



Where in the World is Russian Media Theory?

BENJAMIN PETERS
University of Tulsa

Abstract: This article renews questions and stirs bibliographic materials surrounding Russian media theory: namely, what, in Russian, are *media* and what work do they do in Russia? Why does there not exist, despite ample intellectual lumber over the centuries, an obvious self-described school of media theoretic thought in Russian? Given a brief bibliographic outline of relevant literature on the subject, what can be said to be at stake in Russian or Slavic media theory, in the obstacles that its articulation faces and in the pre-dispositional grounds of possibility for a Russian – or somehow Slavic – media theoretic tradition?

Keywords: Media, media studies, media theory, communication, communication studies, *sredstvo, priem*, formalism

It is a curious fact that nowhere does there exist today, despite the ample intellectual materials, anything that might be called ‘Russian media theory’. Other scholars have identified various schools of media thought as distinctively German (Geoghegan 2013; Pias 2016), Canadian (Carey 1968), American (Czitrom 1982), French (Cusset 2008) and British (Schulman 1993) and yet, while the lumber and ruins are ample, no single school of media thought stands today that is recognizably Russian or otherwise discernibly Slavic.¹ Why not?

That the current Russian intellectual scene has not generated a highly coherent response to a digital media environment wildly in flux is itself not the surprise. Rather it is curious that, despite international attention being lavished on the Russian media environment for much of the last two roughly digital decades, much of the mass media Soviet century before that and on and off for Tsarist centuries of print culture before that, the omnibus topic of the means of communication in Russia has not elicited a more sustained *theoretical* approach to

¹ Interestingly, these schools of thought often intermix national traditions of thought: the *Canadian Journal of Communication* covers British cultural studies, American thought ends in McLuhan, a Canadian; Blondheim, an Israeli, leads the volume on the Toronto School of Communication Theory reader, etc. See Blondheim, Menahem; Watson, Rita (2007), *The Toronto School of Communication Theory*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

the question of any kind of media, including digital media. Unreflective angst about media in Russia often drive headlines: How did Putin get into your Facebook feed? (He didn't, even though state agents did and to likely negligible effect (see Benkler et al. 2018).) How should a reader understand *Pravda* in a post-truth moment? (They mostly shouldn't, although the cynicism and capitalism share what Natalia Roudakova calls a 'kernel of epistemological realism' (2017: 224)). Why did arsonists torch the first printing press in Russia, and why was the press a darling of Ivan the Terrible, anyway? (It's complicated (see Marker 1985).) Still the big-picture question demands to be put plainly: what, for Russia, are *media* and what work, in Russian, do media do?

Scholars have been asking supporting queries for centuries, and this essay can only finger a few low-hanging fruit in the recent literature. My argument is not that some kind of Russian media theory *should* exist (in fact, this essay offers several reasons why it may *not*). Rather it is simply to speculate beyond the curious observation that, given the sustained interest in the subject, no distinctively Russian theoretical approach to media has emerged to date. This brief and at once modest, immodest and necessarily speculative essay aims not to articulate such a theory, nor to lament its nonexistence, nor even to call for further commentary in that direction. It aims instead to take a step backwards to reflect on the causes of that curious fact, to navigate some obstacles standing in the way of its articulation and to excavate the pre-dispositional grounds of possibility for a Russian – or perhaps even somehow Slavic – media theoretic tradition.

Three General Obstacles to Russian Media Theory

As I see it, there are at least three problems obstructing attempts at articulating a Russian media theory: the Russian, the media and the theory, although the spacing and order of these may prove troublesome as well. (Consider the difference between these two equally thinkable translations *russkaia teoriia sredstv massovoi informatsii*, 'the Russian theory of media', and *teoriia russkikh sredstv massovoi informatsii*, 'the theory of Russian media', the difference of which reveals the ambiguity in 'Russian media theory'.) Perhaps still other obstacles will emerge in further consideration.

First, there's the problem of the 'Russian' in Russian media theory: National and pan-ethno-linguistic traditions ('Russian', 'Slavic', etc.) tend to reveal deep incoherence to those privy to their internal disputes: French rationalism, British empiricism, German idealism and American pragmatism, for example, all make for handy pegs for hanging our thought at the door, but, so thoroughly do these strands of thought weave through one another that the distance within any given tradition is often greater than the distance between any two. (Kant, the Königsberg-bound philosopher, marks the height of the 'German' philosophical merger of French rationalism and British empiricism.) At first glance a single tent big enough to embrace all Russian or Slavic approaches to media may appear unthinkable.

Perhaps there is no Russian media theory tradition simply because the debates in Russian media thought may currently be so diverse and divisive that have not even been acknowledged as media debates. By analogy, consider how Edith Clowes begins her *Fiction's Overcoat: Russian Literary Culture and the Question of Philosophy* (2004) by observing why, at least to many in the West, there does not appear to exist a Russian philosophical tradition. Of

course, she, in the course of her signal work, goes on to rediscover such a tradition present yet previously invisible in its literary culture. If philosophy can emerge from Russian literature and culture, so too may media philosophy.

All national identities are, to borrow and twist the language of Bakhtin, funhouse self-reflections compiled out of the observer's own blind spots. This is true elsewhere as well: scholars who take seriously the contributions of so-called 'German media theory' will also appreciate the joke that very little of it is German (its philosophy draws heavily on French influences), only tangentially about media (it often focuses on the interpretive surpluses buried in technical matters and operations), and it offers no theory at all (instead we find in it a literature that fuses critical analysis, history and continental philosophy – a blended antidote *against* systematic theorizing). So too do most major so-called 'Canadian media theorists' draw much from non-Canadian realities: Eric Havelock, for example, spent two decades chairing classical debates and departments at Harvard and Yale; Harold Innis first gleaned the global power imbalances of communication and empire while calculating ballistic trajectories in the French trenches of World War I; and there would be no showman Marshall McLuhan without Tom Wolfe and American public relations professionals (see Pooley 2016). If no prophet is a prophet in their own country, then perhaps so too should no media theorist think – or be thought of – apart from the global media flows that make up their thinking. Perhaps the best way to call an identity into focus is to observe it from afar: as the German language of Ulrich Schmid's pioneering volume *Russische Medientheorien* (2005) suggests, my best bet would hold that the eventual sources for consolidating and articulating a so-called 'Russian media theory' will not – even cannot – come from Russia.

Much of the relevant work in articulating and employing Russian media evidence and theory happens outside of Russia and in languages other than Russian. This is not to exclude Russia, but rather to rearticulate the long-standing irony that Russia's intellectual distinctiveness – or, as is often the case, distinctive claims to its own universality – owes something to the international circuits, colonial commerce and global republics of letters and travel that have sustain Russia on global stages. Russia, whatever else it may be, intersects a vertically-thick political geography with a horizontally-broad cartography of global communication.

What can we say about its cardinal coordinates? Of any nation on the postcolonial global map, Russia today surely stretches the farthest from west to east; however, the perennial debate over to which end of Eurasia Russia leans on a world compass is overshadowed by the towering cardinal fact that it is also the most *northern* of all major countries. More curiously still, its scientific bases litter the Antarctic continent (while the US placed a base on the south pole) and it is the only country to claim exclusive portions of the International Space Station as its own, making Russia – on its own terms – arguably at once among the most northern, southern and extraterrestrial of all countries. Never mind where in the world Russian media theory is: first we might inquire, Where in the world is Russia?²

² Suffice it to note that the skepticism introduced above is compounded by introducing the term *Slavic*. It would strain reason to presuppose that, say, Czech contributions to media operations would have more to do with Moscow than the culture-constitutive tensions with Germany and Slovak Hungarian and Habsburgian influences that constitute the Czech intellectual milieu. No doubt there are as many articulable dialects of media thought as regional approaches will permit, at both a mezzanine-global level – such as as Central Asian, Eastern European, Southern European, Central European, even Eurasian – and a mezzanine-regional level – such as the long list of every national variant from Armenian to Uzbekistani and their many sub-schools of activity. That regions scale fractally, adding essential, irreducible wrinkles to any attempt at synthetic cultural analysis will surprise few

Theory offers a second stumbling block to ‘Russian media theory’. Should one even want it and, if so, under what conditions might one want to express it? Theory – understood as the attempt to formalize and systematize thought – might best be understood as a bit like underwear: one should always have it on but only show it off on the most private of occasions. Again, other successful media theoretic traditions offer very little in terms of systematic theory and much more in terms of new modes of critical reflection and analysis. Consider its global north neighbouring traditions again: Canadian media theory, sometimes called the Toronto School of Communication, highlights the psychological and social consequences of media technologies; meanwhile, the German tradition offers creative close readings of hardware, conceptual and cultural technicalities, while French philosophers delight in the playful superabundance of signs, and in none of these does one arrive at a fully systematized theory *qua* theory of media. Instead, each tradition offers its own complex weave of historical materials and philosophical commentary (in the pre-modern sense in which commentary is primary, not derivative, to scholarship) for offering up new understandings of the means that make up the world. ‘Theory’ here serves as keyword cover and a placeholder for porting in rich supplies in philosophy, history and cultural discourse. If this argument holds, then the lack of any systematic theoretical approach to media questions for Russia not only does not pose an obstacle; it may in fact be a precondition for beginning to peak behind the misnomer of theory – and to glimpse anew the abundant media history, culture and philosophy at stake in Russia.

Finally, whatever might the ‘media’ in the phrase *Russia media theory* mean? The Russian language and its resources offer several starting points, although there are reasons to bristle at the conventional Russian phrase for ‘media’, *sredstva massovoi informatsii* (*SMI*): together with *organy massovoi informatsii*, which is somewhat akin to the ‘the’ in the English phrase “the media” in referring to mainstream mass media companies, a *SMI* understanding of media may be gumming up a more usable trans-historical sense already latently held in common by both digital media and print culture scholars (the bulk of the field). In other words, to take *mass media* as the *normal* baseline in the historical arc of Russia would be a towering mistake – it sets broadcast media as a standard when in fact broadcast messages from few senders to many receivers mark the exception to the historical rule: most media in world history – obviously print and digital media, and less obviously mass media themselves – have far more complex agent, message and address relationships. Mass media focuses also tend to conceptually preload and distort analysis with (often classical liberal) concerns about censorship and public access, state control and individual liberties. For example, that, say, RT ran afoul of British impartiality rules in 2018 may be interesting and important itself, but such issues are surely essential consequences of, but not necessary frames for, understanding media. Instead, the combined shock of the old and new – of the pre- and post-mass media century – may prove a salutary reimagining of what media theory *could* be about in Russia: namely, an interest in the mediation of truth, knowledge and power that does not depend merely on Tsarist orthodoxies, Soviet state socialisms, or contemporary petrostate power-grabs; a Soviet experiment in the construction of what critical algorithm scholar Tarleton Gillespie (2013) calls a ‘calculated public’ that cannot be understood alone through analysis of the levers of state control or the ‘big five’ mass media – state newspapers, magazines, radio, tele-

readers of this journal.

vision and film. Indeed, the most brilliant of media studies – such as those by Ellen Mickiewicz (1997) on Soviet television or those by John MacKay (2018) on Vertov's film-making – often find revealing *mismatches* between the repressive aims of state-controlled media and the diverse conflicting strategies for interpretation and operation of media analysts and makers on the ground. This interpretive heterophilia – a willingness to link in diverse directions in a complex media environment – largely resonates with digital media behaviour such as John Kelly's (Etling et al. 2010) study of connections between Russian-language blogs as well as print media such as Natalia Roudakova's (2017) brilliant read of readers of the *Pravda* newspaper in a post-truth Russia. The strong patterns of diverse, conflicting interpretations press the possibility that 'post-truth' should not be understood as an epithet in a narrative of decline so much as a misnomer obscuring the more general observation (and reminder for the current moment of epistemological mayhem) that public truth has only rarely appeared fixed in the long sweep of modernity. Perhaps there is more common than previously imagined in a notion of media that underlies the Russia of village whisper networks, the Soviet Union of agitprop films and contemporary disinformation social media campaigns – namely, a constant of interpretive heterophilia that is, at least on its face, wholly separable from our fondest preoccupations with state power. Throughout these and other examples there seems instead to be a more pronounced *prima facie* willingness of diverse Russian-language media actors to link to opposing positions, thus outlining a plausible national standout intellectual-practical tradition that acknowledges negation and opposition as kinds of connection often neglected in other more positive-associational traditions.

What a fitting reading of *media*, then, could mean in the Russian intellectual tradition is, and should be, very much up in the air. For one, I am somewhat drawn to the initial root of the phrase *SMI*: namely, the expansive, yet focused, notion of *sredstvo* shares with the Latin root of *medium* a sense of 'that which is in the middle' in both temporal and causal senses: *sreda*, or Wednesday, is thus the middle of the week and an environment. A *sredstvo*, like a medium, is a means – an agent that hovers between cause and effect, operating on the heart of many media philosophical dilemmas, the subject-object relation. Carlotta Chenoweth's current book project, for example, looks to document how diverse media-means – propaganda posters, literacy primers, infographics, *agit* trains, boats, balloons, transportation and rumour networks and much else – play formative roles in the construction of a Soviet literate public. These *sredstva*, these media – much like the non-broadcast structure of address already demanded by print culture and digital media – broach so much more than state power, opening a whole new media *azbuka* (ABCs) for socially constructing and sharing meaning: to pick only one letter, media are also open air museums, opera, Orthodox ouroboros (cf. Bishop Vladimir Sokolovskii), overwriting in computing, the malevolent spirit of the Ovinik in oral folklore and many others.

Another term for *media* in Russian media theory might be the difficult-to-translate term *priem*: in 1926 Viktor Shklovsky, the formalist critic, immortalized the term 'priem' in defining his formalist approach to art in the essay '*Iskusstvo kak priem*' ('Art as Device' or 'Art as Technique'). Rendered into English as both 'device' and 'technique', the term *priem* also arrives on English shores carrying diverse semantic cargo: the word can also mean a reception (the equivalent of 'over' said at the end of a radio transmission), a receptacle (the closet for hanging up coats in a theatre), an acceptance, an admission, a movement, a gimmick and a

manoeuvre (in chess), as well as its neighbour terms '*priemnik*' (a mechanical device). Usefully for re-conceiving media, the terms 'technique' and 'device' evoke casual instrumentality without necessitating the materiality of a casual mechanism itself: this is the technique, not a technology; the device in a literary device, not your pocket. Both techniques and devices are methods by which something can be accomplished without grounding that method in a material mechanism or technology. In so doing, the term had much the same immateriality of the term *technology* in English at the time, which still retained in the early 20th century some of the 19th-century sense of the study (or -ology) of techniques (see Schatzberg 2018). Consider, for example, a roughly parallel but much more recent attempt in German media theory to found media studies on the study of 'Kulturtechniken' by which Bernard Siegert (2014) and Thomas Macho (2003), among others, draw our attention to the 'basic operations and differentiations', such as writing, painting and counting that precede diverse conceptual and ontological objects that constitute culture. *Priem*, similarly, invites thoughts about the reception not as the end of communication but as the technical conditions that give rise to culture.

Most definitions of media cast Gestalt shadows in flitting between fore and ground, or specifically in flitting between that which is in the middle two or more actors in a given situation and the background to the situation itself: in the middle of cause and effect is the means, or the medium; in the middle of past and future is the presence of the medium; in the middle of sender and receiver is the channel. At the same time, the term *medium* can also refer, upon reflection, to the environment that constitutes and encompasses the situation in which the very difference between cause and effect, sender and receiver, actor and acted upon, subject and object become articulable. The difference is not only an analytic a posteriori, or that which can be observed about a situation after the fact of mediation; it is also the difference that constitutes the situation as such. In this context, the term '*sredstvo*' is perfectly well-fit neighbour in a longer line of Indo-European languages fit for thinking through the means that bridge cause and effect, sender and receiver, actor and acted upon, which deserve comment elsewhere.

The term '*priem*' too deserves special emphasis since it locates and highlights a distinctive possibility: namely that the root of *priem*, and thus of the medium-technique-device, is reception, not sending. *Priem* is a derivative of the verb *prinijat* or 'to receive' and yet it offers a notion of reception that is not passive, not an object, not easily subject to objectification. In this, it straddles and helps rewrite the classic subject-object distinction at stake in much media theory. It suggests, as Shklovsky suggests, that reception must be understood not as either passive or active action, not in the grammar of subjects or objects at all, but instead as a useful name for talking about reception separate from senders and receivers. *Priem* marks a noun or name for receiving that belongs not to the subject or the object of action, but to the situation or constitutive environment itself. Shklovsky's vision of art, subsequently, is a vision that imagines, often through formal techniques, as if it could see the object of art from outside, or from a formalist view, that would somehow perform an end run around the biases of the subjective observer of art. However, that is not the only possible technique-approach to art and culture that his terms empower. It is also possible to see art, for example, not from the outside but from the a-priori environment that it is, or to see art as that which belongs first to the environment that enables a subject and object, or an artist and their art, to

act. In this view, the position of the media analyst is not abstracted to a position of observing from outside but is instead integrated into receiving the situation and its fundamental ambiguity as a position for analysis in the first place. In other words, instead of imagining that the analysis of form from an external position will permit an abstraction and observation of meaning, a *priem*-inclined media analyst receives the constitutive ambiguity of media: that the instrument and the means for making meaning, actors and acted upon, subject and objects, senders and receivers, is a consequence of the medium's earlier role receiving those actors as such. Or that the situation in which meaning is made, namely, the ambiguity in which the observer has to distinguish between subject and object while also recognizing that very difference as a consequence of an *ur-* or environmental condition.

Priem, in other words, might invite new kinds of analysis that embrace the methodological rambunctiousness so anathema to Russian formalists but so common to Russian literary history. Perhaps such a formalism lies in the flip of the usual subject-object relation between technique and text: instead of imagining the scholar as that medium between techniques of reading and texts, let us imagine the study of various techniques as the medium for constituting all world meaning. Instead of imagining, as the Russian formalists sometimes did, a certain set of techniques of reading as that which unifies a scholarly tradition of analysis, perhaps Russian media theory calls for scholars to unify around the reading of techniques. This could have certain advantages: taking *priem* as a term for 'medium technique or device', for example, usefully skirts the material concreteness of *pribor* (the Russian word for a concrete device or appliance) and in the process corrects other (classically Western) object-oriented approaches to technological thingness so common in more materialist media philosophical traditions. A *priem* – like a cloud, a shadow, or a subtle gesture – need not be a thing at all while still signifying something very real. True things, as mathematicians and media theorists agree, do not have to be real in the narrow sense of the word: in short, perhaps to study media *priemy* is not only to study, in Shklovsky's phrase, *iskusstvo kak priem* (or 'art as technique'). It is also to make central to the scholarly arts the study of the diverse media, devices, techniques, methods, manoeuvres (as in a *priem* in the game of chess) and receptions that constitute world cultures.

It is, in short, to study *priemy kak iskusstvo* (techniques as art).

***Priemy kak iskusstvo* – or Notes toward a Russian Media Theory that is Neither Russian, nor about Media, nor a Theory**

Whatever the weight of these combined challenges (Russian media theory may never be a clear composite of Russia, media, or theory), the fact remains that the Russian-language tradition of media *sredstva* and *priemy* studies still stands to break open fresh styles, forms of thought and critical work. If it is true, as suggested earlier, that a national media theory tradition requires displacing its observations on media, technology, culture and literature from the nation itself, there are few other territories so ripe with traditions of displaced luminaries – sometimes in exile (both without and within) – as Russia and its imperial reaches. In the search for a successor to theory that so often gums up the unsettling work of philosophy and history, why not turn to the brilliant Russian tradition where the subjunctive tense is, grammatically (think the subjunctive marker 'by'), ever rendered in the past tense while the past

tense of Russia is, figuratively, so often in the subjunctive tense (*which past would Russia want today*)? If it is true, as suggested earlier, that the Russian language brings distinctive resources for a new seeding and flowering of (a very old understanding of) ‘media’, what kind of new histories of Slavic culture might attention to its many basic media (*sredstva*) or even media devices (*priemy*) reveal?

A proper list, of course, encompasses many more voices than can possibly be sketched in the bibliographic snapshot that follows: with Gabriella Safran, we might see the nineteenth-century literary critics discovering fascinating case studies in mixed media as Belinsky sounds out the oral tradition of Decembrist revolution with his pen; perhaps Tolstoy, in receiving a phonograph from Thomas Edison and in hearing the voices of the dead for the first time, marks the end of Belinsky’s literary age of secondary orality with the mass reproduction of the inscription of sound itself.³ In more political and philosophical veins, Mikhail Bakunin’s work on the decentred distributions of political power could be read as a materialist milestone and prescient critique of the many uneven powers concentrated in decentred networks online and off today while the philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, whose struggles to reconcile the subject-object distinction at the heart of German idealism as well as his own faith in nihilism-orthodoxy, adds dimension and depth to the richness of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy’s attention to and use of the multimedia literary devices of language: perhaps Dostoevsky, in articulating the literary naturalism in his epistolary novel *Poor Folk*, for example, rehearses a core political revelation of the Republic of Letters after the Spring of Nations – the realities of correspondence by post, and thus commiseration at a distance about the hardships of everyday life, is no longer a luxury only of the rich: the post is now a matter of and for poor folk. In another rich vein of the literary and visual literacy tradition, Katherine Reischl’s pioneering media-literary work, *Photographic Literacy* (2018), examines the influence of the camera on nineteenth and twentieth-century authors.

A framework for Russian media theory, especially in times of rapid modernization, could also welcome what we might call the *priem* practices and the *sredstva* of science and technology central to the performance of any modern culture: the radical biopolitical utopianism of Nikolai Fedorov and his half-deaf pupil and eventual architect of Soviet rocketry Konstantin Tsiolkolvsckii, among many other cosmists, offer fascinating and revolutionary aesthetic and political reflections on the intertwining of modern scientific and technological *sredstva* with the tensions between the theological and teleological strivings of Orthodoxy and the Russian revolutions (see Groys 2018). Simultaneous attempts to formalize and structure language also sheds light on computational formalism in an age of revolution before the computer came of age: in mathematics, there’s the name-worshipping set theorists Dmitrii Egorov and Nikolai Luzin (see Graham et al. 2009); in poetry, the mathematically inclined symbolists Andrei Bely and Alexander Blok; and in linguistics, the semiotic and formalist circles surrounding Nikolai S. Trubetskoi and Roman Jakobson, and later Yuri Lotman. To the degree that each is preoccupied with a distinct yet compatible strand of *sredstva* – transfinite sets, the uttered word, the phoneme and symbol – the resulting media theory stands ready to help clarify and globalize the origins of computing and automated formal language before computers.

³ See Gabriella Safran’s faculty site for a brief summary of her current work: <https://dcl.stanford.edu/people/gabriella-safran>.

The Soviet era, even as the state censored the school of literary formalism, is marked by a swell in practical experiments in other kinds of media formalisms: it is no accident, for example, that poetry plays a role in shaping the analysis of syntactic constraint in Soviet information theory and computer programming – from analysis of Pushkin and Mayakovsky by the mathematicians Andrei A. Markov (1913) and Andrei Kolmogorov (1965). Jakobson, who himself enjoys association with OPOJAZ, the Prague Circle and the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics, may be among the shortest direct lines to the non-French origins of French theory. (Again, national or regional approaches breed nonsense questions like whether French theory might be Russian before it is French.) What appears now as clear cybernetic analogies (whereby all technologies are what Ernst Kapp called, in 1875, ‘organ projections’ (2018): a crutch as the extension of a leg, the axe extends the cutting blow of the arm, the telephone extends the mouth-ear pair, and the computer, famously, extends the work of the brain) abound in the pre-cybernetic works ranging from revolutionary and scientist Alexander Bogdanov, the neurologist Vladimir Bekhterev, the Czech philosopher of automation and evolution Radovan Richta, the quiet cosmism of cyberneticist Viktor Glushkov and many others.

Perhaps the closest thing that the Soviet tradition has to a philosophy of metaphysics is hidden in its twined machine vision of society and socialist visions for machines. Much as in the American tradition, a sort of machine metaphysics – that sneaky spirit so often banished since Hegel and the other ornate heights to collapse with the Habsburg empire – still haunts the sweeping reach of Soviet dialectical materialism: indeed, with Anindita Banerjee’s (2018) work in hand, perhaps the clearest twentieth-century expression of metaphysics outside of philosophy is in the imagination of *nauchnaia fantastika* (science fiction) ranging from the self-consciously fictional narratives of scientific socialist futures of Bogdanov to the less high-brow public narratives of social salvation through labour, such as the Strugatskii brothers and Efremov (see also Tatarchenko and Peters 2017).

Russian media theory could also be good to think for the present moment. Might it be possible, for example, to sober, pre-empt and re-evaluate some of the contemporary hand-wringing about the Russification of liberal democratic politics? One observation might be, with Elena Vartanova (2012), how the discordant mediatisation of the journalistic press in Europe has a distinctive Russian flavour; or how, with Roudakova (2012), the (often curiously western) calls for de-westernizing media systems break against the rocks of simultaneous desovietisation, internationalisation and fermentation in post-Soviet contexts; or how, in fact, the Russian media theoretic tradition models and maintains a long history of an (educated and proud) public that leapfrogged over the western love affair with journalistic objectivity by normalising long ago its relationship with absentee public truth. The industrialized West, often too quick to espouse economic liberalism while neglecting its own trust in functioning institutions, is often slow to understand a signal lesson from Russian history: truths rarely, if ever, appear straightforward in public and only with significant checks do national leaders use the means of statecraft and public persuasion for anything except cannibalizing the nation’s resources for private gain. The stakes of Russian media theory, too, trend toward such pressingly fresh political-economic and historiographical postures: as my most recent book on Soviet computer networks helps examine, might it actually be the case that post-socialism begins for the Soviet state in the mid-century while the actual economy never accomplishes socialism in practice (see Peters 2016). What other countries might manage to be

post-socialist *before* being socialist? Might the conditions of global capitalism only emerge after the socialist revolution? What other curiosities and corrections against contemporary media fashions and follies might an all-too-rarely modern Russia have to offer?

Other questions abound: what kind of epistemological, ethical and cultural experiments must have been tried in the Slavic tradition in order for our current media environment to emerge as it has – and how does one assess whether such contributions are core, fringe or something else? On the ‘fringe’, with recent works on telepathy by Alaina Lemon (2017) and Vladimir Welminski (2017) in hand, how might a longer and deeper chronicling of the models of communication and the subsequent myths attending commonplace intuitions about technologies and what Lemon calls Soviet ‘technologies of intuition’? Consider also the divergent and informative roles that Russianness has played in the construction of local and international imaginations for machines: what role, Michael Gordin (2015) asks, does the image of the enemy other play in shaping cold war advances in machine language translation in the twentieth century? What role, Ksenia Tatarchenko examines, does the Orientalized Central Asia origins of the algorithm and frequency analysis play in early computer science?⁴ What insights, a volume from Mario Biagioli and Vincent Lepinay (2019) offers, might be gleaned from the global migration of information technology labour from Russia? How, scholars are beginning to question, might the western imagination for the Russian hacker be different, especially if one controls for the *Russian* in the hacker? (see Peters 2018). Whatever else may be said about the tradition of techniques and means – in turn literary and cultural, artistic and artificial, technological and scientific, religious and philosophical – by which Slavic culture is made and shared? Might, say, the role of magic in folklore serve as more than a cultural mechanism in the disquieting rationalism of early Soviet culture,⁵ and thus as another chapter to the recent masterwork of Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clocks* (2016), which reveals how even the most inventive attempts to mechanize away the vitality of modern life have a way of accidentally igniting the spark of life.

In conclusion, I see no less than three opportunity-threats posed by the search for Russian media theory: one, the need for and impossibility of an umbrella vocabulary to accommodate the diverse and pressingly relevant Russian media experience; two, the need for and improbability of a methodological rigour that would narrow such a capacious scope to focus on the means (*sredstva*), technique-devices (*priemy*) and techniques that lead to media; and three, a renewed sense of stubborn humility in the face of the enormity of the task that is articulating, or even speculatively imagining, Russian media theory. Indeed, if, as Chekhov holds, ‘the world is, of course, nothing but our conception of it’, then why not conceive of the Russian-language media experience in terms compatible and contributing to our immensely and irreversibly mediated world? Perhaps, for example, a perspective that embraces some version of the contradictory Russian media experience as the consequence of centuries of the construction of culture through media *sredstva* and *priemy* practices may build out a longer on-ramp for entering into the busy traffic of the tumultuous twenty-first century (no matter how staid, all commentary eventually returns its gaze to the present). As exercises in seeing afresh

⁴ Tatarchenko’s forthcoming monograph is based on her 2013 dissertation. See Tatarchenko, Ksenia (2013) *A House with the Window to the West: The Akademgorodok Computer Center (1958-1993)*, Princeton University, PhD Dissertation.

⁵ See <http://www.columbia.edu/~rjs19/Magic%20Abstract.pdf> for a summary of Rebecca Stanton’s current project.

that which has already been seen, *sredstva* and *priemy* media approaches strike me as potentially capacious enough to include a wide range of vital practices, cultural techniques and operations that will speak to the present preoccupation as well as methodologically sensitive enough to attend to the diverse senses and embodied sensibilities – scripted (literary, historical, coded), optic (visual, cinematic, pictorial), sonic (audio, oral, musical), haptic (interpersonal, sculptural, button-based) and others – required to process such a rich library of media records. The Russian media experience is a bit like the Levinasian ‘unread said’ that is computing data, the material traces of nature and (to scoop Gerschenkron’s line) Nabokov’s translation of *Onegin*: all four contain such dizzying kaleidoscope of written material that can and must be studied, but cannot be properly read (see Bozovic 2016; Shilina et al. 2017).

The sheer unmanageability of media – those modest creatures that necessarily track all over literature and language, science and technology, art and artifice – also issue challenges to the intellectual habits of canon fascination, fixation and formation. It is not, of course, that such a diverse media approach would somehow delegitimize or destroy the many high-culture canons assembled under Slavic studies (indeed the search for a coherent media literature may prove beneficial): rather media theories have historically struggled to recognize canons as such, and it would be unusual to imagine it being otherwise in the Russian context. Media have eyes that wander: the same *sredstvo* that we might identify in a paintbrush stroke across a Repin or a Kandinski canvas may inspire the next update to a touch-up photo filter on Instagram; the same signature that signs a credit card receipt at breakfast may adorn a birth certificate or a declaration of war in the afternoon; and the same radio weather forecast of snow that delights school children may puncture soldiers and climatologists with creeping dread. Such an omnivorous sense of media – brushstrokes on a canvas, signatures on official forms and weather forecasts amid the changing climate – are not so much content-agnostic as they are the means for following the operations across the most meaningful of contexts. Perhaps this is fit for an age of what Kenneth Cmiel and John Durham Peters (2020) have called ‘promiscuous knowledge’ – an age in which life and its meanings cannot be separated from the many channels that network us together and apart.

With this journal’s jubilee issue in hand, it will surprise few to hear that the mediation of Slavic pasts, presents and futures should contain main possibilities at once familiar yet not previously dreamt of. Like other dreamscapes, Russian (and especially Slavic) media theory appears nowhere a coherent thing and yet everywhere a fragment. It has as many pitfalls as potentials: it could contain the philosophical stakes to reimagine, in a thorough accounting of the vital materials that make up the world, the modern grammar of actor (subject-object) and action (cause-effect); the intellectual capaciousness of basic media (*sredstva*) and diverse media devices (*priemy*) to take in both cosmic universals and the mundane practical facts of everyday life while also updating and sobering our vocabulary for a world now overcrowded by the many different kinds of media between (including a chance to rethink the interpretively heterophilic constants and exceptional relationships mass media and state power inherited from the twentieth-century); the opportunity to employ both the external distinctiveness and internal divisiveness of the Russian traditions to correct and rethink other traditions globally. Or it could not. Russian media theory arguably could do all this, more *and* less, and still, like most dreams, be found nowhere in the world.

References

- Banerjee, Anindita (2013) *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity*, Middletown (CT): Wesleyan University Press.
- Benkler, Yochai; Faris, Robert; Roberts, Hal (2018) *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Biagioli, Mario; Lepinay, Vincent (2019) *From Russian with Code: Programming Migrations in Post-Soviet Times*, Durham (NC): Duke University Press.
- Bozovic, Marijeta (2016) *Nabokov's Canon: From "Onegin" to "Ada"*, Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press.
- Carey, James W. (1968) 'Harold Adam Innis and Marshall McLuhan', in Rosenthal, Raymond (ed.) *McLuhan Pro & Con*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 270-308.
- Clowes, Edith W. (2004) *Fiction's Overcoat: Russian Literary Culture and the Question of Philosophy*, Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press.
- Cmiel, Kenneth; Peters, John Durham (2020) *Promiscuous Knowledge*, Chicago (IL): The University of Chicago Press.
- Cusset, Francois (2008) *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, Minneapolis (MI): University of Minnesota Press.
- Czitrom, Daniel (1982) *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan*, Chapel Hill (NC): University of North Carolina Press.
- Etling, Bruce; Alexanyan, Karina; Kelly, John; Faris, Robert; Palfrey, John; Gasser, Urs (2010) 'Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization'. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, 19 October.
- Geoghegan, Bernard (2013) 'After Kittler: On the Cultural Techniques of Recent German Media Theory', *Theory Culture Society*, 30(6): 66-82.
- Gillespie, Tarleton (2013) 'The Relevance of Algorithms', in Gillespie, Tarleton; Boczkowski, Pablo; Foot, Kirsten (eds.) *Media Technologies*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press. 167-193.
- Gordin, Michael (2015) *Scientific Babel: How Science was Done before and after Global English*, Chicago (IL): The University of Chicago Press.
- Graham, Loren; Kantor, Michel (2009) *Naming Infinity: A True Story of Religious Mysticism and Mathematical Creativity*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Groys, Boris (2018) *Russian Cosmism*, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Kapp, Ernst (2018) *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology: On the Evolutionary History of Culture*, Minneapolis (MI): The University of Minnesota Press.
- Kolmogorov, Andrei (1965) 'Zamechaniia po povodu analiza ritma "Stikhov o sovetskom pasporte"', *Voprosy iazykoznaniiia*, (3): 70-75.
- Lemon, Alaina (2017) *Technologies of Intuition: Cold War Circles and Telepathic Rays*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press.
- Macho, Thomas (2003) 'Zeit und Zahl: Kalender- und Zeitrechnung als Kulturtechniken', in Krämer, Sybille; Bredekamp, Horst (eds.), *Bild, Schrift, Zahl*, Munich: Fink, 179-192.

- MacKay, John (2018) *Dziga Vertov: Life and Work (Volume 1: 1896-1921)*, Boston (MA): Academic Studies Press.
- Marker, Gary (1985) *Publishing, Printing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press.
- Markov, Andrei A. (1913) 'Primer statisticheskogo issledovaniia nad tekstom "Evgeniia Onegina", illiustriruiushchii sviaz' ispytaniia v tsep"', *Izvestiia Akademii nauk Sankt-Peterburga*, 7(3): 153 162.
- Mickiewicz, Ellen (1997) *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peters, Benjamin (2016) *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.
- Peters, Benjamin (2018) 'Cracker und White Hat Hacker', *Kulturaustausch*, 3 4: 90 92.
- Pias, Claus (2016) 'What's German about German Media Theory', in N. Friesen (ed.) *Media Transatlantic: Developments in Media and Communication Studies between North American and German-speaking Europe*, New York: Springer International.
- Pooley, Jefferson (2016) 'How to become a famous media scholar: the case of Marshall McLuhan', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20 December, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/become-famous-media-scholar-case-marshall-mcluhan/> (25.1.2020)
- Reischl, Katherine (2018) *Photographic Literacy: Cameras in the Hands of Russian Authors*, Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press.
- Riskin, Jessica (2016) *Restless Clocks: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick*, Chicago (IL): The University of Chicago Press.
- Roudakova, Natalia (2012) 'Comparing Processes' in Manchini, Daniel; Mancini, Paolo (eds.) *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roudakova, Natalia (2017) *Losing Pravda: Ethics and the Press in Post-Truth Russia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schatzberg, Eric (2018) *Technology: A Critical History of the Concept*, Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.
- Schmid, Ulrich, (ed.) (2005) *Russische Medientheorien*, Bern: Haupt Verlag.
- Schulman, Norma (1993) 'Conditions of their Own Making: An Intellectual History of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham', *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 18(1): 51 73.
- Shilina, Marina; Couch, Robert; Peters, Benjamin (2017) 'Data: An Ethical Overview', *The Russian Journal of Communication*, 9(3): 229 240.
- Siegert, Bernhard (2014) *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (trans.), New York: Fordham University Press.
- Tatarchenko, Ksenia; Peters, Benjamin (2017) 'Tomorrow Begins Yesterday: Data Imaginaries in Russian and Soviet Science Fiction', *The Russian Journal of Communication*, 9(3): 245 251.
- Vartanova, Elena (2012) 'The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics', in Manchini, Daniel; Mancini, Paolo (eds.) *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Welminski, Vladimir (2017) *Homo Sovieticus: Brain Waves, Mind Control, and Telepathic Destiny*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Young, George M. (2012) *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BENJAMIN PETERS is a media scholar and author of *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet* and editor of *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture*. He holds the position of Hazel Rogers Associate Professor and Chair of Media Studies at the University of Tulsa and affiliated faculty at the Information Society Project at Yale Law School. More at benjaminpeters.org or @bjpeters.