PRIMARY SOURCE

Inside Putin's Information War

I spent years working for Russian channels. What I saw would terrify the West.

By PETER POMERANTSEV | January 04, 2015

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There were more than 20 of us sitting around the long conference table: tanned broadcasters in white silk shirts, politics professors with sweaty beards and heavy breath, ad execs in trainers—and me. There were no women. Everyone was smoking. There was so much smoke it made my skin itch.

It was 2002, and I was just out of university, living in Moscow and working at a think tank meant to be promoting Russian-U.S. political ties. A friendly Russian publisher who wanted me to work for him had invited me to what would be my first meeting in Moscow. And that's how I ended up surrounded by Russian media gurus tucked away on the top floor of Ostankino, the Soviet-era

television center that is the battering ram of Kremlin propaganda—home to the studios of the country's biggest channels. Here, Moscow's flashiest minds gathered for a weekly brainstorming session to decide what Ostankino would broadcast.

At one end of the table sat one of the country's most famous political TV presenters. He was small and spoke fast, with a smoky voice: "We all know there will be no real politics," he said. "But we still have to give our viewers the sense something is happening. They need to be kept entertained."

"So what should we play with?" he asked. "Shall we attack oligarchs? Who's the enemy this week? Politics has got to feel like a movie!"

More than a decade later, that movie is increasingly dark and disturbing. The first thing Russian militias do when they take a town in East Ukraine is seize the television towers and switch them over to Kremlin channels. Soon after, the locals begin to rant about fascists in Kyiv and dark U.S. plots to purge Russian speakers from East Ukraine. It's not just what they say but how they say it that is so disturbing: irrational spirals of paranoia, theories so elaborate and illogical one can't possibly argue with them.

This is even before the bombs start falling on them: "Information war is now the main type of war," says the Kremlin's chief propagandist Dmitry Kieselev, "preparing the way for military action." And Putin's Russia is very good at it, having combined the dirtiest mechanisms of PR, brainwashing techniques pioneered in cults and a rich KGB tradition of psy-ops into a sort of television Frankenstein with which it controls its own population, conquers neighboring countries and attacks the West.

It poses new dangers. And I know, because I saw it grow.

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During the Soviet era television was an insipid affair. There were five channels, though many regions received only two—"one that shows endless partly leader speeches," went a common joke, "another that shows endless ballet." In the anti-Perestroika coup of 1991, when

Communist hardliners tried to seize power back from the reformers in a dramatic prelude to the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the channels showed Swan Lake on an endless loop. But in the new, cut-throat democracy of the 1990s, which became nicknamed 'dermocracy' or 'shitocracy' by Russian critics, TV moved to the center of politics, as oligarchs gained control of the major channels to play kingmaker in an age when elections, popularity and image suddenly mattered.

As soon as Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, he seized control of television, arresting and exiling the oligarchs who stood in his way. In a country covering nine time zones and one-sixth of the world's land mass, stretching from the Pacific to the Baltic, from the Arctic to the Central Asian deserts, from near-medieval villages where people still draw water from wooden wells by hand, through single-factory towns and back to the blue glass and steel skyscrapers of the new Moscow—TV is the only force that can unify, rule and bind the people.

It is television through which the Kremlin declares which politicians it will "allow" as its puppet opposition, what the country's history and fears and consciousness should be. At the center of the great show is President Putin himself, nothing more than a set of colored pixels on a screen, morphing as rapidly as a performance artist among his roles of soldier, lover, bare-chested hunter, business man, spy, tsar, superman. "The news is the incense by which we bless Putin's actions, make him the president," TV producers and spin-doctors liked to say to me. In that smoky room, I had the sense that reality was somehow malleable, that I was sitting in a group of Prosperos who could project any existence they wanted onto post-Soviet Russia.

The 21st century Kremlin might be controlling the media just as it did in the Soviet era, but there's one mistake today's Russian will never repeat: It will never let television become dull. In fact, the goal is to synthesize Soviet control with Western entertainment—and for that it needs the help of Western producers who, Russians believe, know the alchemical secret of great television formats.

That's where I came in. By 2006, I had moved from public policy consulting to media, working on documentaries for British and U.S. networks. I was invited to come and work for Russian channels, just one of dozens of Western producers tempted by the prospect of working in Europe's fastest growing TV industry.

The networks I worked with were apolitical. Their mission was to churn out Russian versions of hit Westerns shows. One of the first shows I worked on was *Hello-Goodbye*, a Sony reality format previously produced in Holland and the United States, in which a presenter talks to passengers greeting and bidding farewell to each other in Moscow shiny new Domodedovo airport. There were stories about lovers saying goodbye as one left to work in San Francisco; lads off for a dirty weekend in Thailand; a secretary waiting for her boss, whom she is secretly in love with, to return from a business trip to London. An airport might seem a mundane setting for a Western audience, but for a country that had been closed to foreign travel until just over a decade ago, and where flying was still a luxury available largely to the growing but still small

middle class, the show was full of social ambition. It showcased the new, globalized Russia, in a bright new airport in what seemed like a bright, "emerging" nation.

This Western model didn't always go according to plan. When the entertainment network TNT, for example, made the Russian version of *The Apprentice*, the show flopped. The premise of the show is to reward the self-confident and self-assertive business mind. But in Russia, it is the grey apparatchik who is celebrated, while the independent, bright entrepreneurs end up in prison or exiled. The underlying ideology of the show was irrelevant in Putin's Russia.

Plenty of other formats were more successful. *Dancing on Ice* tapped into Russia's love affair with ice skating; reality shows like *Survivor*, which are based on humiliating contestants in extreme conditions, were hits in a country where being bullied by the authorities and the weather is the norm.

Then there was the television, which I never worked on, with a more sinister mission: political-psychological control. The approach could be deeply counterintuitive. NTV, for example, one of the country's biggest networks, doesn't try to pretend Russia is a rosy place like Soviet channels used to do—which is also how they lost credibility with viewers. Quite the opposite: It shows non-stop horror stories about how dangerous the country is, encouraging the viewer to look to the "strong hand" of the Kremlin for protection. Even supposedly "science-based" programs are used for manipulative effect. The most expensive documentary ever shown on Russian television aired in 2009 and was called *Plesen* ("Mold"). It argued that mold is taking over the Earth—an invisible but omnipresent enemy whose evil spores have been invading our lives, causing death and disease. When the film aired it caused a panic, with people running out to buy anti-mold machines and calling into the network from all over the country, asking for help.

There was another spate of prime-time documentaries about "psychological weapons." One was *The Call of the Void*, which aired in 2009 and featured current secret service men who informed the audience about the new psychic weapons they had developed. The Russian military, the program claimed, employed "sleepers," psychics who can go into a trance and enter the world's collective unconscious, and from there penetrate the minds of foreign statesmen to uncover their nefarious designs. One had entered the mind of President George W. Bush, they said, and then reconfigured the intentions of one of his advisers so that whatever hideous plan the United States had hatched failed to come off. The message was clear: If the secret service can see into the U.S. president's mind, they can definitely see into yours; the state is everywhere, watching your every thought.

It wasn't just mold and spies. There was (and is) a lot of glitz, too. Turn on Russian TV and you'll see Jerry Springer style talk shows stuffed full of Hells Angels who have become Russian Orthodox holy warriors ready to defeat the decadent West. You'll see neo-Nazis with MTV-dancer bodies who film themselves beating up gay teenagers in the name of patriotism and whip-wielding Cossacks attacking performance artists on the streets. But in the end the errand is

always the same: to keep the great, 140-million-strong population reeling with oohs and aaahs about gays and God, Satan, fascists, the CIA and far-fetched geopolitical nightmares.

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When the financial crisis hit Russia in 2008, Ostankino producers began to speak of the need for new types of programming to keep the nation under control. “The financial crisis has the Kremlin worried,” a friend who worked at Ostankino told me. “Spiritual stuff is always good to keep people distracted.”

This approach had pedigree in Russia. Back in 1989, a new show appeared on Soviet TV. Instead of the usual ballet and stodgy costume dramas, the audience saw a close-up of a man with 1970s porn star looks, black hair and even blacker eyes. He had a very deep voice. Slowly, steadily and repeatedly he instructed the viewer to breathe deeply, relax, breathe deeply. “Close your eyes. You can cure cancer or alcoholism or any ailment with the power of thought,” he said. This was Anatoly Kashpirovsky, a professional hypnotherapist who had prepared Soviet weight-lifting teams for the Olympics. His mission was to keep the country calm and pacified while the Soviet Union collapsed. Kashpirovsky’s most famous lecture involved asking the audience at home to put a glass of water in front of their TV sets. Millions did. At the end of the program Kashpirovsky told the audience the water was “charged with healing energy” from his through-the-screen influence. Millions believed him.

Kashpirovsky had been taken off air in the 1990s, but in 2009, Kashpirovsky was again given a series, *Séance with Kashpirovsky*, to explore the paranormal and keep the country distracted with shows that addressed such subjects as immortality and ghosts. Honestly, the show seemed a bit behind the times: Ostankino producers had by then moved on to more sophisticated forms of psychological manipulation.

The heads of the networks were obsessed, for example, with Neuro-Linguitic Programming (NLP), a form of subliminal influence pioneered in the United States after 1975. The biggest of the Ostankino channels made a pilot for a show based on Lifespring, the controversial U.S. private, for-profit “life training” courses that went bankrupt in the 1990s after former participants successfully sued for psychological damage. Lifespring’s approach, informed by NLP and Gestalt Therapy, was to “reprogram” people—first by confusing them to the point where their critical thinking breaks down, then by frightening and humiliating them with the recollection of past traumas, all before lifting them up with the promise of success and then, when they are putty, implanting key messages to make them pliant to the demands of the Lifespring “trainers.” The pilot program Ostankino produced replicated the Lifespring sessions in a studio, with participants and the audience at home meant to experience the emotional roller coaster, and addictive effect, of the trainings.

As the decade came to an end and as the Kremlin became ever more aggressive and paranoid, I began to notice how Ostankino TV was increasingly starting to reflect, however haphazardly, the underlying principles of a Lifespring training. It’s programs confused viewers with bizarre

conspiracy theories and itched at unresolved traumas about Stalin, the collapse of the USSR and the destitution of the 1990s—all before lifting the viewer up with stories of Putin-era triumph. Meanwhile current affairs TV presenters would pluck a theme (oligarchs, America, the Middle East) and speak for 20 minutes, hinting, nudging, winking, insinuating though rarely ever saying anything directly, repeating words like "them" and "the enemy" endlessly. It was a powerful technique. As I watched programs where political pundits would lecture to the camera, such as Mikhail Leontiev's *Odnako*, or more recently Dmitry Kiselev's *Vest Nedeli*, I could tell they were deeply manipulative. But would still find myself nodding my head as I watched them, their paranoid mindset (temporarily) imprinted on my mind.

Meanwhile, the social situation was worsening. When TNT, a youth entertainment channel I worked for, asked me to make documentaries about topics that young people cared about, I found that Russian youth were increasingly angry and isolated from the state. For many boys the greatest problem in their lives was their mandatory years of army service, where they faced physical abuse and being forced into black-market jobs for a corrupt class of army officers. Battles between teens and cops were regular: In 2009, I followed the story of a bunch of teens beaten black and blue by police for the dubious sin of drinking beer in a public place. The films I and other documentary directors made around such issues rated well: There was a hunger among the younger generation to watch programs that portrayed their own world. Such films would have been impossible on the Ostankino channels, but as we were a "youth channel" and not necessarily on the Kremlin's radar, we managed to get away with it—for a while. In 2010, I was politely told that the channel would not be making any more "social" films. But would I be interested in making something about footballers' wives?

By this time I was starting to feel increasingly uncomfortable about working in Russian TV and decided to return to London. I wasn't the only one having serious doubts. Several Western producers I knew had come over to work for Russia Today (now renamed RT). Set up by presidential decree in 2005, RT is Russia's answer to BBC World and Al-Jazeera, a rolling 24/7 news channel broadcasting in English (and Arabic and Spanish) across every hotel and living room in the world. Its annual budget is over $300 million and its mission is to "give Russia's point of view on world events."

British and American 20-somethings straight out of journalism school would be offered generous compensation packages to work for the station, upwards of $55,000 plus a relocation fee, whereas in London or Washington they might have been expected to work for free. Of course they all wondered whether RT would turn out to be a propaganda channel. On occasion I would hang out with these 23-year-olds after work and talk to them about their jobs: "Well, it's all about expressing the Russian point of view," they would say, a little uncertain. Since the war in Iraq and then the 2008 financial crash many were skeptical about the virtue of the West. What could be wrong with a "Russian point of view?"

It took awhile for those working at RT to sense something was not quite right. In between the bland sports reports, Julian Assange appearances and Larry King Live broadcasts came the

softball interviews with the president. ("Why is the opposition to you so small, Mr. President?" was one legendary question.) When one journalist, a 23-year-old straight out of Oxford, wrote a news story in which he stated that Estonia had been occupied by the USSR in 1945, he received a bollocking from the head of news: "We saved Estonia," he was told and was ordered to change the copy. When another, straight out of Bristol University, was covering forest fires in Russia and wrote that the president wasn't doing much about them, he was informed: "You have to say the president is at the forefront of fighting against the fires."

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"There is no such thing as objective reporting," the managing editor of RT, Alexey Nikolov, told me when I interviewed him in 2013. By then, I was based in London again, working in think tanks, and Nikolov met me in his bright, large office at RT's Moscow HQ. A veteran international reporter, he spoke near perfect English and sat at the top of a very long desk wearing a knowing smile. In the corner was a Kalashnikov, a collector's item from one of his reporting adventures. "Does it scare you?" he half-joked, when he caught me looking at it.

"But what is a Russian point of view? What does Russia Today stand for?" I asked.

"Oh, there is always a Russian point of view," he answered. "Take a banana. For someone it's food. For someone else it's a weapon. For a racist it's something to tease a black person with."

And there you have it: Russia's opportunistic foreign policy, all wrapped up in a banana metaphor. Thus the Kremlin preaches non-intervention and sovereignty while defending Assad, yet uses the reverse position to justify the invasion of Georgia and annexation of Crimea. Thus it warns against American exceptionalism while claiming that Russia has a special mission to rule over and enlighten its "near abroad." The Russian point of view is anything the Kremlin wants it to be.

During the conflict over Ukraine, disseminating "a Russian point of view" has increasingly meant helping Russian military and intelligence operations. For example, after Moscow-supported rebels in East Ukraine shot down a Malaysian Airlines jet in July, RT spat out a multitude of conspiracy theories (from claims that the real target of the attack was Putin's personal plane to assertions that Ukrainian fighter jets were behind the tragedy), in order to direct attention away from the real perpetrators. Another infamous RT story featured a supposed RAND Corporation document, in which the think tank advises Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to ethnically cleanse eastern Ukraine, bomb it heavily and place locals in internment camps. The fact that the document was found on the fringe conspiracy web-site *Before It's News* should have alerted any news editor as to its lack of credibility—but the story found its way onto RT. (It was subsequently removed from the news site proper (after it had been broadly viewed), but continued to be referenced by RT's opinion contributors.

Some of these tricks smack of an updated model of Active Measures, the Soviet era KGB-run disinformation and psychological warfare department designed to confuse and disorganize the

West. Active Measures employed an estimated 15,000 agents at the height of the Cold War, part of whose brief was to place forgeries in international media. Stories ranged from "President Carter's Secret Plan to Put Black Africans and Black Americans at Odds," to those that claimed AIDS was a weapon created by the CIA or blamed the United States for the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. But if Soviet measures went to great lengths to make their forgeries look convincing, now the Kremlin doesn't seem to care if it is caught: The aim is to confuse rather than convince, to trash the information space so the audience gives up looking for any truth amid the chaos.

Over a decade since my first visit to that boardroom in Ostankino I now find myself in similarly intense, if less smoky, meetings with government officials in London and Washington. They wonder how to deal with the Kremlin's masterful use of the media, which NATO's Gen. Philip Breedlove, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, has called "the most amazing information war blitzkrieg known in history."

Having seen how Russian TV works from the inside I wonder whether the West has the institutional or analytical tools necessary to deal with this new challenge. At a recent conference in Washington, U.S. officials told me they were surprised by how sophisticated Russian TV was. Up until this year they had been utterly unaware of the unique mix of authoritarianism, spin and entertainment the Kremlin has perfected.

The West once upon a time managed to create a powerful narrative within the Soviet Union by mixing entertainment with democratic values. Rock 'n' Roll, the glitzy soap opera Falcon Crest and parliamentary elections were a stark contrast to the USSR's drab TV and Politburo. But Putin's Russia has shown you can have western style entertainment plus authoritarianism. Are we up to the challenge of making the sort of TV that touches the deeper impulses of democracy, to convince audiences both inside Russia, and the 30 million ethnic Russians outside its borders, there is more to liberal democracy than Pop Idol? Inspiration can come from British shows that combine the emotional engagement of reality show formats with social themes. Channel 4's *Make Bradford British*, for example, put people of different, feuding ethnic groups in one house and provoked them to sort out their differences. Could something similar be attempted with ethnic Russians and Ukrainians in, say, Kharkiv?

There also remains a residual, 20th-century belief that Russian propaganda can be countered by delivering "real information" to audiences. But Russian TV doesn't try to prove "the truth." And what good is giving "the truth" to an audience that has been emotionally spun by the Kremlin not to believe it? Inside Russia today, there is plenty of access to alternative information online, and ethnic Russians outside the country have plenty of "reliable" sources, but their emotional allegiance is to Kremlin broadcasters. The West will need the type of programs that will give Russian audiences the analytical tools to understand how they are being psychologically manipulated by Kremlin media. Is there a media version of Penn and Teller out there—a program that could debunk propaganda the way the duo demystifies magic tricks?

Perhaps most worryingly, though, is that we have little understanding of the Kremlin's "weaponization of information." Kremlin news channels are not simply brattish versions of the BBC or CNN, they are also military and intelligence tools, particularly potent in regions with large Russian speaking populations, or those such as Latin America or the Middle East where anti-Americanism is already strong and where the Kremlin is extending its broadcasting reach. Freedom of information and the First Amendment are sacrosanct in Western culture—and to a journalist and documentary maker like myself especially. But what if a player uses freedom of information to sow disinformation. Not to inform or persuade—but as a weapon? In the words of Russian media analyst Vassily Gatov: "If the 20th century was defined by the battle for freedom of information and against censorship, the 21st century will be defined by malevolent actors, states or corporations, abusing the right to freedom of information for quite other ends."

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