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# Here's Why More Russians Don't Read Independent Journalism

By Maxim Alyukov

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People on a bridge in Zaryadye Park in central Moscow. **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

In the 2000s, a study on how news is produced and consumed across 10 countries found a major gap between what newspapers published and what readers found newsworthy.

In some countries, the relationship between an event's perceived newsworthiness and its prominence in newspapers was even negative. Journalists paid more attention to events the less relevant they were to the public.

Since the public's perception of a story's relevance is essential for audience engagement — and, by extension, journalism's civic mission to inform — demonstrating this profound disconnect sparked numerous studies on how ordinary people, as opposed to journalists, understand news relevance.

The question of news relevance might seem peripheral to the immediate challenges

confronting Russian independent journalism, most of which now operates in exile, under threat, or with limited access to domestic audiences. But it is, in fact, central because of these repressive conditions.

In a media environment saturated with state propaganda and constrained by censorship, independent outlets often position themselves as explicitly oppositional, with domestic political persecution and the invasion of Ukraine among the most covered topics. Yet when these stories fail to resonate with people's everyday lives, audiences may disengage.

While regime media are state-funded and relatively independent from audiences, independent outlets depend on audience engagement to survive. Their existence hinges on a small audience estimated to be just 6–9% of Russian adults. In such a context, relevance is not an abstract editorial ideal but a condition set by the audience itself. If the public does not see news as relevant, engagement fades—undermining journalism's role in building opposition and supporting eventual democratization, however distant that prospect may seem.

This contradiction between what journalists and the public see as relevant is well illustrated by a new study of Russian audiences, conducted by the Center for Data and Research on Russia (CEDAR). The researchers identified the most popular Telegram channels named by respondents in a nationwide survey, retrieved the content of those channels that produce news, categorized them as pro-government, oppositional or neutral and analyzed differences in tone and the main topics on the agenda.

The key findings include that pro-regime channels are three times more popular than oppositional ones among respondents who named a news source. Furthermore, oppositional channels are, understandably, more negative in tone, focusing on war and repression, rather than everyday topics like the economy, crime, health and culture.

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Tellingly, Meduza, the most popular oppositional channel, stands out for its positive tone and diverse content, including culture, sport, and humor. The report goes on to suggest that audience growth may depend on a more diverse agenda, with a stronger focus on everyday issues — like the economy or health — and a more positive tone.

It is likely that a significant portion of pro-government sources' popularity stems from the political preferences of the audience, not necessarily its tone or topic selection. Some research suggests that one reason Kremlin propaganda is effective lies in its ability to offer emotional comfort, helping people feel better about themselves by validating their identities.

Simply put, people choose pro-regime RIA Novosti over Meduza because they support the regime and prefer the stories they are being told by state media, which happens to be more diverse and positive in tone due to their role as well-resourced propaganda outlets.

However, a vast amount of prior sociological data suggests that tone and focus do play an important role in attracting or alienating audiences from both pro-government and oppositional media following the invasion, even when political affinities between sources and

audiences are taken into account. Hundreds of in-depth interviews conducted by the independent research group Public Sociology Laboratory over three years of war provide insight into the mechanisms underlying media disengagement.

This research suggests that, initially, some anti-war Russians made a conscious effort to stay informed about the war despite the emotional toll. Over time, their attention faded. Negative, traumatic news caused exhaustion and reinforced political helplessness. Why keep reading if nothing can change?

The repetitive nature of the coverage also led to a widespread perception that one learns nothing new from yet another story about war or repression. Instead, local media gained relevance because they report on issues that directly affect people's lives — issues that feel, at least to some extent, within their power to influence. Discussions about the war faded due to political risk and the belief that persuasion was impossible when opponents are under firm control of regime propaganda.

While these issues seem unique to the Russian wartime context, news relevance has long been a focus in media research, especially around audience disengagement. The problem is that the public's engagement with the media is rarely driven solely by civic duty or political interest.

From classical research into the needs media fulfill to contemporary studies of perceived news relevance, interest in politics is just one of many reasons people follow the news. People are more often drawn to stories that affect their personal lives and impact their local communities, making human and geographical proximity a key factor in perceived relevance. Weather and crime are consistently seen as more important than politics, and local news is consistently seen as more important than national or international politics.

People also gravitate towards stories they believe family and friends might find interesting, providing topics for social discussion. When an issue receives excessive coverage, audiences tend to disengage. Not because they no longer care, but because they feel sufficiently informed.

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Framing plays a crucial role in sustaining engagement: even when stories directly affect people's lives — like economic reporting — they are more likely to pay attention when abstract concepts are translated into concrete, relatable terms. Audiences respond more readily to reports on how rising prices affect grocery bills than to abstract coverage of inflation, monetary policy or GDP.

While traumatic news can trigger short-term spikes in attention, it often leads to news avoidance, compassion fatigue, and long-term disengagement—especially when it lacks a sense of actionable context.

From this point of view, CEDAR's findings are far from surprising. They align with decades of research on audience perceptions and behavior, pointing to a potential path toward audience expansion. The proposed shift would involve diversifying the range of topics that directly impact people's everyday lives and communities such as healthcare, education, local

economies, culture and social issues. This would frame more abstract economic issues in concrete, relatable terms, avoiding a persistently negative tone.

This does not mean abandoning the oppositional stance and critical reporting on war and repression. Independent media prioritize these issues precisely because state-affiliated outlets do not. Abandoning this focus would not only undermine the civic role that independent media play, but would also risk alienating their core, politically engaged audience. However, rebalancing editorial priorities to make content more emotionally sustainable and socially relevant can help deliver these perspectives to a broader public.

However, doing so is likely to be challenging from both financial and moral points of view. Independent outlets operate under conditions of severe resource constraints — working in exile, under threat, and often with limited funding. Expanding coverage across multiple domains requires not only editorial will but the financial and institutional capacity that many of these organizations lack — particularly in light of the recent end of USAID support.

Such an editorial reorientation may also provoke criticism from journalists themselves, as well as from activists and political actors with a stake in the conflict. In a context where the Russian state is waging a brutal war abroad against Ukraine and intensifying repression at home, a shift away from these core topics may be interpreted as an abdication of responsibility — or even moral complicity in normalizing the regime's actions.

However, the challenge for independent media is not to choose between morality and relevance, but to integrate the two: to retain critical integrity while broadening their reach.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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