



Reviews

From Central to Digital: Television in Russia, co-edited by Vlad Strukov and Vera Zvereva. Voronezh: Voronezh State Pedagogical University Press, 2014, pp. 412. Language: Russian.

From the days of *perestroika* in the 1980s Russian television rapidly passed through several stages of evolution to catch up with the achievements of its partners in Europe and the U.S. The compilation of essays entitled *From Central to Digital: Television in Russia* provides readers with insights into the process of how Russian television is coping with the latest of the technological challenges: the switch from central to digital broadcasting. This collection covers almost all aspects of this process: from discursive description of the process of digitalization and technical details of archival information storage, to the experience of the practitioners who are pushing Russian television forward into the new age of digital media. The array of concepts and methodological models used by the contributors demonstrates that Russian television is not, by any means, a ‘propaganda machine’ (as suggested by some critics of Russian television), but a sophisticated and dynamic system which adopts cultural practices from both the domestic and the global agendas. The incremental shift into the digital era makes Russian television programming richer in technologies of audience attraction and allows individuals to participate in the television process through social networks, internet forums and mobile applications. Moreover, as demonstrated by the article on Russia Today (RT), the Russian international television channel, Russian television is not simply a recipient of global cultural trends and technologies. It is deeply and actively engaged in global television culture and is even able to shake it with peculiar promo campaigns. Although some authors of the compilation tend to downplay the topic of digitalization and focus on research into traditional television, the majority of articles pin down the essential issues of the aforementioned process.

The book opens with an introductory essay in which the co-editors, Vlad Strukov and Vera Zvereva, define the main problems facing the digitalization of Russian television and contextualize the topic within studies of Russian television both in Russian and Western historiography. The editors of this volume are well-positioned to pursue this goal, as both Strukov and Zvereva have, in the past, published insightful works on post-Soviet Russian television culture. The authors suggest that, rather than the synchronic and diachronic models previously used in scholarship on Russian television, in the digital era it should be studied using a dynamic model. This model identifies television as a vivid environment which im-

plements various cultural practices and transmits them through different technological platforms. Potentially, digitalized television is able to engage different audiences in the process of TV viewing and thus involve even those audiences who refused to watch TV in the 2000s (and chose the internet instead). However, the government's grip on the process of digitalization, which is carried out by decrees 'from the top', makes Russia a peculiar case, which reminds readers of the role that media plays in authoritarian regimes today. As the authors note, digital television in Russia today 'speaks the language of central television' (p. XXXXVII), thus alluding to practices that exclude dissent voices, which central television adopted in the 2000s.

Overall, the book is divided into four parts each addressing a number of issues connected with the digitalization of television in post-socialist society. The first part is devoted to the problems of transition to the digital era of broadcasting. This is the compilation's theoretical section, which introduces the main aspects of the digital stage in television's evolution, including the technical issue of data storage, and it analyzes Russian audience perceptions of the new, digital technologies. Here, a theoretical overview of digital television, written by Elena Vartanova, is complemented by Vera Zvereva's close look at how Russian society perceives innovation and how various social groups conceptualize it. Zvereva identifies four themes which have framed the debates around the digitalization of television in Russia. First, representatives of the government claim that digitalization helps overcome 'information inequality': it allows Russian citizens in all regions to watch the same channels and thus makes them equal to the Muscovites. Second, some internet users perceive the new changes to be yet another round of a power struggle between media managers, which undermines belief in the public benefit of the innovations. The third and fourth themes describe digitalization as an advantageous technology, which improves the day-to-day experience of TV viewing. The author concludes that, nevertheless, though some debate around digitalization is taking place, there is little discussion among experts and policy makers that explains to ordinary Russians why this innovation is necessary. In fact, it is this lack of debate that allows the state to use digitalization for its own purposes, turning a postmodern technology into yet another instrument of control over society, which is a characteristic of the modern, not the postmodern, state.

The second part of the volume is devoted to an analysis of audience in the digital era. It consists of three articles which deal with methods of audience measurement and particular cases of audience research in the digital era. While Sergei Davydov's essay describes various methods of audience measurement deployed in European countries and Russia, Natalya Sokolova's article on *GamelandTV*, the Russian thematic television channel for gamers, is central to this part of the compilation. An analysis of the channel's internet forum reveals how the audience perceived the content of the channel, and reacted to a rebranding which transformed it from a television channel for gamers into a channel for men, entitled *ManTV*. This contribution is a rare example of research into an audience drawn from the internet community of gamers, one that usually displays reluctance to traditional television viewing. The article shows how this audience contributed to the content of the channel and it challenges Henry Jenkins' argument that in the age of new media it is consumers who take control of the channel. Sokolova shows that despite protests over rebranding, the channel's man-

agement abandoned an existing and loyal audience of gamers for more profitable consumers of luxury adverts.

The third part describes various cultural languages utilized by Russian television in the digital era: from entertainment programmes devoted to business and success to pseudo documentary shows (mocumentaries). This part illustrates how Russian television culture is deeply involved in global cultural trends and utilises the opportunities provided by digital television to diversify the forms used for addressing different audiences. At the same time, Oksana Moroz' article on Russian mocumentaries and Vlad Strukov's article on *Russia Today* draw rather similar conclusions to Zvereva's analysis of the government's key role in the process of digitalization. On the one hand, the Kremlin's control over Russian television leads to the Russian audience being unreceptive to certain types of postmodernist content (like mocumentaries). Furthermore, due to strong political pressure on the media, especially during Putin's third presidential term, pioneers of mocumentaries have been limited in themes for their shows and enjoyed fairly unlimited freedom only on the internet. On the other hand, Russia's inclusion in the world of global media obliges state-aligned media, like RT, to make the most of the tools provided by the digital era to be successful. The latest concerns of U.S. officials over the activity of RT on social media prove that the Russian government clearly understands the advantages of digital media and utilizes their potential for its political purposes.¹

The last part of the volume is made up of interviews with practitioners: media managers and experts who share their opinions on the peculiarities of the process of digitalization in Russia. Of particular value is the material which showcases the first-hand experience of people who implement digital television in Russia. The interviews with the head of the channel *Dozhd*, Natal'ia Sindeeva, and RT's manager, Kseniia Fedorova, in general, repeat the ideas which can be found in previous interviews conducted with Sindeeva, and those with RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan. Still, interviews with the two media managers from Ekaterinburg, Oleg Rakovich, general producer of OTV, and Stanislav Kholkin, editor of ETV, present the process of digitalization in Russia from the regional perspective. This view 'from the regions' is particularly interesting as it rarely emerges in the scholarship.

What can be learnt from these interviews? On the one hand, media managers in the regions perceive digitalization positively as it offers further technical opportunities to engage with the audience. It is precisely ordinary viewers' access to content and their ability to express their opinion through various social media platforms that frames positive attitudes to the introduction of digital technologies in regional television. On the other hand, despite the positive assessment of these innovations, the interviews also demonstrate how problematic the advertising market in Russian regions is. *Dozhd*' is shown to have been an inspiration and role model for regional television channels at the beginning of the 2010s. However, financially, only those channels which are closely connected to the state budget are able to support themselves and survive the competition. Given the recent financial problems that *Dozhd*' has experienced, under pressure from cable operators and Duma deputies, it is unlikely that re-

¹ U.S. intl broadcasting chiefs see RT as major challenge, ponder Russian-language TV news channel August 14 2014, http://rt.com/news/180184-us-channel-russian-speakers/?utm_source=browser&utm_medium=application_chrome&utm_campaign=chrome (accessed 29 August 2014).

gional television channels will be able to display sufficient independence to face off the regional administrations, despite the freedom provided by digital technologies.

Overall, this collection of essays provides an excellent record of changes in Russian television in the era of globalized digital television. The book is a timely and valuable contribution to the field of television studies in Russia: it identifies the main challenges to the development of television in Russia, demonstrates manifold methodological approaches to the study of the subject and defines potential research topics.

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