

Ukraine: media in the midst of war

# Wendy Sloane

## asks what we can know of Russia

**H**indsight is a beautiful thing. Marina Ovsyannikova, a former Russian Channel One editor who famously went on national television holding a handmade placard criticising the Russian invasion of Ukraine and pleading with her compatriots to not “believe the propaganda”, has publicly expressed regret for working for state-controlled media for so many years. Her work on Channel One served only to “zombify” the population, she said, which is why she has now taken up a position with the German broadsheet *Die Welt*.

But many are questioning her move. Why now? Ovsyannikova made the conscious choice to work for a Kremlin mouthpiece earlier in her career, but independent journalists have been fighting against state media control ever since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000. The *Moscow Times* (*MT* – “Independent News from Russia”) called her protest an “anti-war stunt”, pointing out that canny journos knew that the seeds against a free media were sown more than two decades ago, took root slowly, and are now blooming. Was she really that naive, or had she just had enough?

From the moment he took office, Putin worked hard to “dismantle Russian independent media”, the Russian exiled journalist Farida Rustamova wrote recently in the *MT*. The Russian president took over the popular TV channel NTV before taking control of local media, shrunk journalists’ salaries, labelled journalists from abroad “foreign agents”, and banned media outlets and activities he deemed “undesirable”, such as those under exiled Russian businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky. When the “military operation in Ukraine” started, the onslaught against the media intensified.

“In the first week of the war in Ukraine, the authorities shut down almost all the remaining independent media in Russia. The internet channel TVRain was suspended; the oldest independent radio station Ekho Moskvy was taken off the air and its site destroyed; *Novaya Gazeta* [has] stopped

working until the end of the war, and any Russian-language websites that were not under state control were blocked, even if they were not covering the war,” said Rustamova. Those who continued their journalism were constrained by gleaming new censorship laws, where reporting anything deemed *feik*, or fake, could result in a 15-year prison sentence. Fakes, she said, are “any report not based on Ministry of Defence press releases”.

Reporting from inside Russia has never looked so bleak. Most independent Russian media outlets have been either shut down or partially blocked, with many Western – and Russian – correspondents who were based in the country relocated elsewhere. New censorship laws are making accurate, on-the-ground reporting close to impossible, with journalists barred from calling out the true nature of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including referring to it as a “war”. Now, the censorship is starting to spill over to parts of occupied Ukraine, with many viewers having access only to Russian state-controlled media, according to the BBC.

“It is definitely harder than it was during the Brezhnev days because there was a better understanding then of what you could and could not do. Now it is completely unpredictable,” said Derk Sauer, the Dutchman who is founder and publisher of the *Moscow Times* (the Russian-language version was blocked when it reported on Russian riot police refusing to fight in Ukraine and is now only accessible with a VPN). After more than 30 years in Russia, Sauer recently moved his family and many staff to Amsterdam, while opening up new headquarters for the paper’s international edition in Yerevan in Armenia.

“We closed the Moscow office and people are working underground more or less, with no bylines. They are very careful in their communication, using special apps and so on. It is all very difficult to report from Russia these days,” he told me. “We have been declared a foreign agent, our website is blocked, we are breaking the law by talking about war and invasion. We don’t want to run the risk of going back.” Even with VPNs and sites such as Telegram, it’s still risky business to get the news out there. “It’s a cat-and-mouse game we are playing now,” said Sauer. “Unfortunately, we are the mouse.”

Putin’s regime is presenting the biggest challenge for journalists reporting on the country in decades and, as a result, few people outside Russia, as well as inside, have a full picture of what is going on within its borders. “At least if you were censored in the past, you just got told off,” says Nanette van der Laan, a senior producer for *Channel 4 News* who covered the Soviet collapse. Journalists who got expelled, often as the result of a tit for tat, would often reappear on the scene a few years later. “But now it’s

way more dangerous, as you could go to jail and you don't even know what you have done wrong," she said. Her bosses recalled her and her team from a reporting stint in Moscow for their own safety in March.

That said, many news outlets are resorting to ingenious ways to circumvent the regulations. A Bloomberg reporter told me they have also removed bylines from inside Russia and most of their reporters have relocated to Dubai. Other foreign news organisations have followed suit, moving to neighbouring countries such as Latvia or monitoring the situation from their home countries. The *Christian Science Monitor* has kept its main correspondent in Moscow but is running all stories from Russia with a disclaimer: "This article was edited in order to conform with Russian legislation criminalising references to Russia's current actions in Ukraine as anything other than a 'special military operation'."

Despite all the manoeuvring, several reporters – including foreigners – have already gone to jail or are facing a sentence for breaking the new laws. It's a stark warning to others. On April 13, Kremlin critic Vladimir Kara-Muzra was arrested for an interview he gave to CNN in which he called Putin's government "a regime of murderers". Kara-Muzra, a US permanent resident who said he'd previously survived two Russian-led poisonings (which Russia denies), was charged on April 22 with "acting out of political hatred" in "spreading deliberately false information" about the Russian armed forces, according to the unsigned editorial in *The Washington Post*. Kara-Muzra's treatment "marks another slide toward wartime totalitarianism in Russia", the *Post* said, comparing it to that of Evgenia Ginzburg, who was arrested in 1937 after being accused of being a member of a "Trotskyist terrorist counter-revolutionary group".

Less high-profile arrests have also made the news. Four Russian student journalists working for an independent student magazine were arrested after putting together a video defending freedom of assembly: instead of jail, they received "correctional labour sentences". Artist Alexandra Skochilenko faces 10 years in prison for replacing price tags in St Petersburg supermarkets with signs detailing Russia's actions in Ukraine. Colombian Giraldo Saray Alberto Enrique is in custody for "publicly spreading knowingly false information about the Russian armed forces". His arrest followed charges against prominent Ukrainian journalist Dmitry Gordon for disseminating *feik* news. In the third week of the war, a protester in Nizhny Novgorod was arrested for holding up a blank sign.

So how do we get true information about what is going on in Russia –

and what does it mean if we don't? "Because of the restrictions the Russian authorities have placed on journalists, it has become almost impossible to practise normal independent journalism. Because of that, international audiences are not getting a full picture," said James Rodgers, author of *Assignment Moscow: Reporting on Russia from Lenin to Putin* and reader in international journalism at City, University of London. Many Western news outlets are concentrating on, or solely covering, Ukraine, which makes it difficult to predict which way the winds inside Russia are blowing.

"We don't cover a lot of Russia because it's very, very tricky. All the official agencies and online newspapers are working for the Kremlin propaganda machine," said Sasha Schlichter, a senior producer at BBC World Service in London. "They stop publishing stories, as such. Every story has a purpose, working toward the general war effort." Another BBC employee, World Service senior correspondent Olga Ivshina, said that "only the guys with British passports" remain on the ground in the Moscow bureau but insists that the BBC is "still reporting extensively on everything that is going on in both Russia and Ukraine" from Europe.

## *Subhead*

"We have never stopped our operations. That is what our audiences want," she said, adding that viewing figures have never been better. She has no plans to return to Moscow soon. In 2014, while covering the annexation of Crimea, she was ambushed by Russian special forces who threatened to rape her, then kill her and her family, she told me. "I have been covering Russia for years but it has become too threatening to myself and to my relatives. I had to cease activities reporting from Russia. It has become too dangerous."

Do we really know what Russians are thinking? A recent Levada Center poll says 81 per cent of Russians support Putin's actions in Ukraine – but how accurate is that? "I think it's much more complex than we think. Many of my friends are sceptical and critical but they are silent for obvious reasons," said London-based journalist Yuliya Melnikova, who spent two weeks back home in Moscow following a family bereavement in April.

The visit was "terrifying", said Melnikova, who previously worked for the *Moscow Times* and asked that a fake name be used to protect her family. "I did force myself to watch some of the news, which was an effort. The level of continuous brainwashing has been upped to unbelievable levels. Even in Soviet times you had *Vremya*, the official state news programme, and that was

it. You had your hour of shit every day. But now you have 12 hours of shit.”

The main TV channels almost continuously show current affairs, Melnikova said. “Unless you really are skilled in getting information and are willing to dig for it and subscribe to outlets such as *Telegram*, then you need analytical skills to come up with a balanced opinion. Without that you have no other choice, you just listen to what they say. And if people have their TV running like background noise, like many Russians do, then it just slips into the brain.” She recalled a Russian meme she saw recently on Facebook: “The only high precision weapon Russia has is the television; it shoots right into the brain, even if there is no brain.”

And yet some have chosen to stick it out. Russian investigative journalist Yevgenia Albats, Harvard-educated with friends worldwide, said she has no plans to leave. She is chief editor of the liberal *Novoye Vremya* (New Times) magazine, which has now moved to *Telegram*, and had her own show on the Echo Moskvyy commercial radio station, closed down by the state regulator Roskomnadzor in April and now available only on YouTube.

“I’m an old-school reporter. I believe we have to touch the surface, that we have to speak to people on the ground, otherwise it’s very difficult to understand what’s really going on,” she told *Channel 4 News* in March. She told me she had “stopped giving interviews”, no doubt to protect herself. “I also believe that we journalists have certain obligations to our listeners and to our viewers and to our readers. After all, the absolute majority of Russians, they cannot just pick up a suitcase and leave.”

Journalists like Sauer felt they had no choice but to run. “I am, most of all, sad about this crazy and totally unjustified war. Putin and his small circle, they basically are ruining Ukraine and at the same time they are ruining everything that is left from a decent democratic Russia. “The moral degradation of Russia, the endless terrible propaganda, the destruction of civil society. It’s not just journalists, of course, but everyone who is more or less normal in Russia, everyone with some decency is a victim.”

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