

The Internet Ends TV's Monopoly

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Long before Vladimir Putin established a monopoly on natural resources, the economy and parliament, he established a monopoly on television in the early 2000s. This laid the foundation for Putin to take control of everything else several years later.

Although the seizure of the three largest television networks did not lead to the complete collapse of media freedom, Putin was able to establish a monopoly over the process of generating news.

Six years ago, news was defined as whatever was shown on television. Anything not on television was not news. Now the situation has changed. The Internet is becoming a generator of news.

For example, recall when Putin's driver hit and killed a 5-year-old boy in 1997. This incident did not become news either then or at the start of Putin's rule. Compare this with the February accident involving LUKoil vice president Anatoly Barkov. His Mercedes, reportedly driving in the wrong lane to avoid traffic, collided head-on with an oncoming car and left two women

dead. This scandal became news only because millions of Russians read about it on the Internet.

In addition, there were several opportunities for Russian Internet users to see an uncensored, unorchestrated version of the real Putin.

The first example was the PR stunt with the yellow Lada Kalina. If Putin had driven the Lada from Khabarovsk to Chita two years ago, that would have been news, and all of the sarcastic remarks — whether in the press or on the Internet — about the lack of decent roads in Russia, the traffic police hiding in the bushes and the three spare Kalinas tailing along would have been nothing more than commentary. News always carries greater weight than commentary.

But now, an amateur video uploaded onto the Internet mocked Putin's motorcade of several dozen foreign cars and three spare Ladass — in case the one he was driving broke down. That video qualified as full-fledged news, not commentary.

Though the number of Internet users is much lower than the number who watch state-controlled television, the Internet is beginning to have an impact on what information is available to Russians.

The second example involved the public anger at Putin for the government's failure to respond to this summer's wildfires. If Putin had visited the burned-out villages in the Ryazan region two years ago, the public would only have seen a carefully orchestrated report on state television of their concerned national leader touring the area and discussing the problem with locals. That would have been the only news available, and all comments regarding the government's slowness in putting out the fires would have only been inconsequential commentary. But now the situation has changed. Somebody posted a video on YouTube showing how the angry villagers greeted Putin with shouts of "The government should resign!" and "You did nothing to help!" That definitely qualifies as news.

The Internet has now become a source of news, and it is being provided by eyewitnesses and victims of accidents and government abuse, not professional journalists. The Internet has become the leading opposition force.

Many forms of media exist apart from television, but they do not generate news. Putin tried his best to establish a monopoly on television, thereby giving it a monopoly on producing news. But the growth of the Internet in Russia has put an end to that monopoly.

In the near future, we will see whether the Internet destroys Putin or whether Putin destroys the Internet.

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