

Surviving Against the Odds: How Russian Media Learned to Adapt in the 2010s

For a while, it looked like independent media would disappear in Russia. But that is not how things turned out.

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What would happen if you placed a huge concrete block across the entire width of a river? Would it stop the water from flowing? Of course not: the water would simply flow around either end and carve out a new path for itself. Russia's journalists and media professionals have been doing something very similar for some time now.

If to chart the authorities' assault on the media over the last 20 years of Vladimir Putin's rule, the result would be an almost continuous upward curve.

This trend began with the authorities shuttering NTV in 2001 and then going on to crush the remaining major television channels. Although employees of those stations found work elsewhere, officials soon silenced radio stations, newspapers and magazines as well. This became an ongoing process by the end of the 2000s. In some cases, the Kremlin installed new owners, in others, it pressured investors and forced out undesirable chief editors. In short, they did whatever it took to “cleanse” the industry.

And they didn’t stop there. After the mass demonstrations demanding fair elections in 2011–2012, the Kremlin realized it had “unfairly” spared the online media and social networks.

Rumor has it that when Vyacheslav Volodin served as political advisor in the presidential administration, he even drew up a list of publications that he believed had practically engineered the protests. Needless to say, the same fate befell those media outlets — they were either liquidated or almost completely restaffed. This [happened](#) to the news portal Lenta.ru, and the result of this “reshuffling” was worse than if the authorities had simply closed it outright.

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The number of independent media outlets dwindled over the years, leaving journalists with few options for work and readers with few places to find objective reporting. By the late 2000s, the authorities had thrown such a tight dragnet that they even began persecuting individuals who reposted oppositional ideas on social networks. They then passed a series of repressive laws that made it more difficult to finance independent media in Russia.

It might have looked at that time as though nothing but Kremlin-sponsored media outlets would remain on this decimated playing field by the end of the 2010s. But that is hardly how things turned out.

At a recent Moscow party, I discovered that two close acquaintances work on popular YouTube projects and another two on popular podcasts. As for me, I work in the media consulting business.

Only a few years ago, we all worked in traditional media. When I began calling to mind dozens of acquaintances and realized that the same was true of them, I understood that this was a widespread phenomenon. For years now, numerous Russian journalists and media experts have been leaving classical media outlets to work in such new formats as video blogs, podcasts or related projects. In fact, this is so common now that nobody finds it surprising anymore.

This reflects a global trend away from traditional media and towards new formats that reflect the specific situation in each country. What unites them all is the desire of journalists to remain independent and the inability of censors to control that impulse.

The Russian authorities have no practical way to alter the editorial policy of a podcast or YouTube show. They can pressure some of the advertisers, but probably not all. They can open one criminal case claiming that this or that show has insulted someone’s feelings, but they

could hardly bring charges against every one of the countless online broadcasters.

In effect, the only repressive measure at their command is to block an entire online resource such as YouTube, but that could provoke an uncontrollable backlash, something the Kremlin is afraid to risk — at least for now.

The result: new media outlets struggle into existence and gather strength like blades of grass pushing up through the cracks in asphalt.

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In a sense, this is the “wonderful Russia of the future” that opposition leader Alexei Navalny has promised, but that is already appearing today. In fact, these projects express not only a strong sense of inner creative freedom, but also entrepreneurial spirit. In effect, they represent countless grassroots examples of media business. In doing what they find interesting, these people are creating jobs for themselves and each other. This is something that did not exist before.

And this is perhaps one small positive result of the 2010s, an otherwise repressive and terrible decade for Russian media.

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