

Media Sadomasochism

By [Boris Kagarlitsky](#)

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Bad news is a very popular genre in the Russian media. Of course, the media in other countries also devote considerable attention to disturbing or sensational stories, but the peculiarly sadomasochistic style of Russia's media has become so widespread that it now shapes the worldview of millions of people. This sensational genre first appeared during the perestroika years and has evolved to the point where we are now reminded daily of how the police torture citizens, how corrupt officials take huge bribes, seize companies, conduct illegal seizures and embezzle government funds, and how people sell their relatives and betray their friends for money.

We need freedom of speech to expose and expunge the evils and abuses in society, criticize the existing order and draw attention to needed changes. Every citizen has the right to such information, and every honest journalist has the duty to provide it. But the horror stories that fill the Russian media have little relationship to the healthy criticism of society's ills.

Old-school Russian journalism attacked social evils with the primary goal of improving society and dispelling ignorance. Readers understood that the problems in society were

caused by a breakdown in morality. During the perestroika years, journalists who had just broken free from Soviet censorship rushed to report on subjects that had earlier been forbidden. The coverage of those topics was not intended to promote certain values but was seen as an end in itself.

The number of these morbid, disturbing stories did not decline with the end of perestroika. As the media became increasingly commercialized, the entire relationship to information also changed. It was discovered that horrifying and sensational stories sold papers. The desire to expose evil was replaced with the desire to revel in it. The problem is that sensational news stories are accompanied more by apathy than by outrage. Evil is no longer viewed as something that can or should be overcome through social action, economic and political reforms or government efforts.

As the "bad-news industry" becomes increasingly commercialized, the chances of eradicating it appear slim. Instead of overcoming evil, Russians are becoming increasingly complacent with it. The constant media coverage of various horrors, outrages and general wickedness has the peculiar effect of inuring audiences to its effects. The idea of fighting these problems does not even come to mind. Worse, people conclude that everyone does it, so why shouldn't I?

A person might act in a praiseworthy manner himself, but he is less willing to believe that others share the same motives. If somebody attends a protest rally, others immediately suspect him of being paid to participate. If an official refuses to take a bribe, it automatically means he is either lying or he is being compensated in another manner. If someone is an honest employee, abides by a strict code of professional ethics or simply observes basic rules of morality, nobody takes any interest in him. Or he is regarded as a loser.

Worst of all, the "industry of evil" takes all possible measures to oppose the concepts of civic responsibility and integrity, the same republican virtues that were well-known even in ancient Rome. Any society that treats such values with contempt or simply forgets about them altogether is destined to perish.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

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