

THE PROBLEM OF PERSONALITY ON SOVIET TELEVISION, 1950s-1960s *

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Abstract: This article analyses the role of the television personality on Soviet television in its early years in the 1950s and 1960s. Using primary source materials from Russian archives, articles from the professional press, and analysis of a number of television shows, the article argues that television's appearance in Soviet everyday life brought about a key change in the form of mass communication from a Stalinist model that focused on the pre-prepared and based on written Russian to a more spontaneous model that was closer to everyday speech forms. Analysing the role of continuity announcers, programme hosts, and ordinary individuals on Soviet television, the article suggests that while early television professionals held high hopes for the possibility of television to democratise the post-Stalin Soviet Union, these hopes were in fact riven with contradictions.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Television history, Television personality, Communication history

In an influential article written in 1981, John Langer outlined a 'theory' of television's 'personality system'.¹ In contrast to film stardom, which rested on the exceptionality of its personalities, Langer argued that television, as a medium closely linked to private space, tended to produce personalities who were more familiar, more ordinary, and more domestic than their silver screen counterparts. For Langer, the unthinkability of television without personalities reproduced the individualist philosophy of modern western societies, and thus served to deflect the public's attention away from important questions about the economic and social structures of the societies in which they lived.

Despite its very different aims, television in socialist societies was similarly 'individualised' through the presence of personalities. When interviewed today, most people who watched television in that period can bring to mind at least a handful of TV stars (hardly surprising, perhaps, given their ubiquity on socialist screens). But with Langer's thesis in mind, we might ask about the qualities that socialist TV personalities embodied in societies where TV's stated role was to propagandise, educate, and form the Soviet person, and where stardom was a somewhat suspicious concept.² Can we make a similar argument about the role of the television personality in deflecting publics from pressing social and political issues?

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¹ John Langer, 'Television's 'personality system'', *Media, Culture & Society*, 3/4 (1981), 351-65.

² On television's primary function as an organ of propaganda see for example A. Bogomolov, 'O televizionnoi programme, zritele i gazete', *Sovetskoe radio i teledeniye* 8 (1968), 33-36.

This article addresses this question by focusing on the emergence of television personalities in the Soviet Union in its developmental stage of the 1950s and 1960s. Combining analysis of debates around television, selected TV shows, and archival sources, the piece builds on recent research into Soviet television and asks how the question of personality connected to wider social concerns. Building in particular on Kristin Roth-Ey and Christine Evans' arguments about television during the Thaw,³ the article argues that the arrival of television in Soviet homes posed a problem to traditional Soviet modes of communication, which had tended to focus on the dissemination of highly formulaic, authoritative messages. How did television, which demanded a more intimate and *personified* form of address, cope with the existence of ritualistic modes of communication that were antithetical to its essence? And how did these debates impact on the development of specific modes of television communication within the Soviet Union? The article shows how television reflected wider debates amongst the Thaw intelligentsia about how the country could be reformed after the excesses of the Stalin era. In this atmosphere, debates about television personalities held a wider significance: they mirrored not only the professional question of what Thaw television should look like, but were part of a debate about the role of the individual in a socialist society where questions of sincerity and personality were interconnected. In particular, the article seeks to define the role television played in shifting the communicational norms of Soviet society. As a medium that demanded certain kinds of presentation that were perhaps alien to Soviet traditions, the question of the TV personality provides an interesting case study for the possibilities of social change after Stalin's death.

The article is structured in four sections. The first section seeks to frame the key conflict between the speech forms of the Stalin era and those of the Thaw era, placing this within the context of intelligentsia debates about 'sincerity'. The subsequent three sections examine the function of Soviet television personality and the part they played in projecting a new role for the individual in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. Section two discusses the role of the continuity announcer, and the way it created a more intimate form of self-presentation and communication in Soviet society. The third section looks at the role of Soviet TV hosts, and shows how television sought to encourage viewers to think for themselves. In the fourth and final section, I discuss TV professionals' efforts to show the 'ordinary' Soviet individual on screen, illustrating some of the difficulties and possibilities involved. In a postscript, I briefly jump forward to the Brezhnev era and discuss how Soviet television and its personalities became the carriers of the values of 'developed socialism' in the 1970s.

1. Television's Challenge to Soviet Communications

For the pioneers of the 1950s and 1960s, television provided a window on the world. It was a technology with the ability to bring events to the public as they were taking place, and *as they really were*.⁴ Vladimir Sappak, one of the most influential of the Soviet television enthusiasts expressed the corollary of this when he wrote that "... the TV camera lens is not neutral. It demands authenticity and will not tolerate falseness. It notices every false note and every incongruity. In other words, it sharpens our sense of truth."⁵ Television highlighted truth; it exposed falsehood. But television's eye for authenticity meant that it didn't just see *things* in their essential nature, but *individuals* too. Television shone a harsh light on those who were unable to appear as themselves on screen. In the early-1960s, a local newspaper correspondent was invited to a local television studio to give a talk about a 'hero' of industry. Unfortunately, rather than enthralling his viewers with his screen magnetism, this potential TV personality proceeded to recite drearily from a recent article he had written. Instead of following his words, viewers became distracted and "started to observe how a bead of sweat was starting to drip down the shiny forehead of the narrator".⁶ This anecdote suggests that many individuals remained wedded to the written word rather than meeting what critics east and west

³ Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War*, Cornell University Press, 2011; Christine Evans, 'From 'Truth' to 'Time': Soviet Central Television, 1957-1985', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2010.

⁴ On TV's liveness see Roth-Ey, pp.230-253; Evans, pp.18-51.

⁵ Vladimir Sappak, *Televidenie i my*, Iskusstvo, 1988, p.56. See, amongst dozens of examples, N. Zimchenko, "Diktor televideniia," *Sovetskoe radio i televidenie (SRT)*, 1, 1959, 26-27; L. Futlik, 'Bez grima,' *Iskusstvo kino (IK)*, 7, 1965, 92-93.

⁶ E. Mezhev, 'Pravda zhizni i pravda ekrana,' *SRT*, 2, 1965, 16.

considered to be the medium's inherent requirement for direct, spontaneous speech.

How might we characterise the challenge posed by television to Soviet forms of speech? In Kristin Roth-Ey's account, the main barrier to television assuming this role was the primacy afforded to face-to-face oral agitation. Moreover, the 'bean counting' approach where, in the absence of accurate audience figures, bodies in an audience represented something more tangible than numbers of letters received, led to a continuing preference for face-to-face forms of communication.⁷ At the same time, Roth-Ey implies that this preference for oral agitation bequeathed a certain style of communication to Soviet television.⁸ The opposition was not so much between the quantifiable and unquantifiable, nor between oral agitation and television, but rather between writing and speech; the pre-prepared and the spontaneous. This was something of an enduring tension in Soviet culture. The revolution gave rise to a number of voices promoting more proletarian forms of writing and speaking, exemplified by the rise of the so-called worker-peasant correspondents in the press and a drive towards proletarianised forms of speech on the radio.⁹ At the same time, Soviet mass media – and newspapers in particular – were at the forefront of promoting the new linguistic norms of Soviet power, a mixture of grandiloquence and bureaucratese.¹⁰ By the end of the 1920s, it was this latter function – mass media as a means for projecting standardised speech forms – that won out. As Stephen Lovell's recent account of 'broadcasting Bolshevik' shows, it was this view of mass media as the official and infallible voice of Moscow that endured through the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹ It was a style that sought to replicate the style and language of political speeches and resolutions, and which left little room for personalities. Instead, the writer's or broadcaster's 'I' was to be replaced by the more anonymous 'we' of the people and the Party. The famous Soviet radio announcer Iurii Levitan provides a case in point: his voice was identified so completely with that of the state that it almost became his calling card.¹² Levitan's style was the epitome of high Stalinism to the extent that he became famous not for his own views, but for those of the state: merely for reading, not for thinking.¹³

The legacy of this approach to communication could be seen on the screen in the 1950s. Just as the reciting of a newspaper sketch on screen became interesting for viewers for all the wrong reasons (the broadcaster's discomfort, rather than the content of the article), a reading of the *Pravda* editorial – a ritual that continued on some regional studios even into the 1960s – owed nothing to the specifics of television, and more to the hegemony of the written word over audio-visual means of communication.¹⁴

This state of affairs did not go entirely unchallenged. Even in the late Stalin period, there was periodic grumbling about the forms of mass communication. In 1948 *Komsomol'skaia pravda* famously published a critical article on the practice of oral agitators using *shpargalki* (crib sheets) that was seen as an implicit attack on the norms of Stalinist communications. But while Stalin was still alive, and while the boundaries between 'correct' and 'incorrect' linguistic forms were policed so rigidly, change could only be discussed, not enacted. After Stalin's death, intellectuals

⁷ The argument is slightly unconvincing: as Roth-Ey points out, there was in fact a long tradition of tallying and quantifying letters from readers, listeners, and viewers, just as there was a tradition of counting attendance at lectures and agitation sessions. It is unclear why one should be considered to possess more "solidity" than the other. (Roth-Ey, p.194)

⁸ Roth-Ey, p.195.

⁹ Jeremy Hicks, 'Worker Correspondents: Between Journalism and Literature,' *Russian Review* 66 (2007), 568-585; Steven Lovell, 'Broadcasting Bolshevik: The Radio Voice of Soviet Culture, 1920s-1950s,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, 1, 78-97.

¹⁰ Michael S. Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Early Soviet Russia*, Northern Illinois University Press, 2003; Michael G. Smith, *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR, 1917-1953*, Mouton de Gruyter, 1998.

¹¹ Lovell, 'Broadcasting Bolshevik'. The *locus classicus* for thinking about Bolshevik speech norms is Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, University of California Press, 1995, pp.198-237.

¹² Listen, for example, to Levitan's announcement of the Nazi invasion in 1941: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9n9SZ2mb0c>

¹³ As one participant at a 1961 creative meeting on reportage pointed out, if Levitan were to do a spontaneous on-the-spot report, "people wouldn't believe it because people are used to the him reading. Reading well, but reading." *Stenogramma soveshchaniia komiteta po radioveshchaniiu i teledeniuiu pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR i Soiuza zhurnalistov SSSR po voprosam reportazha v radioveshchanii i teledeniuiu. Tom I.*, 1961, GARF, f.R6903, op.1, d.706, l.85.

¹⁴ A. Bogomolov, 'O televizionnoi programme, zrite i gazete,' *SRT*, 8, 1968, 34–35. Igor Kirillov, auditioning for a TV presenter role in 1957 recalled memorising half of the content of *Pravda* (I. Kirillov, 'Glazami diktora' in *Shabolovka*, 53: *Stranitsy istorii teledeniia*, Iskusstvo, 1988, p.135). One could also make the argument that this was a natural consequence of the fact that, at least in their early years, new media forms tend to be parasitic on more established ones: part of the 'conservatism' of television that Anders Fickers has noted. In this sense, one could argue that the trend was not a purely Soviet one. See Andreas Fickers, 'The Emergence of Television as a Conservative Media Revolution: Historicising a Process of Remediation in the Post-war Western European Mass Media Ensemble', *Journal of Modern European History* 10/1 (2012), 49-75.

attempted to reform socialist realism and its discursive norms. Writing in *Novyi mir* [New World], literary critic Vladimir Pomerantsev called for artists to replace the double-speak of the Stalin era with a more personal relationship to the events they described. Poet Ol'ga Berggol'ts argued that the Stalinist literary concept of 'conflictlessness' (where conflict was replaced by a pseudo-fight between the 'good' and the 'best') was the sister of "facelessness".¹⁵ Thus, both Pomerantsev and Berggol'ts linked the cultivation of a personal voice (in other words, a personality) with the creation of a better society.¹⁶

The bid to shift the balance between the written and the spoken received an enormous boost at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. Nikita Khrushchev's closing speech, in which he revealed some of Stalin's crimes, seemed to grant intellectuals *carte blanche* to question the past. The First Secretary's denunciation of Stalin's "cult of personality" only served to make the link between social progress (or retardation) and the personality more explicit. In fact, Khrushchev himself could be adduced as evidence of the shift in norms of personality: where Stalin was imposing, Khrushchev was folksy; where Stalin was an oracle towering over the masses, Khrushchev was apt to appear as a man of the people, dispensing his wisdom to all and sundry. In a 1961 speech at a meeting of TV professionals presenter Iraklii Andronikov praised Khrushchev as presenting an "example of convincing, very natural, living speech".¹⁷

In post-1956 discourses around Soviet mass communications, two tendencies – one demanding more *personality* in Soviet discourse, and the other demanding more *truth* – came together. In this regard, television had a trump card: it was a highly personalised medium which had the capability to create an intimate connection between viewer and presenter.¹⁸ The question of how authority could be rebuilt after Stalinism was, at least in terms of television, inseparable from the question of personality. While television's apparent intolerance of falsehood threatened to undermine belief in its messages, its intimacy could equally heighten viewers' belief in their truthfulness.¹⁹ It was a question of finding the right form of address, and the right sort of personality.

2. Continuity Announcers and the Little Blue Flame

In sections 3 and 4, I will examine two key aspects of this encounter with Soviet individuals on television: the role of the host (*vedushchie*), and the participation of the general public on screen. In this section, however, I will focus on a group of individuals who captured much of the attention in early television discourse: its continuity announcers, or *diktory* in Russian.²⁰

To a large extent, the two roles – continuity announcer and presenter – stood in opposition to each other. While announcers appeared in the interstices *between* programmes, presenters were responsible for hosting them. While this makes continuity announcers seem like a minor feature of Soviet television, they actually played a key role in cementing television's role as a fixture of Soviet life. A huge part of the announcers' appeal was in the performance of ordinariness: *diktory* seemed to be on television simply for their ability to be themselves, rather than for any specific

¹⁵ Vladimir Pomerantsev, 'Ob iskrennosti v literature', *Novyi mir*, 12, 1953, 160-183; Ol'ga Berggol'ts, 'Razgovor o lirike,' *Literaturnaia gazeta* (LG), 16 April 1953, 11. On these debates see Katerina Clark, "Wait for Me and I Shall Return": The Early Thaw as a Reprise of Late Thirties Culture? in *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture During the 1950s and 1960s*, ed. by Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, University of Toronto Press, 2013, pp.85-108. See also Vladimir Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, Belknap Press, 2010, pp.51-59, esp. pp.54-56; Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State from 1917 to the Present*, Verso, 1988, pp.137-141.

¹⁶ On the connection between the Secret Speech, sincerity and the Soviet self see Anatoly Pinsky, 'The Individual after Stalin: Fedor Abramov, Russian Intellectuals, and the Revitalization of Soviet Socialism, 1953-1962,' Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2011, pp.113-163.

¹⁷ Iraklii Andronikov, 'Myslit' publichno, myslit' SRT 3 (1961), 9.

¹⁸ On this point, see Evans, pp.35-36.

¹⁹ The belief that television magnified truth and exposed falsehood was a commonplace of early television discourse in the Soviet Union. See, for example, Vladimir Sappak, *Televidenie i my*, Iskusstvo, 1988, p.56. On this point see Roth-Ey, pp.236-245; Evans, pp.28-34.

²⁰ In what follows, I use the terms 'announcer(s)' and '*diktory*' interchangeably. On the role of the *diktory* see Anri Vartanov, 'Bednaia Valia, a takzhe Tania, Anelia i, konechno, Bella', *Iskusstvo kino* 6 (1991), 26-29; Roth-Ey, pp.240-243; Evans, pp.34-37, 82-83.

skill²¹, an impression compounded by the fact that only a select few made the leap from announcer to presenter. Because of this sense of everyday familiarity, viewers identified strongly with announcers, inundating them with correspondence.²²

As a cultural phenomenon, what did the *diktor* represent? First of all, they reflected prevailing Soviet gender ideals. Kristin Roth-Ey suggests a clear gender split on Soviet television between (female) announcers and (male) presenters. While there were male announcers, most famously Igor' Kirillov²³, and female presenters like Svetlana Vinogradova and Natal'ia Krymova, in the main the distinction almost takes the form of an iron cast rule. This gender divide was not limited to Soviet television: the same situation existed in Europe east and west. Like in Western Europe, Soviet and Eastern European television reflected the existing gender biases of the societies in which they were based, providing yet more evidence for Andreas Fickers' recent characterisation of television as a conservative medium whose "televised 'norms and values' in the long 1950s reflected conservative political and moral beliefs that dominated most post-war European societies".²⁴

Fickers' article focused on the spatial characteristics of television in national and transnational space. We should also consider television's role *vis-à-vis* domestic space, since television was located – physically, psychically and discursively – in the private realm. As one famous television presenter Iraklii Andronikov wrote, "This friendly relationship with *diktory* has arisen because they have, like acquaintances, become members of your family, they address themselves to you, to your children, affably, they have become friends in your home."²⁵ Andronikov was not making an argument for the feminine nature of television *per se*, but in a Soviet society where home signified femininity, it is no surprise that this was the case. As critic Anri Vartanov argued, *diktory* presented a certain ideal of femininity, as well as becoming "*guardians of the TV hearth* [and] priestesses of the cathedral of television".²⁶ As the reference to the "TV hearth" suggests, *diktory* remained discursively tethered to domestic space while it was male presenters who assumed the right to speak out on issues of public importance, as we will see in section 3.²⁷

This conservatism can also be seen in Soviet television's dissemination of normative values to the public. According to Vladislav Zubok, television helped to spread "norms of civility, new fashions, and normative educated language – commodities that were still in short supply even in Moscow at the time".²⁸ The *diktor*, for all that she was 'ordinary', was also supposed to be exemplary in terms of comportment, dress, behaviour, and elocution. In an interview in 1970, Nina Kondratova said: "On the screen [viewers] above all want to see a human individual. The internal world of presenters must be expressed in their vocabulary and their manner of behaviour".²⁹ But Kondratova's second sentence suggested that it was not just the announcer's 'civility' that was on display, but also a certain way of being before the public. *Diktory* offered a gentler, more human mode of presence that differed hugely from the imposing figure of an *apparatchik* declaiming an agitational speech from the podium of a Party meeting. The politician's words spoke louder than actions; the *diktor*'s actions in some sense spoke louder than words.

²¹ Indeed, some articles suggested exactly this: see Zimchenko, 'Diktor teledeniia', 26. We might here draw on Jamie Bennett's distinction between the 'televisionally gifted' *diktory*, and the 'vocationally gifted' presenter. See 'Television's Personality System: Televisual Stardom Revisited after Film Theory', *Screen* 49/1 (2008), 36-37.

²² Evans, p.35.

²³ Evans voices suspicions that Kirillov, the first male *diktor* on Central Television, was hired in order to give male authority to the announcement of the first Soviet satellite to orbit the moon (p.34, n.81).

²⁴ Fickers, 'Conservative Media Revolution', 60.

²⁵ Iraklii Andronikov, 'Rasskaz na ekrane', *LG* 7 May 1959, p.1. *Rasskaz* usually translates as 'story' or 'tale', but this sounds clumsy in translation. The discussion is on how to speak.

²⁶ Quoted in Roth-Ey, p.243, italics added.

²⁷ This structural bias was replicated at the political level: it is telling that, for all its commitment to gender equality, the Soviet Union produced only two female members of the Politburo, the Khrushchev-era Minister of Culture Ekaterina Furtseva, and Galina Semenova, who was responsible for Family, Women, and Demographics in the last years of Soviet power.

²⁸ Zubok, p.153. There were frequent complaints about errors in pronunciation by *diktory*. See GARF, f.6903, op.1, d.741, ll.9-16, '*Pis'ma v TsK KPSS ot slushatelei i zritelei*', July/August 1963. For a guide to diction and speech for *diktory* see GARF, f.R6903, op.3, d.188, E.A. Emel'ianova, 'Sovety diktoram obshchestvennoi redaktsii', 1962.

²⁹ Kira Grigor'eva, 'Kommentator – eto ne dolzhnost!' *Zhurnal* 3, 1970, 46.

As scholars have noted, we should see the ‘natural’ and ‘sincere’ presentation styles of TV presenters as a performance.³⁰ That is not to say that such styles are somehow false, but rather that television favours certain kinds of sincerity over others. (Nervous performers, as John Ellis points out, are just as sincere as the spontaneous and vivacious ones – it is just that by and large we as viewers do not care to watch them on screen).³¹ This necessitates the cultivation of certain kinds of performance that signify sincerity to viewers. The importance of performance to Soviet TV presentation is supported by the fact that many of the leading Central Television *diktory* were trained actors, among them Nina Kondratova, who trained at the State Institute for Theatrical Art (GITIS), and Valentina Leont’eva, who studied as a Stanislavskian at the Moscow Art Theatre (MKhAT).³² The Stanislavsky connection in particular is suggestive, since he encouraged actors to search for a form of *presence* (e.g. a mode of performance) with which to communicate one’s personality to others. Ultimately, then, what television brought to the repertoire of Soviet mediated communication was a style of performance belonging to everyday interactions rather than the fiery rhetoric of political meetings. While the gendered division of on-screen labour pointed to television’s role in disseminating normative gender roles and correct forms of speech and behaviour, the changing styles of presentation embodied by the Soviet *diktory* nevertheless suggested that communication between state mass media and its audience was beginning to take place on a more intimate plane.

Much of the work of the Soviet *diktory*, existing as it did in the interstices between programmes, was live television, rendering close textual analysis impossible. Surviving footage of many Soviet *diktory* is limited to their somewhat peripheral role as presenters of shows like *Goluboi ogonek* [Little Blue Flame]. The programme was a kind of variety show, containing an assortment of songs, comedy skits, dance numbers and chats with guests. Initially, the show was broadcast weekly, but failed to find a compelling *raison d’être*, and it eventually became a show limited to festive occasions (International Women’s Day, Victory Day, the anniversary of the Revolution, and, most famously, New Year’s Eve).³³

It is worth examining [an excerpt](#) from an early edition of the show, broadcast on New Year’s Eve 1963, through which we can see how television reflected (and altered) the communicational norms of the period. From the opening titles, which proclaimed that “Everything you will see has been created for you”, the emphasis was on entertaining a viewer who had been “invited” to a very exclusive party at which the “best people in the country” were also in attendance. This parade of the country’s luminaries included actors, composers, sportspeople, politicians, military heroes, and astronauts. In this regard, the show might be said to have reproduced the divide between ‘ordinary’ and ‘exceptional’ even as it was bringing viewers closer by ‘inviting’ them to be in the same room.

However, the division was not as great as might be thought. It is fascinating to watch the opening few minutes of the show, in which the show’s hosts present their guests to the public, for we see the extent to which heroism and exceptionality were touched by the new norms of self-presentation. As the presenters introduce their guests, these exceptional individuals display a range of reactions to the show’s enforced festivity: Nadezhda Mitroianova, Hero of the Soviet Union, fails to look at the camera and fidgets nervously; Rear Admiral Berezhnoi nods gravely; Pilot Konstantin Artseulov smiles warmly. In a perverse way it seemed that – at least in this context – heroic achievements amounted to less than the performance of an authentic self. The bad old habits still reared their head: when Iurii Gagarin gave his New Year’s address (3.26), despite screenwriters’ attempts to replicate spontaneous speech, Gagarin still delivered his lines in a monotone, sometimes forgetting his words, and occasionally looking down at his script. On the whole, however, the show forcefully disseminated a new kind of sociability and new norms of communication. It suggested that exceptionality now had to be tempered with ordinariness: the show bore witness to the fact that it was impossible for public figures to maintain the old styles of self-presentation when they were covered in confetti and streamers or raising a class of *Sovetskoe shampanskoe* to the viewers at home. Imagining Iosif Stalin in the context of *Goluboi ogonek* is unthinkable; Nikita Khrushchev would have fit in very well.

³⁰ John Ellis, ‘The Performance on Television of Sincerely Felt Emotion’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625 (2009), 103-115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

³² On the connection of Stanislavsky to presentation style see Evans, pp.45-46.

³³ Evans, pp.123-128.

All of this suggests the varying ways in which television reflected and promoted changes in styles of communication in the Thaw period. On the one hand, announcers and the programmes in which they appeared came to represent a kind of 'Sovietness', even if this identity did not always involve political slogans. Programmes like *Goluboi ogonek* promoted forms of identification that relied less on hero worship – despite the presence of figures like Gagarin – than seeing on the screen people who were 'just like us'. In other words, it pointed towards a form of community that resided in the ordinary and the everyday. Similarly, by standing outside the public sphere and outside (above?) politics, early TV announcers gained in believability and became a source of popular identification amongst viewers. However, their apparent apoliticism created a problem, for Soviet ideology in the Thaw period was not simply about stability, but also revolutionary transformation. Television needed not simply to provide a sense of identification and community, but also to educate the masses and propagandise the Party line. How did television go about achieving this?

3. Speaking and Thinking Publicly

While the *diktory* gained enormous popularity with Soviet viewers, over the course of the 1960s, the role of the *diktor* began to lose its prestige. For critic Anri Vartanov, they were gradually "edged out to the periphery", and became less "guardians of the hearth" as "mannequins, reading out an official, impersonal text."³⁴ In their place, a new group of personalities began to emerge: commentators like Iurii Fokin, 'reviewers' like journalist Iurii Zhukov, and hosts like *Club of Cine-Travellers* Vladimir Shneiderov. These presenters sought to use their communication skills to promote their vision of the world; and their role reflected early professionals' vision of TV's socially transformative role, as well assumptions about who had the ability and the right to convey authority.³⁵

In this section, I want to focus on Iraklii Andronikov, a well-known presenter of literary programming (as well as a figure keenly involved in debates about the direction of Soviet television) as an exemplar of the Thaw TV personality. Andronikov was an academic and raconteur, who specialised in literary history and, in particular, on the life of the Nineteenth Century novelist and poet Mikhail Lermontov. In 1954, Andronikov presented a live lecture called *The Riddle of N.F.I.* about Natal'ia Fedorovna Ivanovna, the mysterious 'N.F.I.' whose initials appear in many of Mikhail Lermontov's poems.³⁶ As a result of the show's popularity, Lenfil'm produced [a television adaptation](#) of the show in 1959 which added to the original by including film inserts and theatrical *entr'actes*, and utilised extra-diegetic music, all of which was united by the improvisational and conversational talents of Andronikov.

After a playful opening sequence, which foregrounds the constructed nature of the programme (we see both behind the scenes and in front of the camera) and places the audience both in the position of the studio audience and the audience at home, we cut to Andronikov, who proceeds to unravel the 'Riddle of N.F.I.' Especially relevant to our discussion here is the extent to which the film dramatised not just the story of Lermontov, but also the act of searching for truth. This was of a piece with Thaw cultural values, which incessantly praised the virtues of thought. Within press and radio circles there was great enthusiasm for 'publicistic' (that is, socially informed and analytical) forms of journalism, which reflected a belief amongst the Thaw *intelligentsia* that the public could assume a more active civic role if only they were encouraged to think more.³⁷ Emblematic of this shift was Iurii Fokin, the presenter of *News Relay* whose speech was littered with "I think", or "in my opinion", providing an invitation to viewers to agree or disagree – in other words, to think for themselves.³⁸

Although *The Riddle of N.F.I.* was concerned with the relatively uncontroversial subject of literary history, it was part of this wider attempt to show the public not so much *what* to think, but *how* to think. In 1961, Andronikov spoke at

³⁴ Vartanov, 'Bednaia Valia', p.27.

³⁵ On the question of authority on Soviet screens see Roth-Ey, pp.223-280.

³⁶ Sergei Muratov, *la dumaiu, ty dumaesh'*, MediaMir, 2012, pp.153-154.

³⁷ See Thomas C. Wolfe, *Governing Soviet Journalism: The Press and the Socialist Person after Stalin*, Indiana University Press, 2005, pp.71-103.

³⁸ Roth-Ey's interpretation of Fokin's role is more negative than mine (see pp.265-66) but it is difficult to make a definitive judgement either way without access to the programmes themselves.

a meeting of TV and radio professionals and called on presenters to “Think publicly, think aloud”.³⁹ To think aloud, Andronikov claimed, it was necessary to possess an ability to do so on the hoof, without relying on pre-formulated ideas, otherwise the viewer would detect the fraud. In *The Riddle of N.F.I.*, this act of ‘thinking publicly’ was performed somewhat theatrically, with Andronikov pondering out loud and trying to solve the mystery of the identity of the mysterious ‘N.F.I.’ Andronikov also made it clear that to communicate ideas to the public, it was necessary to be able to communicate them orally: “A text that is read out or learned off by heart is not the sort of text which is born immediately out of the process of conversation, simultaneous with thought.”⁴⁰ *The Riddle of N.F.I.* was an example of this: Andronikov held the viewer’s attention throughout through language and gesture, employing his talent for improvisation and impressions. For theatre director Oskar Remez, the success of the programme was down to Andronikov’s ability to connect with viewers through conversation and create the “intonation of intimate conversation”.⁴¹

Andronikov’s address took place in an atmosphere where such conversation was still a rarity. A few months after the broadcast of *The Riddle of N.F.I.* the Central Committee’s all-important resolution on television complained precisely of a lack of such “intimate chat” and “natural conversation” on Soviet screens and the inability (or unwillingness) of many TV producers to allow such conversation on screen was a frequent source of annoyance.⁴² While shows like *News Relay* and *The Mystery of N.F.I.* pointed towards a new form of television address, stilted, pre-rehearsed forms of address were for many still the norm. While it may have been acceptable for presenters to speak unscripted, in reality there were many occasions when it was not allowed – as well as the odd instance of viewers deviating deliberately.⁴³ With this in mind, the best advice that could be offered was that presenters might be permitted to go off script slightly, or that they might learn their lines well enough that it seemed as if they were improvising.⁴⁴

Seen within the context of intellectuals’ drive for new ways of communicating with the public, the cases of Andronikov and Fokin at first glance illustrate the possibility of a more democratic form of discourse on Soviet screens. Through their screen personae both promoted the virtues of thought to a public that had become accustomed to allowing the Party to think for them. This would seem to present a challenge to deeply ingrained norms of communication and thought. But at the same time, it is clear that viewers’ questioning was considered to be permissible only within certain limits, and it was only to be activated by certain delegated individuals. Moreover, this ‘democratic’ discourse came with certain strings attached: namely the Thaw intelligentsia’s assumptions about who had the right to speak. As Kristin Roth-Ey has suggested, the Soviet TV host was a projection of male cultural authority.⁴⁵ It was a favourite genre of Soviet (though not just Soviet) television, and it continues to this day: male hosts holding forth to their viewers about the *public* issues of the day.

Speaking more broadly, the problem was not just the maleness of cultural authority, but the assumptions about the public that came with the notion of TV authorities. The atmosphere of the Thaw gave intellectual groups like academics, artists, journalists, and TV professionals leeway to discuss matters of social importance without fear of Stalinist reprisals. These individuals, whether male or female, varied in their political viewpoints, but many of them felt that they knew what the country needed – better, perhaps, than the Party whose interests they served. Despite this, they shared with the country’s rulers a certain soteriological vision of the public as individuals who needed to

³⁹ Andronikov, ‘Myslit’ publichno’.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ O. Remez, ‘Pokhozhee i raznoe,’ *IK*, 3, 1961, 118.

⁴² *KPSS o sredstvakh massovoi informatsii i propagandy*, Politizdat, 1960, p.540. On this resolution see Evans, pp.42-46.

⁴³ See, for example, Russian Archive of Contemporary History, Moscow (hereafter RGANI), f.5, op.33, d.73, ll.78-80, P. Romanov to TsK KPSS, 21 December 1958; RGANI, f.5, op.33, d.105, l.51, S. Kaftanov, ‘Order of the President of the State Committee for Radio and TV’, 16 September 1959; RGANI, f.5, op.33, d.173, l.15, S. Avertisian to S. Kaftanov, 21 March 1961; RGANI, f.5, op.55, d.235, ll.13-17, N. Mesiatsev to TsK KPSS, 12 January 1966.

⁴⁴ E.g. Riabchikov, ‘Reporter ekrana’, 8. A similar paradox existed with radio, where speakers were expected to both follow a script *and* to imbue that script with an improvisatory spontaneity (Lovell, 88).

⁴⁵ Roth-Ey, pp.261-268.

be transformed through education.⁴⁶ Thus, the notion of ‘TV authorities’ illustrates the extent to which intellectuals saw themselves as central to the country’s recovery, even as they denied agency to a Soviet public that was seen to require enlightenment from its intellectual superiors.

Crucially for our argument, just how ‘spontaneous’ all of this was is open to doubt. After her retirement Valentina Leont’eva, the country’s most well-known *diktor* (one of the few that made the leap to the role of presenter) complained of discrimination against announcers in favour of presenters, and added that the seemingly spontaneous addresses of the TV commentators were actually written (and presumably verified) in advance and passed off as improvised: they were actually being read from crib sheets.⁴⁷ So while we could read the case of Fokin as symptomatic of a shift in communication style, we could also read it as more of the same – as well as an elaborate confidence trick performed on viewers.

4. Tales of Heroism and Ordinary Individuals

In the previous two sections we have seen how Soviet television put forward a challenge to Stalinist communicational norms. I have also suggested how its television personalities, both as announcers and as hosts, were hostage to certain social assumptions on the question of who had the right to speak. But what of the ‘ordinary’ Soviet individual on screen? It is easy to forget that Soviet socialism was both a humanist ideology and a movement radically oriented towards the participation of the ordinary individual. There was an anti-elitist thrust to Soviet discourse, in which the common worker was considered to possess an authenticity and spontaneity that was somehow more natural than the studied speech of the intellectual.

However, ever since the infamous occasion in 1957 when the presenters of the quiz show *VVV* invited the public to visit the studio to win a prize, leading to a stampede, there had been an understandable reluctance to allow ‘random people’ to appear on screen ‘unvarnished’.⁴⁸ As a result, television turned towards the paradoxical notion of the exemplary ordinary person to represent the public as a whole.⁴⁹ But exemplary individuals did not always make for the most effective television personalities. The heroic lathe operator could turn out to be stilted and just plain *boring* on screen; and a Party official might choose to speechify. Indeed, the professional press of this period is full of how-to guides which steered the TV presenter through the arduous process of ensuring that their guests could ‘be themselves’ on screen – as well as dismal reports of occasions when their guests started to mumble, to sweat, to play up for the camera ... or to forget their lines.⁵⁰ The dilemma for TV executives was to create a form of television that would be spontaneous, allow for the participation of the general public, but without risking a fiasco.

One solution was a show like *KVN*, essentially a replacement for *VVV*, where the problem of the tongue-tied turner was resolved in favour of young, witty intellectuals.⁵¹ But another way out of the dilemma was offered by a programme called *Stories of Heroism*, presented by the writer-historian Sergei Smirnov.⁵² The show, which began broadcasting in 1963, was, at its most basic, a conversation between Smirnov and a hero of World War II, a subject Smirnov had written about extensively. As with Andronikov, the popularity of *Stories of Heroism* was thought to be partially down to the “natural conversation[al]” skills of its presenter.⁵³ However, compared to Andronikov and the *diktory* Smirnov appeared

⁴⁶ On the role of the intelligentsia’s mission to educate the masses see Wolfe, ‘Governing’; Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin*, Oxford University Press, 2001; Timo Vihavainen, *The Inner Adversary: The Struggle Against Philistinism as the Moral Mission of the Russian Intelligentsia*, New Academia, 2006; Pinsky, ‘The Individual’.

⁴⁷ Vartanov, 27.

⁴⁸ On the *VVV* affair see Roth-Ey, pp.246-253; Evans, pp.31-34.

⁴⁹ Paradoxical, but in keeping with a Socialist Realist *mentalité* whereby the exemplar in the present became a beacon of how life would be a still-to-arrive Communist future.

⁵⁰ See Valentina Leont’eva, *Diktor i televizionnyi reportazh*, *SRT*, 3, 1961, 10–11; Mezhev, ‘Pravda zhizni’.

⁵¹ Roth-Ey, pp.253-261.

⁵² On Smirnov see Roth-Ey, pp.266-267

⁵³ E.g. L. Rukavishnikov, ‘Vnimanie: interv’iu,’ *SRT*, 2, 1966, 27; Futlik, ‘Bez grima’, 93.

somewhat stiff and sober. It is clear, for example, that his introduction (which took up almost a third of the programme) originated in a pre-prepared script which Smirnov had either learned or read from an autocue. In the clip embedded below Smirnov hesitates, straining to remember the correct phrase, or corrects himself, which further limits the illusion of spontaneity of his address. Nor did the show make much concession to the TV medium: a desk, a curtain, two microphones, a glass of water (which Smirnov often sipped from) were the only 'props'.

But in many ways Smirnov wasn't the star of *Stories of Heroism* and, to his credit, he seemed content to let his guests do the talking. Like *KVN*, the appeal of *Stories of Heroism* was in placing ordinary individuals on the screen not in the artificial setting of a factory floor ("This year we have fulfilled the plan 120 percent"), but in a 'natural' conversation with a host.⁵⁴ The programme could to some extent be thought of as Soviet version of the talk show, but instead of celebrities hawking their latest product, these were ordinary individuals with interesting stories to tell, reflecting the Soviet fascination with the common man. Smirnov's skill was in eliciting a response from guests who were often visibly nervous and hesitant; part of the show's appeal to viewers was seeing Smirnov coax his guests out of their shyness by eliciting answers that made them feel comfortable on screen. The nerves displayed by interviewees despite the great feats they had accomplished in the war only added to the sense of authenticity. Smirnov's great skill was to elicit a response from guests who were often visibly nervous and hesitant.

What the show added to the question of the socialist personality on screen was an emotional element. This is especially clear in one of Smirnov's departures from the *Stories of Heroism* series: the documentary TV film *Katiusha* (and [part 2](#)) (1964), made by Moscow's Documentary Film Studio, which recounts the deeds of Ekaterina Demina who, during World War II was a nurse, a communications officer, and also worked in military reconnaissance.⁵⁵

Katiusha's key innovation was to place the protagonist at the heart of the film. At the beginning (part 1, 2.42), we see Smirnov and Demina take their seats at a specially-convened viewing. The camera then focuses on Demina's reactions, which were often rawly emotional, to the film of her life playing on screen. The documentary benefited from the expressiveness of Demina's face, which was capable of communicating states of emotion without words. Later in the film (part 2, 1.40), we see Katiusha break down in tears at a memorial to her fallen comrades. This emotionality creates a sense of connection with Demina: while the idea of 'ordinary heroes' was a commonplace of Soviet mass media, here we really do get a sense of how ordinary Demina was, and thus how remarkable her achievements were. For screenwriter Nikolai Klado, *Katiusha* showed the emergence of a new kind of screen presence. What was novel was not the fact that Demina was an ordinary individual who had accomplished incredible feats, but that her connection with viewers was affective, immediate and of course sincere. Demina was taken to be a kind of "emotional commentator" who, through her intimate connection with events, could become the "face of a new art of television".⁵⁶ But Klado had in mind not just ordinary individuals, but also experts, who instead of merely imparting facts would replace the "affected, didactic tone of an infant school teacher" with something more personal. Such "tele-friends" would, claimed Klado, "be welcomed into everyone's home willingly".⁵⁷ Thus the emotional warmth of the announcer and the cultural authority of the presenter would be combined in the form of authoritative-yet-familiar figures who had earned the right to be on screen not so much by the correctness of their words, but also through the sincerity of their speech and emotions. However, we might also suggest that the focus on affect as a guarantor of sincerity bore witness to a devaluation of spoken language (and, by extension, of Party ideology), as if the true promise of truthfulness was to be found not in words, but in tears. This move towards a more emotional form of television address is something that would become more pronounced during the period of 'developed Socialism' in the 1970s.

⁵⁴ Indeed, an article of 1965 placed Rasskazy and *KVN* together in their depiction of individuals in "unexpected situations". See 'Krupnym planom' [In Close-Up], *SRT* 1 (1965), 1.

⁵⁵ 'Katiusha' is a diminutive of Ekaterina as well as a rocket launcher, hence the film's title.

⁵⁶ N. Klado, 'Rodstvennik ili drug?', *SRT*, 2, 1965, 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

5. Postscript: Television and Personality during 'Developed Socialism'

As the radicalism of the early Brezhnev period gave way to conservatism, some of the figures of the past fell by the wayside. After the events of 1968, there was widespread suspicion of intellectual figures like *News Relay's* Iurii Fokin, whose downfall mirrored the decline in fortunes of journalists like Anatolii Agranovskii after 1968.⁵⁸ Yet those who came after him were not so different: figures like Genrikh Borovik, the presenter of 'International Panorama' and Valentin Zorin, who hosted '9th Studio' still gave a rather personalised – and sometimes controversial – view of world events, though they tended to give a rather one-sided view of life abroad.⁵⁹ And, of course, both conformed to the patterns of male cultural authority seen in the 1960s, which delegated the freedom to speak in the public sphere to men alone.

However, Klado's dream of seeing ordinary, 'emotional' commentators on screen was at least partially realised. Around the same time Katiusha aired, Mosfil'm was producing a new multi-part TV film – the first to be produced in the Soviet Union – called *Drawing Fire* [Vyzyvaem ogon' na sebia] which followed the fortunes of Ania Morozova, an ordinary villager who accomplished heroic feats in World War II. In many ways, Morozova could be considered a fictional counterpart to Demina.⁶⁰ And after 1968, television began to focus on 'ordinary' individuals, who took their place on Soviet screen in fictional TV series like *Day After Day* and *Our Neighbours*. Their protagonists were no longer extraordinary heroes, but ordinary people with a shared way of life.

Moreover, now that video technology allowed for shows to be pre-recorded, members of the general public – regardless of ability – were able to participate and appear on screen in quizzes like *Auction*. For Christine Evans, this shift towards showing a wider mass of the public on screen was born of the perceived need to unify the Soviet public after the upheavals of the late-1960s.⁶¹ The symbols of this unification became the markers of 'developed socialism': consumption (*Auction* was explicitly about 'educating' the population about Soviet products) and the 'Soviet way of life'.⁶² This 'way of life' had clear gendered aspects: *Let's Go, Girls!* ranked contestants, among other things, on their dress sense, while contestants on *Let's Go, Guys!* wrestled, took place in motorcycle races and shooting competitions. But just as important was that the talents displayed on the show could be acquired by all: "The show isn't about an exceptional individual," wrote one reviewer. "What is demanded of a person is the knowledge and skill that, with a little bit of effort, anybody with energy and time could possess."⁶³ To some extent, 70s television was moving away from its obsession with authorities.

The iconic television personality of the 1970s – and perhaps the Soviet period as a whole – was Valentina Leont'eva. One of her most well-known shows, *Ot vseï dushi* [From the Bottom of the Heart], presented a kind of community get-together in which members of a factory, town, or city came together to celebrate the group's achievements, often including tearful reunions or surprise announcements. In this way, the show came close to achieving the early television enthusiasts' dreams of television authenticity. As one watches the shocked – and, one presumes, unperformed – reactions of those on screen it is hard not to come to the conclusion that these were the 'emotional commentators' that Klado had rhapsodised about.

All in all, shows like *From the Bottom of the Heart* were all about parading the positive aspects of the 'Soviet way of life', with its positivity consisting in kindness and emotional authenticity as much as public service. One could argue that this was simply Soviet mass media writ large, but television (unlike, say, the press) was able to hide the joins, and

⁵⁸ On Fokin's downfall see Roth-Ey, pp.277-278; Evans, p.104.

⁵⁹ For this reason it was said that many viewers watched with the sound off. On Borovik and Zorin see Dina Fainberg, 'Notes from the Rotten West, Reports from the Backward East: Soviet and American Foreign Correspondents in the Cold War, 1945-1985', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2012, pp.77-118, anecdote about muting the programme on p.106.

⁶⁰ Though the character herself was based on a real-life model.

⁶¹ Evans, pp.181-182.

⁶² Ibid., pp.163-169.

⁶³ S. Torchinskii, 'A nu-ka, parni!', *SRT* 4 (1972), 19-20; Evans, p.182.

its presenters were one of the main reasons. Just as western television's personalities, in John Langer's formulation, served to deflect the public from the pressing problems of the world around them, by the 1970s Soviet television was doing something similar. By reducing complex political, social and economic questions to *interpersonal* ones, Soviet personalities erased social antagonism from the audience's purview. But while Langer held that the presenter was the sign of an individualistic society, in Leont'eva's case, the host became the guarantor of the cohesiveness of the Soviet collective. Figures like Leont'eva became central to the self-identity of the Soviet state; they gave a face to Soviet values and an image of the ideal subject of 'developed socialism'. Her calm, perhaps even maternal, presence was at the centre of this: her emotions seemed to express the audience's, too.⁶⁴ As one viewer commented in a letter to Leont'eva about the show: "It's heard to imagine our life today without television, and television without you. You are a special *diktor*, somehow ours, domestic, perhaps family ... Our great friend."⁶⁵ In other words, Soviet television was at its most effective when 'they' on screen were identified by viewers as 'one of us'.

Biography:

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⁶⁴ Christine Evans makes this point in a paper on the show. See 'The 'Soviet Way of Life' as Way of Feeling *Ot vsei dushi* and the problem of visualizing Soviet superiority'. Paper given at ASEES Convention, Boston, MA, November 21-24 2013, pp.10-11.

⁶⁵ 'Serdtshe v teplykh ladoniakh', *SRT* 10 (1975), 31.