The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Western Media Must Get Creative in Infowar

By Keir Giles

August 04, 2015



Events in Ukraine over the past 17 months have focused world attention on the extraordinary efforts made by Russia to subvert media narratives and shift public opinion over the cause and course of the crisis.

There are two aspects of this Russian approach to "information warfare": first, the outward-facing campaigns of disinformation and propaganda, designed to blunt or divert criticism of Russian actions already carried out and prepare the ground for further steps; and second, the internal efforts to isolate the Russian population from a true picture of events both in the outside world and in their own country.

Foreign broadcasters are under pressure to demonstrate that they can reach Russian audiences, in the way they did during the Cold War. But new obstacles stand in their way. In some respects, it is even more challenging for interested Russians to access the full range of information from the outside world now than it was then. During the Cold War, those living under Communist regimes who wished to hear news from abroad could do so with

a shortwave radio. In the period of relative media freedom in Russia that followed, several foreign broadcasters dropped these services and moved to rebroadcasting in major Russian cities, partnering with local FM stations.

The BBC World Service, for instance, ceased analogue shortwave transmissions to Europe in 2007-08. But once Russia decided to reduce the penetration of foreign media, those FM rebroadcasting arrangements were slowly closed down.

For Russia, this was part of implementing the requirements of its information security doctrine of "securing national information space," and protecting it against "breaches." The measures include both overt and more subtle means of constraining and directing the domestic news agenda. These measures combine to mean that Russia still manages to influence domestic opinion, despite few restrictions on Internet content or the availability of foreign media.

In part, this is because of the limited role of online media in Russia as an independent source of information. Multiple studies have highlighted the dominant role of television in informing Russian society. Where the online debate threatens to depart from the approved narrative, Russia's system of trolls and bots comes into play to divert or swamp discussion.

However, two further distinctive obstacles lie between the Russian Internet media user and the outside world, known by their Russian abbreviations of InoSMI and SORM. InoSMI is a foreign media selection and translation service, widely used by domestic media in Russia and available directly to readers via its own website. It purports to provide direct translations of foreign media coverage, and so gives the impression of providing access to the outside world's view of events.

In reality, both the selection and translation are highly subjective, and skewed to support the approved state narrative on events — so there is a bias toward translation of Western media reportage either from sources which are broadly supportive of Russian policy, or conversely, those that criticize and attack Russia, ideally in unreasonable or irrational terms.

SORM is the Russian state system for recording information on Internet use. Unlike similar systems in the West, it has always been an overt and publicly acknowledged security measure. The paradox is that unlike during the Cold War, it is not possible to access foreign media online without the knowledge of the authorities.

Pressure will continue for external broadcasting services in the West to step up efforts to challenge Moscow's near-monopoly on news in Russia. But given the highly effective systems Russia has put in place to prevent this, Western media will need to come up with new ideas to reach the Russian public.

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