news topics. All respondents saw the same three pairs of news excerpts in Module C. The three topics addressed in the Module C news reports are 1) the designation of investigative news outlet Proekt as an undesirable organization, 2) controversy between Germany and Russia over an OPCW report on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and 3) Russia's complaint to the ECHR about Ukraine. The full text of the three excerpt pairs can be found in Appendix C.

5.4.3   General Survey

In addition to the three modules described above, the survey also included questions about demographics, media habits, attitudes toward the media, and political beliefs. The full text of the survey questions (translated into English) can be found in Appendix D. The hypotheses predict different response patterns in the four modules depending on the news sources that people regularly use. The questions on news habits were used to sort respondents into several groups, some of which overlap, based on what news outlets they do and do not use. Respondents were asked to indicate which news outlets from a list of 37 nationally-oriented news outlets they have watched, read, or listened to in the past few months. In a follow up question, respondents were asked to list the frequency with which they use the selected sources. Respondents were categorized as a frequent user of a given news source if they reported using that source at least three times per week.

News outlets were sorted into four categories: state news outlets, pro-state news outlets, "Kremlin-friendly" news outlets, and independent news outlets. State news outlets are those that are owned by the state or a state-owned company (such as Gazprom) and in which the state substantially influences content. Pro-state news outlets are those that are not owned by the state but whose content closely mirrors that of the state-owned news outlets. Kremlin-

friendly publications are news outlets that are privately owned and operated. These news outlets do not generally produce pro-state propaganda similar to that of the first two news outlet categories. However, there has been recent evidence that they have succumbed to some degree of editorial pressure from the state. The previously discussed business publications RBC and *Vedomosti* fall into this category. Finally, "independent" news outlets include both the foreign press and domestic independent news outlets that adopt an adversarial position toward the state.[5] A list of the 37 news outlets and how are they are categorized can be found in Appendix D. In the analyses, respondents are treated as regular state news users if they regularly use at least one state news source. Independent news consumers are those that regularly use at least one independent news source. An additional important category of respondents are those that use state news sources regularly but do not use either the independent news sources or the Kremlin-friendly privately owned sources. This group is of particular interest in this study, given that their news exposure is entirely driven by the state's messaging.

5.5   Survey Sample

A total of 1020 respondents completed all the sections of the survey. Descriptive statistics about the sample demographics can be found in Appendix E. A quota sampling method was used to approximate Russia's internet-using population. However, certain demographic groups were difficult to recruit into the study and it was necessary to relax some quotas to ensure the timely completion of the study. The sample is therefore somewhat younger, more highly educated, more male, and more concentrated in certain densely populated regions than the population as a whole. This sample is therefore more likely to use a diverse array

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5. The use of the word "independent" to describe such outlets refers to independence from the Kremlin. The four news outlets used in the survey are also independent of foreign governments. However, for the purposes of dividing respondents into news audience groups based on news habits, consumers of news outlets affiliated with foreign governments such as *Radio Svoboda* are included as independent news audiences, even though such news outlets are not independent in a more general sense.

of media sources, especially online, relative to the full population.

5.6   Analysis and results

If content and beliefs about sources affect demand for state and independent news, then people's reactions to state and independent news content should differ based on the sources they regularly use. Therefore, to analyze the results, I first divide respondents into groups based on the news sources they regularly use. Approximately 66% of respondents reported regularly using a state news source, and 24% reported regularly using an independent news source. About 39% of respondents regularly used state sources but did not use independent or "Kremlin-friendly" non-state news outlets. Only 7% of respondents used independent news sources but not state sources. In most analyses, I focus on the comparison between independent news audiences (including those who also use state sources) and state-only audiences. Because of the additional effort required to access non-state sources, we might expect those who use independent sources to have especially strong preferences for these non-state outlets.

The first set of hypotheses concern the role of content-based preferences in driving demand for different types of sources. To assess the role of content-based preferences in motivating news outlet choice, I compare how respondents evaluate state and independent news content when the source is concealed. If content-based preferences matter, then evaluations of state news content should be more positive among state news audiences, while independent news content should be evaluated more positively than state news content by independent news audiences. More specifically, the outcome of interest for each survey response is,

$$ContentPref_i = \mathbb{E}[Y_i|state, concealed] - \mathbb{E}[Y_i|nonstate, concealed]$$

where Y is the numeric response to the scale questions or an indicator for whether a

response was selected in the binary response questions. These differences are estimated at the individual level using a simple difference in means, as follows:

$$ContentPref_i = \frac{1}{N_s} \sum_e Y_t(state_e, concealed_m) - \frac{1}{N_{s'}} \sum_e Y_e(nonstate_e, concealed_m)$$

where Y_e is the response to a given excerpt, N_s is the number of state news excerpts $N_{s'}$ and is the number of non-state news excerpts for which there is a response. Although respondents all saw three state and three non-state news excerpts in Module A, they had the option to refuse to answer any question.

If audience's beliefs about news sources affect their choices, then people might evaluate news content differently when they know the source from which it came. The differences in how people evaluate state and independent news content should be stronger when the source is known than when it is unknown. To test the effect of revealing the source on the difference between how respondents evaluate state and independent news, I fit the following regression model for each of the main responses:

$$Y_{i,e,m} = \beta_1 Revealed_m + \beta_2 State_e + \beta_3 Revealed_m * State_e + FE_i + \epsilon_{i,e,m}$$

where "Y" is the response, "Revealed" is an indicator of whether the source is shown (varying at the module level), "State" is an indicator of whether the source of the excerpt is state-controlled (varying at the excerpt level), and "FE" is a respondent fixed effect. The interaction between the source of the excerpt and the revealed condition represents the effect of source priors on responses.

I find compelling evidence of content-based preferences among state news audiences in the analysis of Module A (concealed condition). The main results from the Module A analyses can be found in Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2. Figure 5.1 shows the difference in responses to

state and independent news excerpts for different audience groups. Figure 5.2 shows the average response to state and independent news excerpts for state-only and independent news audiences. Focusing first on state news users, I find evidence that state news audiences evaluate content produced by *Perviy kanal* more positively than content produced by the four independent news outlets when the source is concealed, as shown in Figure 5.1.
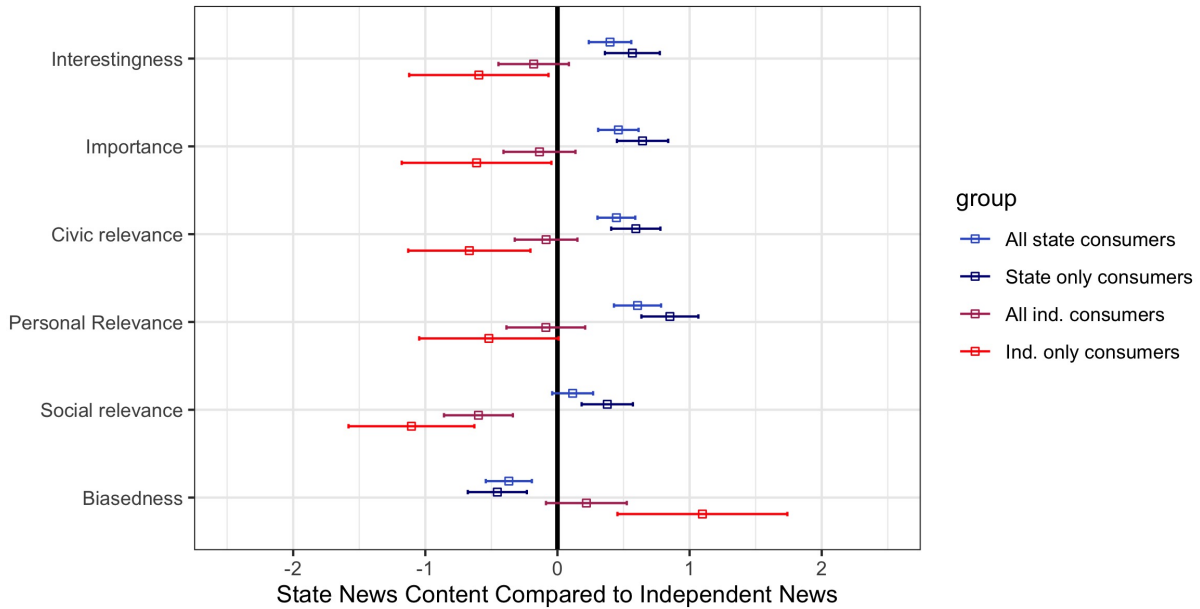
Figure 5.1: Differences in average responses to state and independent news in Module A (concealed source condition). Respondents are divided by audience group. All responses are measured on a scale from 0 to 10. Positive values indicate a higher average score for state news content than independent news content for a given survey item.

Consistent with H1a, state news audiences expressed stronger interest in state excerpts. In addition, consistent with H1b, they considered the state news excerpts to be, on average, more important and, consistent with H1c, more relevant across all three dimensions of relevance. Consistent with H1d, there is evidence that state news audiences consider independent news content to be more biased than state news. Audiences may be more likely to recognize political biases in the news if those biases seem directed against their side. That state news audiences perceive independent news content as more biased may stem from the perceived direction of this bias. As would be expected, those who use state news outlets
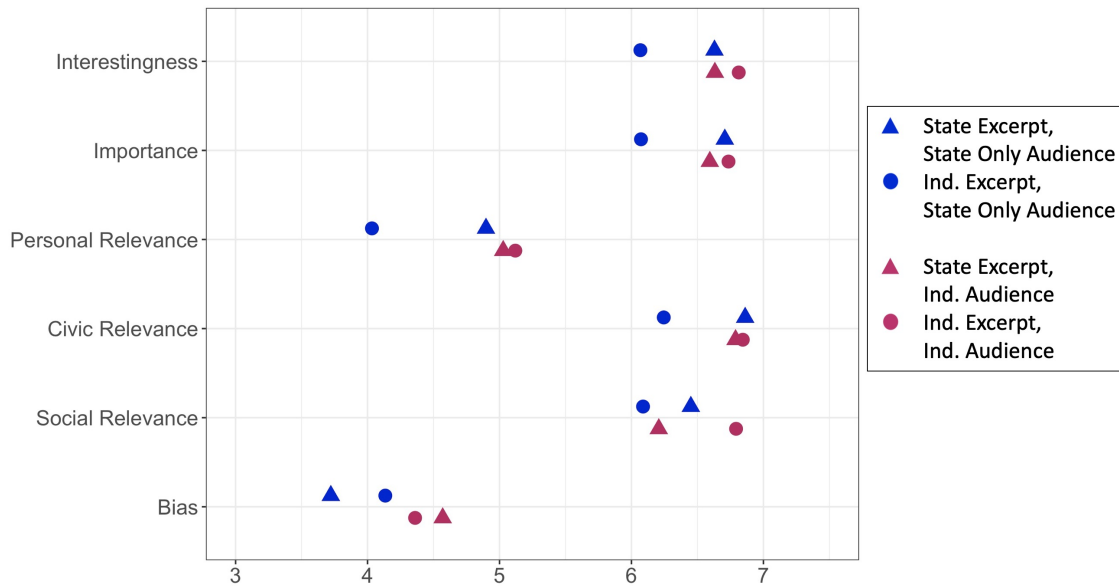
Figure 5.2: Average evaluations of state and independent news in Module A (concealed source condition). All responses are measured on a scale from 0 to 10. Color refers to audience group while shape refers to the source of the news excerpt, which was concealed from the respondent. Average responses to state news content are similar among the two audience groups. The groups diverge in their responses to independent news content.

exclusively show an even stronger preference for state news content.

For independent news audiences, the results are somewhat more ambiguous. For the full group of independent news consumers, many of whom also watch state sources, there is no statistically significant difference in responses to state and independent news content with the exception of the question on social relevance. Independent news audiences were more likely to say that independent news excerpts would be a topic of conversation than state news excerpts. This may be driven by the attention that independent news outlets give to certain politically controversial topics. For the small group of respondents who rely on independent news exclusively, the results in Figure 5.1 show evidence of a preference for independent news content. The results are also noisy, given the relatively small number of respondents in this group. The lack of a preference for independent news content among

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the broader group of independent news consumers that includes those who also use state sources is surprising, given the additional effort these consumers are expending to access the independent content.
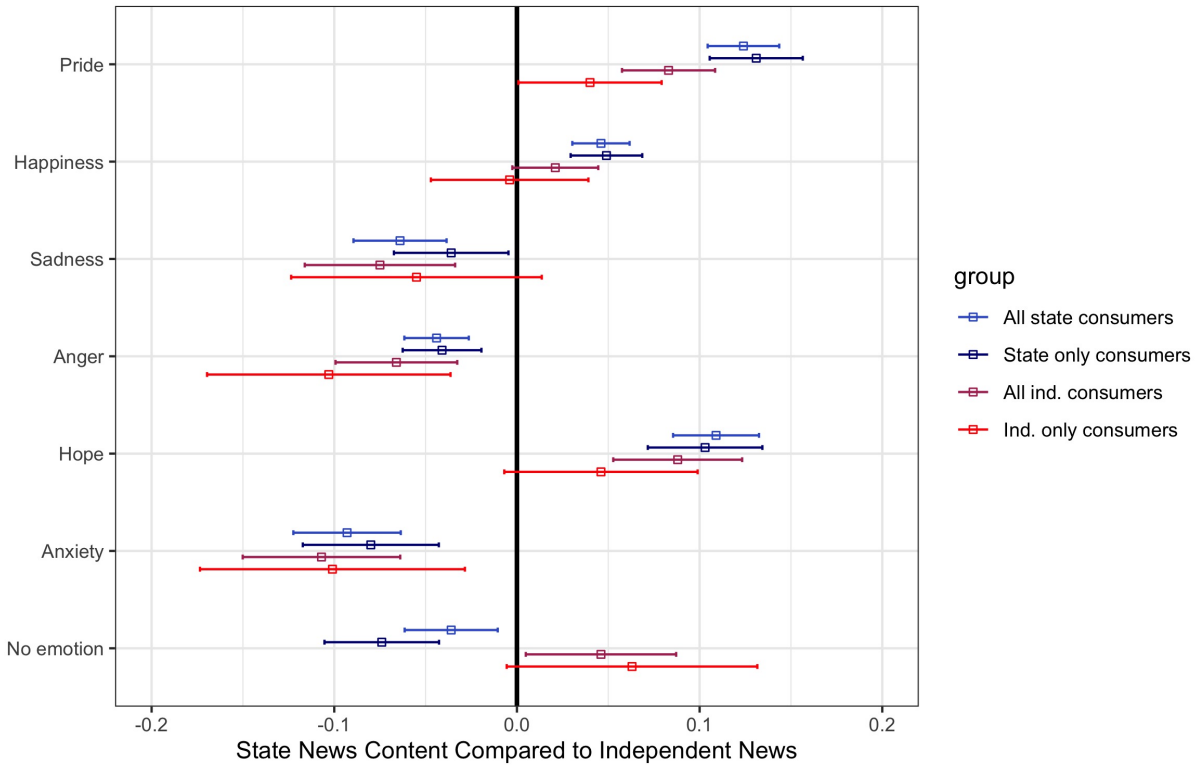
Figure 5.3: Differences in the proportion of respondents indicating a given emotional reaction to state vs. independent news excerpts. Respondents are divided by audience group. Respondents were asked how the news excerpt made them feel, and were able to select as many options as they wished. Results show that positive emotional reactions were more common in response to state news excerpts. Independent news excerpts were more likely to cause negative emotional reactions.

H1e posits that part of the appeal of state television news may be its emotional effects. State news audiences may have a stronger emotional reaction to state news content than to independent news content and may be more likely to have a positive emotional reaction. Responses suggest that positive emotional reactions to news content are overall less common than negative emotional reactions or neutral reactions. Figure 5.3 shows the differences between how respondents said they felt in response to state compared to independent news

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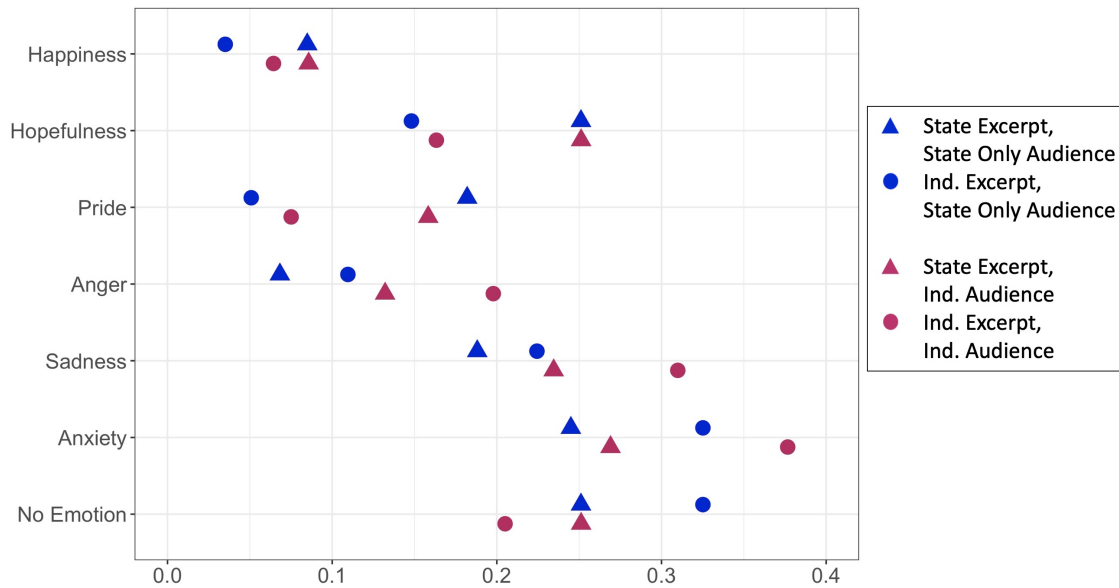
Figure 5.4: Average emotional reactions to news content in Module A (concealed source condition). Color refers to audience group. Shape refers to source of news excerpt, which was concealed. Results show that positive emotional reactions were rarer in general than negative emotional reactions and more common in response to state news excerpts.

content. There is evidence consistent with H1e that respondents were less likely to say that they had no emotional reaction to state news content compared to independent news content. They were also less likely to mention a negative emotional reaction (anxiety, sadness, anger) and more likely to indicate a positive emotional reaction (pride and hope especially) in response to state content compared to independent content. Figure 5.4 shows that negative emotional reactions were, in general, more common than positive emotional reactions.

I find evidence that emotional reactions to news content are correlated with interest. Respondents tended to express greater interest in stories that they said made them feel happy, sad, anxious, proud, and hopeful. There was a negative relationship between interest in news stories and expressed lack of emotional reaction to the story. These findings may suggest that part of state television's appeal may be its emotional appeal.

While there is compelling evidence for a modest but statistically significant content-based preference among state news audiences, there is no evidence that these preferences are strengthened by revealing the source. The results for state news audiences, shown in Table 5.1, are not consistent with strong attachments to sources affecting how these audiences evaluate news. The difference between average responses to state and average responses to independent news content does not significantly increase by revealing the source. Figure 5.5 similarly shows the strength of the content-based preference in the revealed and concealed conditions. The results show that the content-based preference for state news is similar in the revealed and concealed conditions.

	Dependent variable:					
	Interestingness	Importance	Civic Relevance	Personal Relevance	Social Relevance	Bias
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Revealed	−0.162	−0.182*	−0.151	−0.201*	−0.249**	−0.211*
	(0.105)	(0.107)	(0.105)	(0.119)	(0.110)	(0.124)
State source	0.555***	0.642***	0.618***	0.832***	0.377***	−0.423***
	(0.108)	(0.102)	(0.095)	(0.114)	(0.104)	(0.117)
Revealed * State source	0.235	0.211	0.116	0.100	0.245*	0.133
	(0.146)	(0.142)	(0.139)	(0.150)	(0.148)	(0.155)
Respondent fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	4,532	4,529	4,439	4,443	4,455	4,286
R^2	0.445	0.413	0.425	0.480	0.426	0.489

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5.1: Effect of source revelation on preference for state over independent news among state news only audiences. Observations represent a given trial by a respondent. Respondents completed three trials for each source type in each treatment condition (12 total, unless a trial was skipped). All models are estimated using OLS with standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Revealed is an indicator of the treatment condition. State source is an indicator of the source of the excerpt in a given trial. The interaction term represents the effect of revealing the source on the content preference for a given source.

For independent news audiences, the results are more ambiguous. When the source is revealed (Module B), there is some evidence of a small but statistically significant preference for independent news over state news, as shown in Figure 5.5. On average, independent news audiences find independent news content to be more interesting and more important

than state news content when they know its source. However, as reflected in the results in Table 5.2, there is little evidence of a statistically meaningful difference between the concealed condition and the revealed condition. There is some suggestive evidence that differences in interest become stronger when the source is revealed, although the results do not meet conventional standards of statistical significance. Part of the challenge may be that there are fewer independent news consumers in the sample, resulting in noisier estimates. The results in Table 5.2 suggest that it is hard to differentiate in this case between the preference for content and the preference for sources.

	Dependent variable:					
	Interestingness	Importance	Civic Relevance	Personal Relevance	Social Relevance	Bias
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Revealed	−0.133	−0.185	−0.179	−0.315**	−0.395***	−0.327**
	(0.132)	(0.130)	(0.130)	(0.151)	(0.123)	(0.150)
State source	−0.182	−0.145	−0.089	−0.090	−0.602***	0.223
	(0.143)	(0.145)	(0.127)	(0.157)	(0.136)	(0.163)
Revealed * State source	−0.266	−0.197	−0.099	0.006	0.171	0.046
	(0.186)	(0.185)	(0.171)	(0.206)	(0.177)	(0.198)
Respondent fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	3,349	3,347	3,304	3,286	3,297	3,237
R^2	0.416	0.383	0.385	0.408	0.402	0.449

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5.2: Effect of source revelation on preference for state over independent news among independent news audiences. Observations represent a given trial by a respondent. Respondents completed three trials for each source type in each treatment condition (12 total, unless a trial was skipped). All models are estimated using OLS with standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Revealed is an indicator of the treatment condition. State source is an indicator of the source of the excerpt in a given trial. The interaction term represents the effect of revealing the source on the content preference for a given source.

Given the design of the study, it is not possible to distinguish between the positive effects of revealing a favored source or the negative effects of revealing a disfavored source. In general, the scores given in Module B (the revealed condition) are lower than those given in Module A (the concealed condition), as shown in Tables 5.1 and 5.2. This could suggest that respondents are reacting more negatively to disfavored sources as opposed to positively
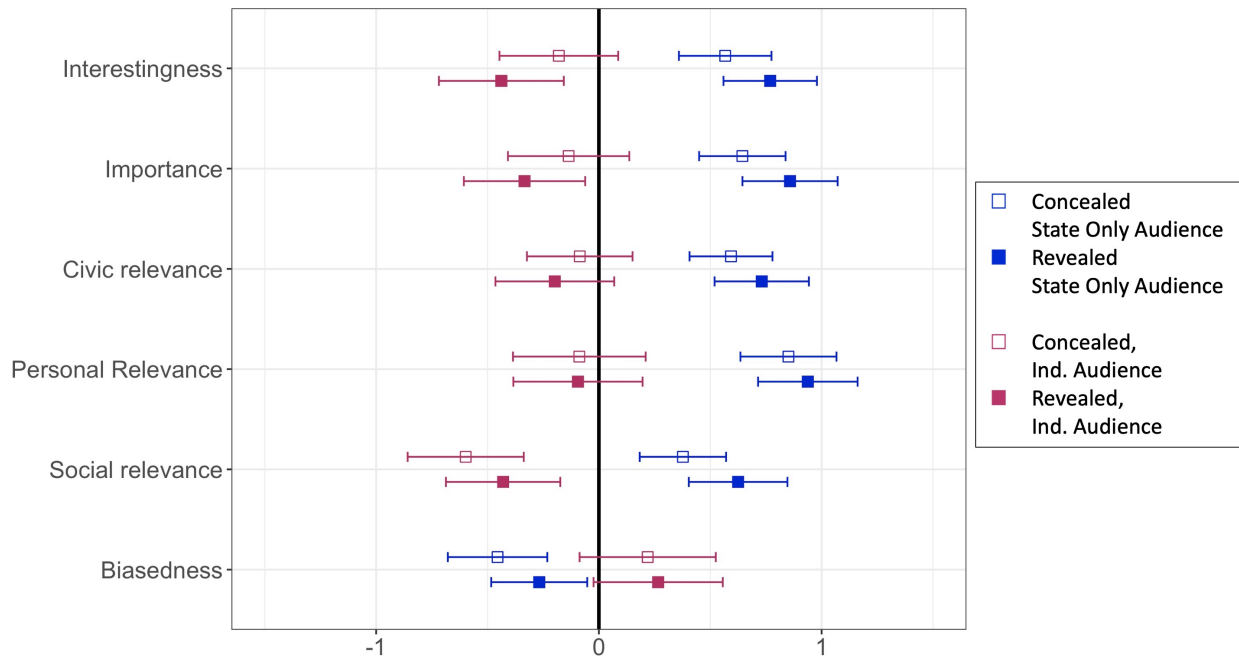
Figure 5.5: Difference in reactions to state and independent media in the concealed and revealed conditions. Color refers to audience group. Outlined points represent the concealed condition while filled in points represent the revealed condition. Respondents were asked to evaluate news excerpts on a scale from 0-10.

toward favored sources. However, because Module B was after Module A for all respondents, the lower levels of interest in the news excerpts in Module B may be driven by fatigue rather than the effect of the source revelation.[6]

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6. The models used to evaluate the effect of source priors on responses differ from those described in the PAP. The models described in the PAP focus on the difference between how individuals respond to a given news source in the revealed and the concealed condition, rather than the difference in the difference between state and independent news outlets. Such an approach could potentially better differentiate between the positive effects of revealing a preferred source and the negative effects of revealing a non-preferred source. However, in pre-specifying this model, I did not consider the possibility that Module B responses could be systematically different from Module A responses not only because of the effect of revealing the source but also because of survey fatigue. Survey fatigue could reduce interest in news excerpts as the survey progressed. The order of Module A and Module B could not be randomized because of the risk that, if Module A were after Module B, respondents in Module A might be thinking about the lack of source attribution and attempt to guess the source. This could then mean that differences identified in the analysis of Module A could be due to source priors rather than content. Because Module B had to always be after Module A, the difference in difference specification is more appropriate as survey fatigue should equally effect responses to state and independent news in Module B.

5.7   Unpacking Content-Based Preferences: Exploratory Analyses

The previous results suggest that state news audiences generally evaluate state news content more positively than independent news content along a variety of dimensions. What explains these content-based preferences? In this section I explore the predictors of interest in state news content to better understand who it is that likes state news and what it is about the content that they like.

5.7.1   Audience priors and state news interest

As discussed, the pro-Putin slant of state news might deter the president's critics but appeal to his supporters. To test whether the consistency of state television news messaging with audience priors is part of its appeal, I evaluate the relationship between political beliefs and evaluations of state news content in Module A (concealed condition). I regress responses to state news content in Module A on a series of demographic variables and approval of President Putin (measured on a four point scale from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve). The results, shown in Table 5.3, provide compelling evidence that support for the president is predictive of greater interest in state news content, the perception that state news content is more important, and the perception that state news content is less biased. I show the results first with several demographic controls alone. I also show results with controls for political interest, as expressed in the survey. In Models 3, 6, and 9, I control for average responses to independent news content. Supporters of the president tend to give more positive evaluations of all news content. However, their added interest is significantly greater for state news content than independent news content.[7]

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7. One concern whenever using public opinion data from an authoritarian country is that respondents might not be willing to express negative views toward the authoritarian leader. Prior research suggests that, in Russia, respondents are generally relatively honest in their assessments of Putin (Frye et. al. 2017). A concern with these survey results is that a reasonably large number of respondents (15.7%) did not indicate their approval of President Putin. One plausible explanation could be that respondents were completely neutral toward the president, and therefore could not decide whether they approved or disapproved of his performance. Another plausible explanation is that respondents disapproved of the president, but were

Table 5.3: Slant and Evaluations of State News Content

	Dependent variable:								
	Interest - state			Importance - state			Bias - state		
Putin Approval	2.057***	1.943***	1.678***	2.025***	1.938***	1.769***	−1.446***	−1.465***	−1.126***
	(0.229)	(0.223)	(0.189)	(0.218)	(0.215)	(0.183)	(0.266)	(0.268)	(0.214)
Female	0.364*	0.488**	0.188	0.452**	0.555***	0.191	−0.094	−0.088	0.0004
	(0.161)	(0.158)	(0.132)	(0.153)	(0.152)	(0.129)	(0.187)	(0.189)	(0.150)
Age	0.007	0.005	0.012*	0.011	0.009	0.013**	−0.035***	−0.035***	−0.023***
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Higher Ed	0.073	−0.026	0.135	0.047	−0.034	0.130	−0.064	−0.085	−0.027
	(0.178)	(0.174)	(0.146)	(0.170)	(0.168)	(0.142)	(0.207)	(0.209)	(0.165)
Big city	0.201	0.112	0.073	0.036	−0.037	−0.123	−0.168	−0.166	−0.208
	(0.185)	(0.181)	(0.152)	(0.177)	(0.174)	(0.148)	(0.216)	(0.217)	(0.173)
Political interest		0.669***			0.545***			0.056	
		(0.092)			(0.088)			(0.110)	
Interest - Alt.			0.528***						
			(0.026)						
Importance - Alt.						0.506***			
						(0.026)			
Bias - Alt.									0.623***
									(0.028)
Region fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	859	853	859	860	854	860	846	840	829

Standard errors in parentheses.

Note: Predictors of evaluations of state news in the concealed condition. All models are estimated using OLS. The dependent variable in models 1, 2, and 3 is the average interest score, in models 4, 5, and 6, is the average importance score, and in models 7, 8, and 9, is the political bias score. Models 2, 5, and 8 include political interest as a covariate. Models 3, 6, and 9 include the average response to the same question as the dependent variable but for independent news. Approval of Putin is measured on a 4 point scale from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve). Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

There is also evidence that emotional attachment to Russia is predictive of interest in state news content. Table 5.4 shows the relationship between expressed emotional attachment to Russia and evaluations of state news content. Emotional attachment to Russia is correlated with views toward Putin. However, the positive association persists even when controlling for attitudes toward Putin. This finding is consistent with the work of Lipman et. al. (2018) and Greene and Robertson (2020) which suggests that the celebratory, patriotic coverage of a rising Russia is an important part of its appeal to audiences.

5.7.2 Topic Selection and Framing

I suggest that content-based preferences may stem from the selection of topics that news outlets choose to cover and from the way that news outlets choose to frame their stories on a given topic. The results from Module C and a deeper analysis of the findings from Modules A and B provide greater insight into the distinct roles of topic selection and framing by news outlets in influencing audiences preferences. In Module C, respondents were asked to choose between two news stories on a given news event, one of which was drawn from a state source and one of which was drawn from an independent source. No source information was included. The choice for one excerpt over the other should therefore depend entirely on framing. The results from Module C do not provide compelling evidence of a preference for how state or independent news outlets frame their stories on specific news events. There was no evidence of a correlation between choices in Module C and the regular use of state or independent news media as revealed by the survey. Additionally, there was no relationship between responses in Module C and responses in Module A. Finally, respondents' choices were inconsistent across the three story pairs in the study. The full distribution of responses

unwilling to express such a preference. Either of these reasons could result in non-random missing data that could bias the results. In the main results presented here, those who who refused to express their assessment of the president's performance are simply dropped. However, in additional tests, I find that the results are robust to changes in the handling of missing approval data. In one set of analyses, I treat all "do not know" responses as .5 (mid-level score). In another set of analyses, I treat all missing responses as 0 (strong disapproval). I find a strong positive relationship between approval of Putin and interest in the state news content regardless of the specification.

Table 5.4: Attachment to Russian Identity and Evaluations of State News Content

	Dependent variable:								
	Interest - state			Importance - state			Bias - state		
Russian Attachment	0.318***	0.248***	0.132***	0.296***	0.233***	0.132***	−0.099**	−0.042	−0.039
	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.032)	(0.028)	(0.034)	(0.040)	(0.032)
Putin Approval		1.337***	1.299***		1.346***	1.383***		−1.333***	−1.019***
		(0.240)	(0.201)		(0.230)	(0.195)		(0.288)	(0.232)
Female	0.335*	0.268	0.142	0.460***	0.364*	0.150	−0.159	−0.086	0.007
	(0.146)	(0.156)	(0.131)	(0.139)	(0.149)	(0.127)	(0.170)	(0.187)	(0.150)
Age	−0.006	−0.003	0.006	−0.001	0.002	0.008	−0.027***	−0.033***	−0.021***
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Higher Ed	−0.033	0.064	0.122	−0.105	0.038	0.115	0.009	−0.071	−0.034
	(0.160)	(0.172)	(0.144)	(0.153)	(0.164)	(0.139)	(0.186)	(0.207)	(0.165)
Big city	0.039	0.146	0.055	−0.048	−0.018	−0.140	−0.006	−0.149	−0.191
	(0.169)	(0.180)	(0.150)	(0.161)	(0.171)	(0.145)	(0.197)	(0.216)	(0.174)
Interest - Alt.			0.502***						
			(0.026)						
Importance - Alt.						0.481***			
						(0.026)			
Bias - Alt.									0.623***
									(0.028)
Region fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	1,006	857	857	1,007	858	858	986	845	828

Note: Predictors of evaluations of state news in the concealed condition. All models are OLS. The dependent variable in models 1, 2, and 3 is the average interest score, in models 4, 5, and 6, is the average importance score, and in models 7, 8, and 9, is the political bias score. Because emotional attachment to Russia and approval of Putin are strongly correlated, models 2, 5, and 8 control for Putin approval. Expressed attachment to Russian identity is measured on an 11-point scale from 0 (no attachment) to 10 (strong attachment). Mean attachment is 7.7 and the modal response is 10. Approval of Putin is measured on a 4-point scale from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve). Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

for Module C across the three event pairs can be found in Tables 5 and 6. Overall, the results from Module C are difficult to interpret but suggest that audiences do not have consistent sources preferences that stem from the subtle differences in framing reflected in these news excerpts.[8]

Table 5.5: Mod. C Results - State News Only Audience

Story	State	Alt	Refuse
Proekt	0.44	0.32	0.24
Navalny	0.30	0.44	0.26
Ukraine	0.54	0.34	0.12

Table 5.6: Mod. C Results - Independent News Audience

Story	State	Alt	Refuse
Proekt	0.45	0.42	0.13
Navalny	0.36	0.48	0.16
Ukraine	0.52	0.32	0.15

To further examine the relationships among content-based preferences, topic selection, and framing, I coded the news excerpts used in Modules A and B by news topic and assess variation in response patterns across and within news topic. Unlike the specific news events that were the focus of the Module C analyses, these topics were relatively broad. For the first set of analyses, I first constructed a list of important topics that were in the news at the time of the study. I then use keys words to code each news excerpt as relating to or not relating to a given news topic. Many news excerpts related to more than one news topic.

The first topic of interest was news related to opposition activity and state repression, including news related to opposition activist Alexei Navalny and his supporters, protest activity, corruption allegations, and the designation of several media outlets and human

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8. Another concern is that a large number of respondents refused to choose between the two stories in Module C. This may reflect the political sensitivity related to these stories or an inability among respondents to choose between the stories. However, it is also worth noting that Module C appeared relatively late in the survey and was a cognitively intensive task. It is possible that refusal to answer reflects survey fatigue.

	Dependent variable:					
	Interestingness	Importance	Civic Relevance	Personal Relevance	Social Relevance	Bias
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Opposition/repression topic	−1.314***	−1.482***	−1.253***	−1.177***	−1.126***	0.651***
	(0.138)	(0.137)	(0.128)	(0.140)	(0.127)	(0.146)
Observations	4,532	4,529	4,439	4,443	4,455	4,286
R^2	0.024	0.032	0.024	0.015	0.018	0.005

Note: $^*p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

Table 5.7: Topic-Based Preferences: Opposition and State Repression, State News Only Audiences. Models are estimated using OLS. An observation represents an individual trial for a given respondent (respondents completed mulitple trials). Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

rights organization as either "foreign agents" or "undesirable organizations." Unsurprisingly, this topic appears prominently in independent news (comprising approximately 27% of news excerpts) and hardly at all in state news (comprising about 2% of news excerpts). I find that this topic was also, unsurprisingly, divisive across audiences. In Tables 5.8 and 5.7, I show the results of a series of regression model in which each outcome is a different survey response and the independent variable is an indicator of whether the excerpt was on this topic. Table 5.7 shows the results for state news only audiences and Table 5.8 shows the results for independent news audiences. The results suggest that part of the reason state news users are less interested in independent news content is that they are relatively disinterested in this topic and find it to be less important and less relevant than other news topics. This topic is heavily covered by independent news outlets, which may deter some state news audiences. Although the results in Table 5.7 compare this topic to news coverage across all news outlets, state news audience also show a preference against news on this topic even when compared only to other independent news coverage. For independent news audiences, the pattern of responses is quite different. Independent news audiences tend to perceive news on this topic to be especially relevant and important compared to other news topics. Given that this topic is largely avoided by state news outlets, interest in this topic may motivate some to seek out independent news outlets. Notably, both state and independent news audiences detect

more bias in the coverage of this topic compared to other topics. Given the controversial and politically charged nature of the subject matter, it is not surprising that people are more perceptive of any kind of bias (in either direction) on this topic.

	Dependent variable:					
	Interestingness	Importance	Civic Relevance	Personal Relevance	Social Relevance	Bias
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Opposition/repression topic	0.209	0.283*	0.108	0.426**	0.363**	0.576***
	(0.163)	(0.171)	(0.163)	(0.190)	(0.156)	(0.174)
Observations	3,349	3,347	3,304	3,286	3,297	3,237
R^2	0.001	0.001	0.0002	0.002	0.002	0.004
Note:						*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5.8: Topic-Based Preferences: Opposition and State Repression, Independent News Audiences. Models are estimated using OLS. An observation represents an individual trial for a given respondent. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

State-only and independent news audiences also differed in their emotional reactions to news on the topic of opposition activity and state repression. Among independent news audiences, negative emotional reactions were common, with 61% of respondents listing at least one negative emotion: 39% listed anxiety, 30% listed anger, and 28% listed sadness as emotional reactions to news on this topic. Only 21% said that news on this topic made them feel "nothing in particular." Among state-only news audiences, emotional reactions to news on this topic were more muted, with 39% listing at least one negative emotion: 19% listed anxiety, 14% listed anger, and 17% listed sadness. Perhaps most notably, state-only audiences were far more likely than independent news audiences to say that news on this topic made them feel "nothing in particular", with 46% of respondents giving this response. For news unrelated to this topic, the "nothing in particular" emotional response is only given 30% of the time. This suggests that for many of those who rely exclusively on state news, the topics that are a central focus of independent news coverage but largely ignored by state news are not especially emotionally engaging.

The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan was another major topic in the news during the time of the study. The topic appeared in 18% of state news excerpts and 26% of independent

news excerpts. Interest in this topic was high among both state and independent news audiences. When limiting the observations to only include news on this topic, state-only news audiences show no preference for state news content and independent news audiences show no preference for independent news content in terms of expressed interest, perceived importance, perceived relevance, and perceived bias. Interestingly, however, emotional reactions to state news content related to this topic are, on average, more positive than emotional reactions to independent news content related to this topic, among both state and independent news audiences. Positive emotional reactions such as happiness, hope, and pride were given for 27% of state news excerpts but only 15% of independent news excerpts that relate to this topic. By contrast, negative emotional reactions were listed for 60% of independent news excerpts but only 44% of state news excerpts. These differences may stem from the different emphases of state and independent news coverage within this topic and the pairing of news on Afghanistan with coverage of other topics. Independent news coverage on this topic was focused on activity within Afghanistan. By contrast, state news coverage tended to focus on the response to the situation by Russia and Western countries. Many news reports in state coverage featured meetings between Putin and various world leaders in which this topic, among other topics, was discussed.

Another topic of particular interest is news related to public health and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. News excerpts discussing the pandemic comprise 14% of state news excerpts and 6% of independent news excerpts.[9] For state-only news audiences, excerpts on this topic were perceived as especially interesting and important. Independent news audiences showed no particular interest or disinterest in news excerpts on this topic.[10] There is

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9. To identify news excerpts related to COVID-19, I first use key word searches to identify relevant texts. However, I then excluded certain news excerpts that mention the pandemic but provide no reporting related to public health. For example, some news excerpts briefly mention COVID-19 as an explanation for why a meeting or event was held remotely. These are not treated as COVID-19 news. However, if COVID-19 is mentioned as one of several topics discussed at a meeting, this is included.

10. While independent news audiences tended to score news on COVID-19 similarly to state-only news audiences, they also tended to score all news more highly. Therefore, pandemic-related news was not especially interesting.

no evidence that either state-only or independent news consumers show a particular interest in state or independent news coverage of this topic or perceive the importance or relevance as different depending on the source.

In addition to relevant news events at the time of the study, I also consider news coverage of President Putin. Putin's name is mentioned, on average, .4 times per state news excerpt and .3 times per independent excerpt. For independent news audiences, interest in news discussing the president was neither particularly interesting nor uninteresting and there was no evidence of a preference for state or independent news content within this topic. State-only news consumers, by contrast, show a greater level of interest in news that mentions the president and perceive it to be especially important. Moreover, they tend to find the state news coverage mentioning the president to be especially interesting and important relative to that of the independent news outlets. State news audiences are especially likely to say they have a civic duty to know about news stories that mention that president.

Taken together, these results suggest that both topic selection and framing within a topic matter to audiences. State and independent news audiences differ somewhat in the topics that most interest them and that they perceive to be most important and relevant. As would be expected, state news audiences show a particular interest in news relating to the president and disinterest in news relating to the opposition and state repression. Independent news audiences, by contrast, perceive news related to the opposition and state repression to be especially important and show no particular interest or disinterest in news about the president. Both state and independent news audiences considered news coverage of the pandemic and Afghanistan to be interesting and important.

5.8   Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess what Russian news audiences value in their news consumption and whether preferences over content and sources correspond to regular media

diets. The results show that regular consumers of state news preferred the content produced by state news outlets to that produced by independent news outlets, even when they did not know its source. These preferences did not become significantly stronger when the source was revealed. While this study does not directly test the effects of content-based preferences or source loyalties on the choices that people make about where they get their news, the results suggest that part of the appeal of state television news to its audience comes from the content itself. In the absence of source cues, state news audiences found state news reporting to be more interesting, more important, more relevant, and less biased than news produced by four well-known independent news outlets. What explains these preferences? The results provide some evidence that the selection of topics may matter. State news audiences were more likely to say that the events described in state news reports would affect them personally and be a topic of conversation. These respondents also tended to agree more strongly that they had a civic duty to know about the events described in the state news reports compared to the independent news reports. On the other hand, certain news topics related to opposition activity and state repression that are prominently featured in independent news were relatively uninteresting to state news audiences. The emotional impact of exposure to news content also may play a role. State news audiences were more likely to have a positive emotional reaction to state news content than to independent content. Finally, the slant of state news content might increase its appeal to some audiences. I show that interest in state news content is positively associated with approval of President Putin and with a sense of emotional attachment to Russia.

The extent to which the study captured preferences relevant to real-world choices depended on how representative the sample of news content used in the study was of the news produced by these news outlets in the real world. Achieving this representative sample of news content is a challenge. News outlets often produce far more news related content in a given day than a typical news consumers actually watches or reads. In this study, I decided to focus on top news stories, including those included in prime time news broadcasts

on state television and featured in some way as top news by the independent news outlets. News outlets vary in how they feature top stories and in how they choose which of their stories to feature. The design of this study depends somewhat on the comparability of these featured stories across news outlets. As discussed, an important source of variation across news outlets is the extent to which they focus on a particular topic. A given news event may be reported by both state and independent news, but appear much more prominently in one source than another. Given the way that news reports were selected to be included in the study, I am able to capture the variation in the number of news stories reported on a given topic by each news outlet. However, the length of any given news report does not affect the extent to which that report is represented in the study. For example, if *Meduza* and *Perviy kanal* had each reported one news story on a given day about a news outlet being designated as a foreign agent, but *Meduza's* story is three times as long as *Perviy kanal's* story, a 100-word excerpt from each of these stories would be equally likely to end up in the study for a given participant. This would lead in this case to under-representing the divergence in content between the two sources.

The content-based preferences identified in the study depend on the specific news events occurring at the time of the study. The prominent news events at the time of this study centered on the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, the labeling of several independent news outlets and human rights organizations as foreign agents or undesirable organizations, a series of natural disasters in Russia and around the world, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that the level of content-based preferences could vary substantially if the main news events at the time were more or less politicized. The results might have also been different had the study been conducted at a time when there were fewer major global news events happening. Future research could use a similar approach to this study to assess how content-based preferences vary across time as the news cycle evolves.

A key difference between the five news outlets included in this study is the medium. I designed the study such that these differences were minimized. All the content was presented

to audiences in the form of text. Images were always still images. The formatting was always the same. Part of the reason for taking this approach was practical: concealing the source of information and completing all of the analyses was more tractable using text rather than using video or audio. The other rationale for this approach was to focus on the differences across sources in the substance of what they report. However, text cannot encompass everything that may be meaningful to a viewer when evaluating content. If audiences have a preference for the specific way that some sources use video, for example, that is not captured in this study. Future research could specifically focus on the role of visualizations and audio in shaping demand in this context.

In the second part of the study, respondents again evaluated news content by state and independent news sources along several dimensions. Unlike in the first section, the source of the news excerpts was revealed. In the revealed condition, state news audiences tended to prefer state news content and independent news audiences tended to prefer independent news content, but there is not clear evidence that respondents' beliefs about sources changed their perceptions of news content. However, one concern in trying to distinguish between content-based preferences and beliefs about sources is that we do not know whether audiences attempt to or succeed at guessing the source of the news excerpts when the source is concealed. Given that real news excerpts were used in the study, some respondents might have actually recognized some of the news reports that were used in the study. If this was the case, then what may appear to be a content-based preference could actually be driven by respondents' views of the source. Presenting the content in the form of text rather than video should reduce the likelihood that people were able to correctly guess the source of news content in the concealed condition. However, it still is a concern.

5.9   Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that part of the reason that people watch state television is that they like the content. Even when alternative sources were available, many in Russia did not bother to seek them out. As the results of this study demonstrate, this was not entirely driven by the inconvenience of accessing independent media compared to state media. Even in the absence of such differences, people still express a high level of interest in state news content. Moreover, many of those who did seek out alternatives to state propaganda still showed a relatively high level of interest in state news content. Taken together, the results suggest that state media outlets have been effective at drawing audiences in part because people value the reporting they provide.

This has important implications for understanding the effectiveness of the Kremlin's information strategies in the past and present. Over the course of Putin's long tenure in office, the state has incrementally cracked down on independent media, rendering it more difficult for journalists and news outlets to operate. Yet, for many years, it did not explicitly ban or limit access to independent news outlets. Like many modern authoritarian regimes, Russia under Putin had maintained some of the trappings of democracy, including official guarantees protecting press freedom. The results from this study provide some insight into why that strategy worked. If enough people genuinely liked and valued state news, as these results suggest that they did, then the Kremlin could maintain large audiences for its state propaganda without having to impose more costly restrictions on independent media.

5.10   Appendix A: Module A Example

Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Путиным

Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Владимиром Путиным. Она сказала, что считает неприемлемым приговор оппозиционному политику и настаивает на его освобождении.

Российский президент в свою очередь ответил, что не видит политической подоплеки в деле Навального.
По словам Владимира Путина, граждане России не ограничиваются в своих политических взглядах и праве на высказывание мнения.

Figure 5.6: Sample independent news excerpt, source concealed (from Ekho Moskvy, Aug. 21, 2021)

How **interested** are you in this story on a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating extremely interested and 0 indicating not at all interested? Please slide the bar below.

In your opinion, how **important** is this news story on a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating extremely important and 0 indicating not at all important? Please slide the bar below.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the news article? Please slide each bar below.

- I think we have a duty to know about the kinds of issues the article discusses.

- The information in this report might affect me, my family, and/or friends.

- People will be talking about this news story.

- This story is politically biased.

How does the story make you feel? Please check all that apply. [Answer order randomized]

Proud

Happy

Angry

Sad

Hopeful

Anxious

Other

Nothing in particular

Prefer not to answer

5.11 Appendix B: Module B Excerpt Examples

Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Путиным

Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Владимиром Путиным. Она сказала, что считает неприемлемым приговор оппозиционному политику и настаивает на его освобождении.

Российский президент в свою очередь ответил, что не видит политической подоплеки в деле Навального.
По словам Владимира Путина, граждане России не ограничиваются в своих политических взглядах и праве на высказывание мнения.

Figure 5.7: Sample independent news excerpt, source revealed (from Ekho Moskvy, Aug. 21, 2021)

Владимир Путин провел встречу в Кремле с президентом Казахстана

Прежде чем отправиться в Нижний Новгород, Владимир Путин в Москве встретился с президентом Казахстана. Касым-Жомарт Токаев прилетел по приглашению российского лидера. Обсуждали двустороннее сотрудничество. Товарооборот между нашими странами, несмотря на пандемию, в этом году увеличился на треть. Но основное внимание, конечно, ситуации в Афганистане и региональной безопасности.

«Мы активно сотрудничаем в международных организациях, включая наши объединения. Я имею в виду и ШОС, Евразийский экономический совет наш, по всем направлениям есть хорошее продвижение вперед, наши союзнические отношения укрепляются, приобретают все новые и новые качества. <...>»

Figure 5.8: Sample state news excerpt, source revealed (from Perviy kanal, Aug. 21, 2021)

5.12   Appendix C: Module C Excerpts

Proekt

Excerpt A (alt)

«Проект» признали «нежелательной организацией» после запроса антикоррупционера

Издание «Проект» признали «нежелательной организацией» после запроса в Генпрокуратуру руководителя Федерального проекта по безопасности и борьбе с коррупцией Виталия Бородина.

Согласно запросу, опубликованному изданием, Бородин обратился в Генпрокуратуру еще зимой после выхода статьи RT под названием «Гарант независимости: на чьи деньги готовятся расследовательские материалы международного издания «Проект».

Excerpt B (state)

Работа "Проект Медиа"в России признана нежелательной

Работу неправительственной организации "Проект Медиа"в России признали нежелательной. Об этом сообщили в Генеральной прокуратуре.[. . .]

По сообщениям СМИ, этот информационный ресурс, позиционирующий себя как независимый, получал финансирование из США.

В Генпрокуратуре признали, что деятельность "Проект Медиа"несет угрозу "основам конституционного строя и безопасности РФ".

OPCW and Navalny

Excerpt A (alt)

Германия объяснила найденную Захаровой ошибку в докладе ОЗХО об отравлении Навального

Нестыковка в проекте доклада Организации по запрещению химического оружия (ОЗХО) об отравлении Алексея Навального была вызвана технической ошибкой. Об этом заявил на брифинге представитель МИД Германии Райнер Бройль. "Сегодня у нас 17 июля. Мы до сих пор ничего внятного, ни единого комментария со стороны техсекретариата не услышали," – сказал он в эфире YouTube-канала "Соловьев Live." В этой связи Шульгин высказал мнение, что группа стран, которые всем известны, намеренно пытается удержать "на плаву тему с мнимым отравлением Навального".

Excerpt B (state)

Техсекретариат ОЗХО так и не сказал России ничего внятного

Технический секретариат Организации по запрещению химического оружия не дал ни единого комментария относительно нестыковок в докладе по инциденту с Алексеем Навальным, заявил постоянный представитель России при ОЗХО Александр Шульгин. В первой редакции доклада сообщалось, что ОЗХО направил группу из-за подозрения на отравление российского гражданина 20 августа 2020 года — в тот же день, когда Навальный был госпитализирован... Бройль заявил, что Германия на самом деле обратилась в ОЗХО 4 сентября... «Ошибку секретариат увидел и во второй редакции исправил, чтобы не было никаких недопониманий», — сказал Бройль.

Ukraine

Excerpt A (alt)

Россия пожаловалась на Украину в ЕСПЧ, возложив на Киев ответственность за гибель мирного населения Донбасса и крушение рейса MH17

Власти России обратились в Европейский суд по правам человека с первой межгосударственной жалобой на другое государство — Украину, сообщает Генпрокуратура РФ.

В жалобе приводятся нарушения, ответственность за которые, по мнению Москвы, лежит на Киеве.

Excerpt B (state)

Россия впервые подала жалобу в Европейский суд по правам человека на другую страну

Украина ведет войну против мирных жителей Донбасса, дискриминирует русскоязычных граждан, перекрыла пресную воду для Крыма, не расследует массовое сожжение людей в Доме профсоюзов в Одессе. Это далеко не полный перечень всех претензий к властям в Киеве. Терпение Москвы, говорят эксперты, иссякло.

5.13   Appendix D: General Survey

Please indicate your gender.

- male

- female

- I prefer not to answer

In what oblast/krai/republic do you live? [Select from dropdown list]

How old are you?

What is your level of education?

- Primary or lower, junior high school (7-8, now grade 9)

- Secondary school (10, now 11 grades)

- Primary vocational education

- Secondary vocational education

- Incomplete higher education (at least 3 years of university)

- Higher

How would you describe your material situation?

- We don't even have enough money for food

- There is enough money for food, but buying clothes is difficult

- There is enough money for food, clothes and small household appliances, but it would be difficult to buy a TV, refrigerator or washing machine now

- There is enough money for large household appliances, but we could not buy a new car

- There is enough money for everything except the purchase of real estate (summer cottages or apartments)

- We are not experiencing material difficulties. If necessary, we could purchase a cottage, an apartment

- I prefer not to answer

Which phrase best describes the area where you live?

- A big city

- The suburbs or outskirts of a big city

- A town or a small city

- A country village

- A farm or home in the countryside

[Followup] Which city do you live in? [Select from dropdown list]

How many times in the past week have you watched or listened to a news program or read a news publication?

- 6 or more times

- 3-5 times

- Once or twice

- Not at all

What are your preferred means of accessing the news? Please check all that apply. [Order randomized]

- Television

- Yandex News, SMI2, Mail.ru, Rambler or other online news aggregator

- News publication websites (such as kp.ru, tvrain.ru, lenta.ru, rg.ru etc.)

- Social networking sites (such as VKontakte, Live Journal, Twitter, Facebook etc).

- Messaging services (such as Telegram, WhatsApp etc.)

- YouTube or other video sharing platform

- Radio

- Newspaper (printed)

- Podcasts

- Other:

- I do not follow the news

Which of the options you selected is your favorite way to access the news? [Include answers selected in prior question, order randomized]

Which of the following news sources have you watched, read, or listened to in the past few months? Please check all that apply. If there is another news source that you have used that is not on the list, please list that at the end.

- Forbes

- Lenta.ru

- L!fe (LifeNews, Life.ru)

- Republic.ru

- Moskovsky Komsomolets (MK.ru)

- Argumenti i Fakti (aif.ru)

- BBC Russian Service

- *Vedomosti*

- Gazeta.ru

- TV-Rain

- Kommersant

- Komsomolskaya Pravda

- Meduza

- Nezavisimaya Gazeta (ng.ru)

- Novaya Gazeta

- Pravda

- Radio of Russia

- RBC

- RIA Novosti

- Rossiskaya Gazeta (rg.ru)

- TASS

- Echo of Moscow

- Yandex News

- Snob.ru

- RT

- Izvestia (iz.ru)

- Euronews

- NTV

- Rossiya-1

- Channel 1

- Rossiya-24 (Vesti.ru)

- OTR

- Vesti FM

- Radio Free

- VTimes

- The Bell

- Istories

- Other:

- I have not been following the news

How often do you use each of these sources? [include for each source selected in previous question]

- Daily/ Almost daily

- A few times per week

- A few times per month

- Once per month or less

How reliable do you find the reporting on the three main federal television channels (Channel One, Russia-1 and NTV)?

- Completely reliable

- Somewhat reliable

- Somewhat unreliable

- Completely unreliable

- It completely depends on the source

- Find it difficult to answer

How reliable do you find the reporting in the main independent news publications (such as Echo of Moscow, Dozhd, Novaya Gazeta, VTimes, Meduza etc.)?

- Completely reliable

- Somewhat reliable

- Somewhat unreliable

- Completely unreliable

- It completely depends on the source

- Find it difficult to answer

Some people say that the state television channels (Channel One, Russia-1, NTV) are biased. Would you say that you generally agree or disagree with this?

- Strongly agree

- Somewhat agree

- Somewhat disagree

- Strongly disagree

- Find it difficult to answer

Some people say that the major independent news outlets in Russia (Echo of Moscow, Dozhd, Novaya Gazeta, VTimes, Meduza) are biased. Would you say that you generally agree or disagree with this?

- Strongly agree

- Somewhat agree

- Somewhat disagree

- Strongly disagree

- Find it difficult to answer

Do you generally approve or disapprove of Vladimir Putin's performance as president of Russia?

- Definitely approve

- Somewhat approve

- Somewhat disapprove

- Definitely disapprove

- I find it difficult to answer

Do you generally approve or disapprove of the activities of the Russian Duma?

- Definitely approve

- Somewhat approve

- Somewhat disapprove

- Definitely disapprove

- I find it difficult to answer

Do you think that, on the whole, the country is heading in the right direction, or does it seem that the country is going off track?

- It's heading in the right direction

- It's heading in the wrong direction

- I find it difficult to answer

How interested are you in politics?

- Very interested

- Rather interested

- Hardly interested

- Not at all interested

- I find it difficult to answer

How much would you say that the political system in Russia allows people like you to have an influence on politics?

- Not at all

- Very little

- Some

- A lot

- A great deal

- I prefer not to answer

How emotionally attached do you feel to Russia? Please choose a number from 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all emotionally attached and 10 means very emotionally attached. [Slider bar]

How do you normally access the internet? Please check all that apply.

- Through a Wifi or wired network at home

- Through a Wifi or wired network at work

- On a mobile device

- Through public wifi networks

- Other:

What category would you classify yourself in by occupation?

- Head of an enterprise, organization

- Department Manager

- Specialist with higher education

- Employee without higher education

- Service staff

- Doctor

- Teacher

- Working

- Student

- Small business, self-employment

- No job, NOT looking for a job (doing housekeeping, etc.)

- Unemployed (no job, but looking for a job)

- Other (what exactly?)

- I prefer not to answer

Categorization of News Outlets

State

- Perviy kanal (Channel 1) (State TV)

- Rossiya-1 (Russia-1) (State TV)

- Rossiya-24 (Russia-24) (State TV)

- NTV (State TV)

- OTR (State TV)

- RT (State TV)

- TASS

- Ria Novosti

- Rossiskaya gazeta

- Argumenti i fakti

- Vesti FM

- Radio of Russia

Pro-State

- Gazeta.ru

- L!fe

- Komsomolskaya Pravda

- Izvestia

- Lenta

- Pravda.ru

"Kremlin-Friendly" Non-State

- RBC

- Vedomosti

- Kommersant

- Moskovskii Komsomolets

- Forbes

Independent

- Meduza

- Dozhd (Rain)

- Nezavisimaya gazeta

- Novaya gazeta

- Ekho Moskvy (Echo of Moscow)

- Radio Svoboda (Radio Free)

- BBC Russian

- Euronews

- Snob

- IStories

- The Bell

- Republic

5.14   Appendix E: Sample Summary Statistics

Table 5.9: Sample Descriptive Statistics

1	Median Age	38
2	Female	46.7%
3	Higher Ed	32.2%
4	Central	33.41%
5	Far Eastern	2.42%
6	North Caucasus	2.75%
7	Northwestern	12.86%
8	Siberian	8.13%
9	Southern	10.33%
10	Ural	8.24%
11	Volga	21.87%

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Control over mass media can be a powerful tool for an autocrat. Flooding the airwaves with pro-regime propaganda and silencing critics through censorship allows incumbent dictators and aspiring authoritarians to mold the public's understanding of the social and political world. It could be deployed as an instrument to mobilize or pacify the masses as the leader sees fit. But its power to influence can be constrained by the audience's limited attention. People consume and absorb mass media only to the extent that they derive something of value from it. If the public simply ignores state propaganda or seeks information elsewhere, it will be less effective as a persuasive tool.

Some authoritarian regimes manage this problem by trying to eliminate any available alternative sources of information. This kind of strategy, however, is difficult and not always effective. It is often possible to circumvent blocks on information and the public may resent efforts to impede their access. Moreover, even eliminating alternative media will not necessarily convince the public to pay attention to and believe state messaging.

In Putin-era Russia, state media has become a central component of the Kremlin's strategy for maintaining power. In part, the state's dominance over information has been achieved through the Kremlin's efforts to crack down on independent news outlets that it deems threatening. These attacks have increased the costs to audiences who want to access these sources. They have also hindered the ability of independent news outlets to operate within Russia, reducing their reporting capacity. Alongside these efforts at information suppression, however, the state has also invested in developing a propaganda product that many Russians

seem eager to consume. By making propaganda popular, the state could dominate the flow of information without having to completely restrict access to all other news outlets—at least for a time. The findings from this dissertation provide insight into the value that Russian audiences derived from their consumption of state propaganda. They help to explain why so many rely on state-controlled news as their primary source of information, despite having access to alternatives.

The central finding of this dissertation is that, despite its biases, state media enjoys large audiences in part because a lot of people like it. They find the content interesting, important, relevant, and emotionally engaging. State news audiences evaluate state news content more positively than independent news content, even in a blind taste test. When asked which source they expect to report the most useful information on a given topic, most people say state news.

Most Russians are aware that state news represents the Kremlin's perspective and that state news outlets engage in censorship. Nonetheless, audiences trust these sources to report useful information, at least on some topics. In part, their dependence on state media is driven by a relatively low regard for available alternative sources. Independent news outlets are seen as relatively lacking in access to information. Of course, the Kremlin has also played a role in hindering the reporting capacity of the independent press.

Russian news consumers are not generally active supporters of censorship. However, their attitudes toward censorship are nuanced and contextual. When state news outlets suppress information related to criticism of the government or protest activity, this does not necessarily deter many viewers. In some cases, when those being silenced are groups deemed threatening to social stability, some people might even support censorship. These attitudes toward censorship may develop, in part, as a result of the constrained political environment in which people are operating, which renders news pertinent to political accountability relatively less useful. The findings from this dissertation suggest that, when it comes to news on opposition activity—a primary target for censorship—many Russians are simply not that

interested in the information they may be missing.

Russia's media landscape has changed drastically in the months since the data for this dissertation was collected. Shortly after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin ramped up its crack down on the free press. Journalists found guilty of spreading "false information" about the war—any information that deviates from the Kremlin's narrative—could potentially face a 15-year sentence under new wartime censorship laws. Independent news outlets and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have had their websites blocked. Virtually all independent media based in Russia (including all of the Russia-based independent news outlets used in the August 2021 experiment) have suspended operations. Because it is based in Latvia, Meduza has been able to continue to operate. However, like most independent news outlets, its website has been blocked in Russia and accessing its content from Russia now requires a VPN. Journalists hoping to reach Russian audiences have turned to the messenger app Telegram as well as emailed newsletters to try to share information about the war.

At the time when the data for this dissertation was collected, the differences between state and independent media were often relatively subtle. Indeed the results from Chapter 5 find that even independent news consumers often evaluated state news relatively positively. The war has changed this. The difference between state and independent media coverage is no longer subtle. Before they were forced to shut down, Russian independent news outlets accurately reported on the devastation wrought by Russia's attacks, including for the civilian population of Ukraine. They also reported on the new repressions being implemented in Russia. Russian journalists based abroad (such as those at Meduza) have continued to do so since the adoption of new censorship laws. By contrast, state media has denied that a war is happening. They have adopted the Kremlin narrative that this "special military operation" is aimed at 'demilitarizing" and "de-Nazifying" Ukraine, with a particular focus on protecting Russian speakers in the Donbass. They have denied the reality that civilians have been targeted and killed in large numbers. The extreme censorship policies quickly

enacted by the Kremlin suggest that the regime did not believe that its previous information control strategy would be sufficient to sustain this narrative. The Kremlin might have also expected a relatively high level of interest in Ukraine and likely feared the consequences of public opinion turning against the war when the Kremlin's aspirations for fomenting a quick and easy change of leadership in Kyiv failed to materialize.

As a result of these new censorship policies, accessing alternative information to that of the state-aligned media is not impossible, but the friction news consumers encounter in trying to do so is far greater than it has been in decades. That added friction may dissuade some of the marginal previous independent news consumers from putting in the effort, especially the large number of independent news consumers who also used state-controlled or Kremlin-friendly sources. The already high popularity of state media prior to the implementation of these censorship policies likely made it easier for the Kremlin to eliminate alternatives.

Despite its efforts, the Kremlin will not be able to completely shield the public from learning about the costs of this war. The Russian economy has been severely disrupted. Russian soldiers are dying in large numbers. Many Russians have family in Ukraine. It is possible that Russian trust in state media narratives will begin to wane as the public is able to learn more about the costs of this war from direct observations and from their social networks. Understanding the limits of audience belief in state media and other information sources in this new media climate will be an important task of future research. At the same time, however, conducting research in this repressive political climate has become far more challenging. Researchers will have to develop new strategies to gauge public opinion in light of the lower reliability of traditional polls. Measurement tools that are less vulnerable to self-presentational concerns may be especially useful. A critical question for future research will be the motivations of the public in their pursuit of information. In the current political climate, the incentives for Russians citizens to learn the truth about the war may, unfortunately, be low. With repression now greatly intensified, publicly criticizing the war is extremely risky. Knowing the truth about what is happening and not responding may

impose a high psychological cost. For these reasons, many Russians may opt to stick with the state media narrative. On the other hand, the distortions in state media have become so extreme and the stakes potentially so high that some Russians may be especially eager now to not only seek out the truth but also to share it with others. This may have important implications for how demand for state and independent information sources will shift going forward.

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