Mobilization and Reform: Political Communication Policy Under Gorbachev

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Mikhail Gorbachev's program for the renovation of the Soviet political system is a reform of considerable magnitude. The sequencing of policies provides important information about the nature of the Soviet system and the dynamics of change, and in that sequence, communications policies shifted earliest and most radically. Virtually from the beginning of Gorbachev's tenure in power, an observer of Soviet politics could detect in the use of the media the operation of a key mechanism in effecting major change. Glasnost, the new openness and public discussion, is a media phenomenon. The new role accorded the media is in many ways a revolutionary one. The expanded functions of the media in the Gorbachev administration require them to precipitate institutional change in the Soviet political system. Mobilization will be temporary if there is insufficient structural change to support it, and the media system itself has become a principal factor in breaking down dysfunctional institutions inherited from previous regimes, strengthening weak institutions (such as the soviets) and developing new types of institutions. As a consequence of this dynamic, systemic change in the media system precedes other large-scale change, and, in fact, before any major economic and political reforms of the Gorbachev administration were launched, extensive changes in the system of political communication had been made.

Expanding Media Functions

One of Gorbachev's most important initiatives has been the development of autonomous or "unofficial" associations, augmenting and perhaps eventually functionally (but not formally) replacing the often ossified institutions of the Soviet system. The media organizations themselves have been notable sponsors or creators of the new "unofficial" groups. The innovative television program "12th Floor" advocated the formation of autonomous youth organizations outside the Young Communist League well before relevant legal and political provision had been made to govern their operation. The magazine Ogonyok's "evenings" were early, highly political discussion groups; the journal Novy Mir is sponsoring the Mikhail Bukharin Club in Naberezhnie Chelny. Youth clubs, political discussion clubs, activist clubs committed to ecological, private entrepreneurial, veterans', women's and other issues are only some of the numerous examples of politically relevant public activities that preceded the structures to accommodate them.
These new organizations are radically different from the voluntary associations that were formed during Brezhnev's tenure. Those societies, dedicated to the preservation of monuments and nature, were far more bureaucratic and official and lacked the focus, dynamism, and direct political significance of the newer and more spontaneous grass-roots movements. Anatoly Yakovlev, of the journal *Voprosy filosofii* (Questions of Philosophy), ties the development of the new organizations and cooperative associations to *glasnost* and observes that they will "engender a totally new situation, especially if they begin to be backed up by legal regulations, and then also by political means." (Soviet Philosophers..., 1988).

The development of these associations is intended to increase labor productivity and develop genuine participation, both political and economic. The interrelationship between productivity and participation - is a key tenet of the Gorbachev reform, and it depends to a considerable extent on the renunciation of coercive methods and thickening the subsystem of local or autonomous attachments and activities (sometimes referred to as civil society).

Many of the Soviet Union's most powerful political institutions have now been judged by Gorbachev to be dysfunctional. They are stubborn impediments to a thoroughgoing renovation of the system: holdovers from Brezhnev's "time of stagnation" or Stalin's era of command administration. The role of the media in reshaping this legacy is central to *perestroika*, as the collection of Gorbachev reforms is known. Yakovlev sees the function of the media not only as resocialization in new values and symbols, but also as national integration. The operational strategy of Stalinism has left Soviet society "atomized," and people disunited, owing to the destructive action of totalitarianism" (Soviet Philosophers..., 1988). Under Brezhnev, national integration was impeded by what was, in a sense, an opposite current: the development of particularistic associations or interests tolerated if not openly sanctioned (for example, the second and third economies, ethnic and semifeudal mutual support systems). The issue for the Gorbachev administration is the replacement of these deeply embedded but now dysfunctional behavioral patterns and the reconstruction of national attachments.

On the negative side, therefore, the mission of the media involves delegitimizing prior attachments. On the positive side, it involves forging new attachments that will operate at the level of the individual and coalesce in overarching polity-wide shared values. In current Soviet policy, the impetus for reintegration will be provided by the media system: the agency that alone spans the array of isolated and alienated individuals and counter-productive associations with a centrally generated message-system. Yakovlev observes that "social consciousness' ... cropped up in our society, thanks to the mass media" (Soviet Philosophers..., p. 9).

**Balancing Power and Mobilization**
Because the media are central participants in a process of institutionalization and because that process involves highly charged positive and negative communication, issues of limits and impact have become critically important. Gorbachev has repeatedly called on the media to support perestroika and not, as he put it, "discredit" it: "Publish everything. There should be pluralism of opinions. But the thrust should be such that the line of perestroika [and] the cause of socialism are defended and strengthened" (Gorbachev, 1988, p. 2). To counter past practices and values, the media have engaged in a genuine reevaluation of many central sources of value orientations: attacking Stalinism, rehabilitating Stalin's victims; assailing bureaucracy; re-establishing a role for religion and private philanthropy; sanctioning private entrepreneurial activity; eliminating the class-based understanding of international relations; questioning the correctness of Soviet military ventures and conditions of military service in general; removing the prohibition on disclosure of crime and deviance at home; and many others.

As might be expected, the delicate balancing act of criticism and support, essential components of perestroika, has not been uniformly accepted. At the 19th Party Conference in June, 1988, a very powerful theme emerged: the media had gone too far and were actually impeding forward movement, indeed the very functioning of the system. A. M. Masaliev, first secretary of the Kirgiz Communist Party; V. I. Kalashnikov, first secretary of the Volgograd province party organization; writer, Yuri Bondarev; and V. V. Karpov, head of the Writers' Union, all represent rather different constituencies; they and others castigated the media for incompetence, inaccuracy, bias, and arrogance.

Structural change has not gone as far as to legitimize multiple political parties offering comprehensive policy alternatives or serious programmatic dissent among high level elites. In the spring of 1988, a sharply dissenting position surfaced in the media in the form of the letter by a Leningrad teacher, Nina Andreeva, published in the newspaper Sovetskaia Rossia, just as Gorbachev was leaving the country for Yugoslavia (Andreeva, 1988). The letter, subsequently reproduced in some provincial (oblast) newspapers as well, was harshly critical of glasnost and perestroika. The views in the letter closely paralleled the positions of Egor Ligachev, then the second most powerful official in the leadership, and he reportedly praised the letter in unpublicized meetings with Soviet media officials (Quinn-Judge, 1988). It was not until three weeks later that an editorial in Pravda produced the Gorbachev response (Printsipy perestroiki..., 1988). Again, on August 5, during the nightly national news program Vrema (Time), when Gorbachev was again away from Moscow, Ligachev was given unusually long coverage (just over 20 minutes) in which he opposed strikes, market relationships, re-opening the wounds of Stalin's time, and the thesis of the non-class basis of Soviet foreign policy. Exactly a week later, Alexander Yakovlev, Politburo member and most highly placed ally and advisor of Gorbachev, appeared on the same program to give the Gorbachev administration's opposing view. Ligachev's commandeering of television, with its huge audience of over one hundred million viewers, to put forth what amounted
to an alternative platform that followed a clearly recognizable leader's format, may be regarded as a new level of display of intra-elite conflict - a level judged unacceptable.

Though Ligachev's power was diluted in the next month's reshuffling of the Politburo, some Soviet intellectuals raise the issue of media limits in quite another way: surely those views that surfaced with the Andreeva letter are still held by some segments of the population. Should the media not be open to those views as well as to those that support Gorbachev's policy of perestroika? Thus the question of media limits involves, in part, the issue of illuminating intra-elite dissension, in the past a prohibited area of expression. What is the appropriate status of those views, if they are at the same time manifestations both of strategies of elite conflict and of genuine attitudes held by the public? We may conclude that aggregation and articulation are in tension where the political leadership is involved though not, apparently, in the less directly challenging operations of autonomous associations. As will be seen below, the use of the media by the "Popular Fronts" of the Baltic republics though criticized as exclusionary and one-sided, is, on the whole, tolerated.

Operations of institutions that had long served as the power bases of the elite and had been immune to criticism, have now become much more transparent, as they too are put on the political agenda for change. Colonel Mikhailov, head of the press bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which oversees the regular police, announced recently that "we will question those who try to shut the journalist's mouth. We are for maximum openness..." (Mikhailov, 1988, p. 3). Mikhailov also stressed the importance of "maximum precision" on the part of journalists writing about the Ministry; by coupling responsibility and openness - he may well be attempting to limit the latter, but he can only do so within a much wider environment of information. The most celebrated case of new transparency involved the most secret of state institutions, the KGB, the security police. In January 1987, the head of that agency reported on the front page of Pravda that KGB officials in the Ukraine were disciplined for illegally arresting an investigative correspondent pursuing his journalistic duty (Chebrikov, 1987).

This case exemplifies a persisting texture of policy implementation in the Soviet Union. Centrally mandated policies are modified and frequently obstructed by local power centers, a practice that had become exacerbated during the period of Brezhnev's policy of "trust in cadres," which assured long tenure and located elite replacement pools within the given sub-national organization. The Brezhnev policy was itself a reaction to Khrushchev's policy of rapid turnover and a Moscow-centric unified replacement pool. Even though Gorbachev's strategy of power consolidation has resulted in impressive numbers of personnel changes at the national and provincial levels, and in the governmental and the party sectors, the media reforms he has proclaimed at the center have not been evenly or uniformly implemented at the sub-national level. Media experts who gathered in Moscow in February 1987 to assess the role of the media and perestroika
concluded that local media should establish direct ties with the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in order to weaken their dependence on local party organs (Fomicheva, 1988).

The problem of national and regional tensions has been compounded by the rise of the autonomous associations, some of the most powerful of which, advocate regional separatism or something short of separatism, characterized as "sovereignty." Embedded in this process is a central media presence. In all of the Baltic republics, the Popular Front movements for local autonomy have been extensively covered by republic-level media. In the view of Moscow, some of the most important media organs have been effectively captured by these movements and exclude contrasting views. As a commentary in Pravda by a Latvian legal official stated: "... with the exception of the newspapers Cina and Sovet-skaia Latvia, to all intents and purposes [the republic's mass media] have gotten out of Party control and influence and have become the private domain of their editors or of groups of individuals" (Dzenitis, 1988). On the whole, perhaps because of the small size of the Baltic republics and their history as laboratories for experimentation, this pattern has been tolerated, although in the spring of 1989, the local program of the Lithuanian popular movement was taken off the air, to be re-evaluated after the March elections.

The expanding political role of regional media applies with special force to television, because of its enormous audiences and rapid response time. In Latvia, television has been credited with averting ethnic strife (Fein, 1988). Nearly two years before Armenian-Azerbaidzhani tensions erupted, television headquarters was receiving large numbers of letters urging Moscow to make Armenian television programming available to the Armenian enclave in Nagorno-Karabakh, in neighboring Azerbaidzhan. The official in charge admitted that there was no technical obstacle; red tape prevented a solution which, in this case "as in many other questions, turned out to have costs of a political character" (Televidenie - mnogonatsionalnoi auditorii, 1988). At the 1988 session of the Presidium of the Soviet parliament that considered the problems in that area, the head of government of Azerbaidzhan referred first to the extension of Armenian television to Nagorno-Karabakh as proof of his republic's responsiveness.

Media Effects and Credibility

If the media were to perform successfully as agents of socialization and mobilization, substantially greater attention had to be devoted to media effects. Because of the new policy requirements, impact, previously evaluated largely on the basis of unrepresentative audience feedback (an impressive volume of letters) or anecdotally based judgments of officials, has now become an issue of central importance. A more systematic and theoretically grounded understanding of media effects in the Soviet system of political communication has actually been developing for several years and represents a departure from the previously held stimulus/response model of the communication process
(Mickiewicz, 1983). Among the more important conclusions drawn by media officials is that the source breaking the story is distinctly advantaged in the potential of its persuasive power. Since information barriers are known to be exceedingly porous in the modern world - the foreign radios are just one example of alternative sources of information for the Soviet public - the most effective strategy is pre-emption rather than attempted suppression. This applies not only to the reporting of domestic phenomena previously considered off-limits, but also to positions of foreign adversaries. By the beginning of 1989, the Soviet Union had ceased jamming foreign radios. However, much earlier, in January 1986, the head of the \textit{New York Times} Moscow bureau was interviewed at length on Soviet television and permitted to take issue with the Soviet host on a number of fundamentally divergent policy positions. Nothing of this sort had happened before; pre-emption had begun to replace suppression.

The presentation of opposing views by the opponents themselves, now routine throughout the Soviet media, was a product of the Division of Youth Programming, under the direction of Eduard Sagalaev, who, in December 1988, was made head of news programming on Soviet national television, an appointment of profound significance. It was Sagalaev who also launched the program, "12th Floor," which for the first time aired the often contentious and abrasive views of Soviet young people. The program held officials publicly accountable and encouraged autonomous groupings or associations well before their legal and organizational requirements were officially established. The general educational system has also been a central focus of the program. In an interview with the author, Sagalaev said that he considered it the mission of television to reform the educational system, since vested interests could not be shaken loose and new, more modern education specialists had as yet no institutional base. Television would be the surrogate institutional base.

The ability of Soviet commentators and participants to develop a variety of contending positions about Soviet foreign policy positions has been extremely limited, but it is likely that the creation of a new series of government and party periodicals of record will loosen the constraints on the rest of the media.

Heightened interest in media efficacy has resulted in measures to expand the sources of feedback in what has traditionally been an environment of exceptional feedback deficit. The television industry is developing its own national survey network. It plans to install Nielsen-like boxes in 500-600 homes. Some limited "express" telephone surveys are conducted to tap overnight response, but the current pattern of distribution of private telephones presents sampling problems. A system of ratings is being discussed as an instrument for allocating rewards within the industry, particularly as it and the other media move into an era of economic accountability. The prospect of significantly greater consumer-driven programming in television, of skewing the socialization and mobilization functions of the medium, is of concern to officials. Political observer V. Ia. Tsvetov, for example, has argued that ratings should not be turned into dogma. Yet, without a
much more highly developed and systematic feedback system it will be impossible to gauge the effects of policies that have drastically altered the information environment produced by the most pervasive and probably persuasive of the media.

The Case of Television: Mass Audiences and "Large Caliber" Effects

In Alexander Yakovlev's strategy, the elements of the mass media are functionally differentiated, and it is television that has altered the entire system. He has been quoted as saying "'The TV image is everything'" (Mickiewicz, 1988). It is the most "national" medium; it has attracted the first truly "mass" audience in Soviet history.

Television spans the 11 time zones of the country and routinely reaches some 150 to 200 million viewers. In 1986, fully 93% of the Soviet population were television viewers, and, as elsewhere, the audience is the most heterogeneous of any media audience, embracing rural and urban, the uneducated and the intelligentsia, men and women, and all ethnic nationalities (Mickiewicz, 1988). In each of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union at least 3/4 of the households have television sets (Arutunian and Bromlei, 1986). Although early surveys found that the college educated differed significantly from the rest of the population in consumption of television (as they did in the early days of American television - [Bower, 1973]), later research found that this was true only in very large cities, where alternative options for leisure time use were readily accessible. In fact, in mid-size cities, 98% of the college educated watch television daily or several times a week, exceeding the pattern of viewing of the least well educated (Fedotova, Kapeliush, and Sazonov, 1985).

The interaction of the components of the media system in the Soviet Union, as in other countries, has produced systemic effects; newer elements severely dislocate older ones. Radio listening has been reduced to "an insignificant portion of free time" and is now mainly a secondary activity (Gabiani, Mushkudiani, and Mylnikova, 1986, p. 33). Movie theaters have experienced declines in box-office sales. When a television mini-series is being broadcast, streets are empty; movie theaters, deserted; instances of juvenile delinquency decline; alcohol consumption is reduced. Television is credited with lowering the rate of out-migration of young workers from the Baikal-Amur Mainline railroad project in the harsh climate of the east. Soviet officials distinguish television from other components of the media system by referring to it as "large caliber," and all other system components as "small caliber."

A recent American study argues that television news is an "educator virtually without peer" (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 2). In contrast to the earlier literature on "minimal effects," newer studies document television's impact. However, as Page et al. state, "Rational citizens accept information and analysis only from
those they trust” (1987, p. 39). A central element of the current Soviet media revolution is the attempt to establish credibility and authority. One way is to remove the appearance of the heavy hand of censorship. It is for that reason that while Western television systems have moved historically from live to taped programming (mainly for convenience, efficiency and cost reduction), the reverse has occurred on Soviet television. Live programs (including participatory call-in programs) are being re-introduced in large numbers, after having been curtailed during the Brezhnev years. As a Soviet commentator noted: "Live reports and broadcasts virtually disappeared.... The era of complete dependability had arrived" (Polskaia, 1986).

Similarly, trust can be gained only if events important to the public are covered and without delay. The pre-Gorbachev policy of noncoverage of natural and industrial disasters - domestic bad news, in general - has resulted in low levels of trust in domestic media (Mickiewicz, 1981). The new policy of coverage actually began with the coverage of an earthquake in Tadzhikistan in October 1985, six months before the Chernobyl nuclear accident, but the policy process was evidently still experimental (and the leadership, no doubt divided) and was unable to accommodate a test of the magnitude of Chernobyl. After Chernobyl, where hesitation and delay in the provision of information actually exacerbated the crisis, natural and industrial disasters have been covered with a new completeness. Soviet television covered in detail the 1988 earthquake in Armenia, as well as numerous other previously forbidden subjects, such as food shortages, health care delivery problems, drug addiction, and many others. One indicator of the changes in Soviet television coverage of domestic news is the increasing use of Soviet television footage in American broadcast news.

Credibility is enhanced by packaging, and the television system is rapidly being upgraded technically. Computer-generated graphics were introduced in 1986; remote pick-ups and live interactive satellite transmissions ("space bridges") are now routine. Electronic news gathering (ENG) has been expedited by new, mainly foreign-produced, equipment. Editing and sound tracks utilize modern techniques. News presentation is becoming more personalized, and the role of the impersonal news reader has been reduced, a development that is creating concern that one of the traditional functions of the news reader - maintenance and transmission of Russian language standards - will be lost (Byla, est i budet, 1988).

**Policy Implementation and Unintended Consequences**

Change of the magnitude sought by Gorbachev inevitably triggers complex and unintended consequences. Since media policy is intended to precede and invigorate the structural reforms to follow, there is an even wider field of risk, since some unforeseen consequences may well push in the direction of institutions the central policymakers had not anticipated.
For some in the Soviet Union, the granting of access to Western political figures is tantamount to collusion in sedition (Bochevarov, G.N. 1987). The extremist nationalist association, Pamyat (Memory) was also generated by the more favorable environment for unofficial groupings. For others, simply the provision of multiple points of view is confusing and disorienting (Zapreshchaetsia zalyvat dalshe vsekh, 1988).

For ethnic minorities, too, the effects of the new policies are likely to result in simultaneously contradictory trends: on the one hand, and especially in the near term, as regional television successfully engages issues (including linguistic ones) of salience to its audience, that audience will be mobilized about specific questions and in ways that may diverge markedly from polity-wide agendas. On the other hand, the pervasive presence of national television, with its broader spectrum of issues, greater resources, and generally superior production values, is performing an integrative function which, in the long run, tends to erode ethnic identity and tradition (Arutunian and Bromlei, 1986). That television is especially effective in integrating those previously left out of the political system - the information poor - has been found in many studies of the medium across political systems (Grabber, 1984; Guboglo, 1988).

The political agenda of the media under Gorbachev - mobilization for institutional change - is a high-risk strategy that puts a premium on rapidity of change. Institutionalization is more often a long-term process if it is to be stable and durable. Mobilization, to be effectively maintained, must be related to appropriate institutions. The interaction of these two dynamics will be a central feature of the Soviet future.

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