

Preferring Propaganda: Why Russians Choose State News

Ashley Blum

Abstract

Most Russians rely on state-controlled media for news, despite their pro-Kremlin bias and—until recently—the availability of independent sources. Why? In this study, I administer a “blind taste test” to a sample of Russians to measure preferences for content and attachments to sources relevant to media choices. I find that, even when they do not know the source, regular state news watchers prefer news content drawn from state media to content from independent outlets. The results suggest that information manipulation by the Russian state works not just because of state efforts to reduce independent media’s accessibility through censorship but also by attracting audiences to state media, facilitating the spread of pro-state propaganda and drawing demand away from independent media.

Introduction

Propaganda is a popular tool for autocrats. Media control provides dictators a means of promoting state policies, bolstering public support, signaling their strength, and dissuading any potential opposition. Disinformation, manipulation, and extreme bias are common features of state media. While such distortions seemingly serve the regime’s objectives, they can backfire if audiences tune out in response. If state-controlled media is pure propaganda, why would the public watch?

One explanation for state media’s audience is its relative accessibility. Dictators often pair propaganda strategies with censorship, including explicit bans on the free press or softer tools of information suppression. The added effort required to access independent information sources as a result of this censorship may be sufficient to deter most information-seekers (Roberts 2018). Unwilling to expend the effort to access independent sources, people turn, instead, to state information, which is typically readily available through every medium.

I suggest that state media’s popularity may stem not only from its accessibility but also from the perceived informational value and emotional appeal of its content. I focus on the case of Russia—where state media has become a hallmark of the Putin regime’s grip on power (Oates 2006; Gehlbach 2010; Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Rozenas and Stukal 2019; Stukal et al. 2022). I show that, in this context, state media content is well-liked by its audience relative to independent alternatives, even in the absence of accessibility differences.

I use a novel research design in which Russian participants evaluate a representative sample of real news excerpts drawn from state and independent Russian media. In the “blind taste test” condition, excerpts are presented with no source attribution. In this condition, I find that regular consumers of state media perceive the content of state television broadcasts to be more interesting, important, and relevant and less biased than the content of major independent news outlets. Moreover, respondents report more positive emotional reactions to state media than independent media, and more negative emotional reactions to independent media than state media. In the non-blind condition, in which the source information is revealed, these preferences are not significantly stronger than in the blind condition. The research design allows for disentangling and measuring complex media preferences. Together, the results suggest that content-based preferences may play an important role in driving the consumption of state propaganda in Russia. Further analyses show that the preference for state media content in the blind taste test is positively correlated with approval of Putin and emotional attachment to Russia, suggesting that consistency with audience priors might be an important part of state media’s audience appeal.

The results of this study provide insight into how modern authoritarian regimes can use propaganda effectively, even without a complete monopoly on information. Until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s media environment was relatively open compared to that of other authoritarian regimes. Explicit censorship policies were limited and the internet provided access to a variety of independent news outlets, blogs, and social networks that offered alternative information to state media. Yet the audience for such content was always relatively small. Part of the explanation for the difference in audience size between state and independent media was likely the state’s successful efforts to reduce independent media’s accessibility using soft

censorship tactics. However, this study’s results suggest that audience demand for state media content might have also contributed to the state’s dominance over information. Catering to audience preferences in its propaganda may have allowed the state to persuade and manipulate public opinion through information without having to bear the costs of imposing and enforcing strict censorship.

Additionally, this study contributes to the literatures on selective exposure and the uses and gratifications of media. Existing research on these topics has focused largely on advanced democracies. The present study reveals the extent to which these theories generalize to an authoritarian context in which the state plays a predominant role in the media landscape. The results suggest that the preference for like-minded, affirming, and emotionally appealing content is important to understanding selection in these broader contexts.

Research Context

Prior to the adoption of wartime censorship in March, 2022, the media landscape in Russia included a somewhat diverse array of news outlets, including state-owned, domestic independent, and foreign news outlets. However, these different types of news outlets did not compete on an even playing field. Due in large part to state attacks on the independent press, as well as some of the more general financial challenges facing the news media industry, by 2021, the independent press in Russia was in a precarious position. In its 2021 country report on civil liberties, Freedom House gave Russia a score of 0/4 for press freedom, noting the state’s dominance over television and attacks on journalists (Freedom House 2021). Reporters without Borders ranked Russia 150 out of 180 countries in its press freedom index and recently published a report documenting a sharp increase in crackdowns on the free press since 2019 (RSF 2021).

In recent years, television has fallen almost entirely under state control. Previously independent channel NTV was taken over by Gazprom during Putin’s first term and its news content now mirrors that of the other state channels. The independent channel *Dozhd* (TV-Rain) was removed from the airwaves in 2014 after conducting a controversial survey and became an online

channel. State control over television provides a substantial advantage in reaching audiences; television remains the most popular news medium, although younger audiences are increasingly getting their news online. A 2019 Public Opinion Foundation poll of 1535 Russians found that 71% of Russians reported using television as a source of information and news, 44% reported using online news publications, 19% reported using social networks and blogs, 12% reported using newspapers and magazines, and 12% reported listening to the radio. Among those age 18 to 30, online sources were more popular than television, with 48% of respondents watching television, 57% reading online publications, and 38% using social media and blogs.

State news is not limited to television. It is also readily available online, in print, and on the radio. Due to Kremlin pressure, state-owned and pro-Kremlin privately-owned news outlets have, for years, enjoyed a privileged position on prominent news aggregation site Yandex News (Soldatov and Borogan 2015; Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker 2018; Kravets and Toepfl 2021). Taken together, the state's control over television and its wide availability on other platforms ensures that consumers face fewer barriers and lower costs when accessing state than independent media.

Despite facing challenges, as of 2021, when the data for this paper was collected, a variety of independent news outlets continued to operate in Russia. These sources included online television channel *Dozhd*, Latvia-based online publication Meduza, radio station Echo of Moscow, independent newspapers *Novaya gazeta*, and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and a variety of news blogs. News outlets affiliated with foreign governments such as BBC and Radio Svoboda provided another alternative. Importantly, at that time, none of these sources were blocked and all could be accessed online without a virtual private network.

Some private news outlets in Russia are difficult to classify as fully independent or state-aligned. RBC and *Vedomosti*, for example, are among the best-known business publications in Russia. For years, they provided independent coverage of not only business affairs but also political, social, and economic news, and were known for their investigative reporting on corruption. Both, however, recently suffered significant threats to their editorial independence, with leadership replaced by Putin loyalists and the resignation of many independent reporters

and editors.

Between 2019 and 2021, the primary mechanism through which the state targeted independent Russian media was through the law on foreign agents. Several popular independent news outlets, including Dozhd and Meduza, were designated as “foreign agents” and were required to include a prominent and lengthy label on every news report and social media post. The label was a significant deterrent for advertisers, threatening news outlets’ business models. Some designated independent news outlets were forced to close.

Overall, Kremlin actions rendered the work of journalism in Russia difficult. Nonetheless, journalism continued. Russians, especially those with internet access, had real choices about where to get their news. The media environment was relatively open compared to that of many other authoritarian countries.

Popular Propaganda and Audience Preferences

Propaganda can be a powerful political tool, providing dictators a means of signaling their strength, stifling dissent, setting the agenda, controlling political narratives, and persuading the public of their competence, even when under-performing (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Huang 2015; Chen and Xu 2017; Guriev and Treisman 2019, 2020; Pop-Eleches and Way 2021; Carter and Carter 2021). Its usefulness, however, depends on whether the public pays attention to it. Audiences seemingly have reason to reject state media, given its biases and distortions (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Huang 2018; Carter and Carter 2018). How, then, can propaganda still be effective?

Despite their peddling of propaganda, state-controlled information sources in authoritarian settings often enjoy large audiences. A small subset of individuals seek out independent information. Why? I suggest that understanding these consumption patterns and the puzzling popularity of propaganda requires considering three factors related to media choice: 1) the accessibility of different news sources 2) the beliefs people have about sources, and 3) audience preferences for specific kinds of content. I consider each of these factors in the Russian context

in greater detail below.

Accessibility and costs

News consumers prefer content that is easy to access. Authoritarian states often use censorship—both explicit and “soft” censorship—to reduce the accessibility independent news (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Bennett and Naim 2015). At the same time, they invest in making state propaganda as visible and accessible as possible across media. The challenge for autocrats, however, is that maintaining total control over information is difficult, costly, and, sometimes, counterproductive. Censorship is unpopular, hard to enforce, and often easily circumvented. In her analysis of China, Roberts (2018) argues that even porous censorship can be highly effective because consumers are easily deterred by the “friction” they encounter when trying to access non-state information. The findings suggest that state information sources’ accessibility advantage is a significant part of its appeal. However, Chen and Yang (2019) found that increasing the accessibility of suppressed content in China alone did not significantly increase demand for this content.

In Russia as of 2021, state and independent media differed in their accessibility, though this gap was smaller than in China. Because state news was available on television and enjoyed a privileged position on news aggregation sites, accessing its content was far easier. Additionally, while some independent news outlets—like state outlets—were free, others, such as Dozhd, charged subscription fees for full access to their content. Taken together, the media environment in Russia was such that it was easy and cheap to consume state media, while consumption of independent media was more costly.

Beliefs About Sources

Although state television’s accessibility advantage almost certainly enhanced its appeal, it may not fully explain state media’s popularity. The perceived value of the reporting may also matter. Part of this perceived value may stem from audience beliefs about sources (Greer

2003). A news consumer might judge a given news report as more or less biased, more or less important, and more or less relevant depending on the source to which it is attributed. Audiences rely on news outlets to gather, select, organize, distill, and distribute information. Unable to observe this process in full and lacking some of the contextual knowledge to make sense of the information environment, news consumers have to rely on their beliefs about news outlets when evaluating news content. Drawing on their understanding of news outlets' trustworthiness, expertise, capacity, and allegiances, audiences may try to judge the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and objectivity of reporting based on its source (Hass 1981; Ibelema and Powell 2001). Additionally, they may consider news outlets with established reputations and large audiences to have greater social significance, regardless of the perceived quality of the reporting. Overtime, they may become attached to specific sources, developing essentially a brand loyalty, and reject the reporting of news outlets they consider less reputable or otherwise dislike (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Peterson and Kagalwala 2021).

Previous research on the effect of source cues has shown mixed results. Some studies suggest that source cues affect people's trust and interest in information (Baum and Groeling 2009; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Knight Foundation 2018). However, other studies have found that sourcing has little effect on audience belief in news and that the content of the message is far more important (Austin and Dong 1994; Jakesch et al. 2018; Dias, Pennycook, and Rand 2020).

Russian news audiences' beliefs about the bias and reporting capacity of state and independent news outlets may affect their news diets and perceptions of news content from different sources. Some may recognize that state-controlled news outlets have an incentive to distort their coverage in the Kremlin's favor. Alternatively, audiences might consider adversarial independent news outlets to be biased against the Kremlin, biased against Russia, and supportive of the opposition. The "foreign agent" label attached to many of these sources and regular criticism of these outlets by elites may add to such suspicions. Furthermore, independent news outlets may be deemed less reliable and comprehensive due to their smaller reporting capacity and more limited access to political elites. Additionally, news consumers may believe that state news has particular value because it will be widely watched by others and because it might give insight into how the state perceives current events. This could result in the public perceiving

state news reporting to be especially important to know or socially relevant, even if it is not perceived to be especially high quality.

Content-Based Preferences

Finally, the perceived value of content may stem from the substance of what is reported—its style, framing, usefulness, reasonableness, and emotional impact. Some may gravitate toward certain content, including political content, for its entertainment value (Baum 2002). Others may attempt to judge the information value of reporting based on its perceived plausibility and reasonableness. These judgments may be based on the extent to which claims are supported by convincing evidence and/or conform to audience priors. Certain topics may be perceived as especially interesting or important. Audiences may take an interest in a news topic because it might affect them personally or their family and friends (personal relevance), because it may have significant implications for society as a whole (civic relevance), or because it is likely to be a topic of conversation (social relevance).

State-controlled and independent news outlets in Russia vary in their topic selection, framing, and style. State news outlets tend to focus on summarizing government activities, including meetings between Putin and various ministers, regional government officials, and foreign officials and new government policies. Foreign policy, in particular, receives significant attention on state media. These government activities, especially those involving Putin, are generally reported uncritically and with particular attention to positive outcomes. Adversarial independent news outlets, by contrast, report more frequently on opposition activity and corruption. Opposition activists are portrayed more sympathetically and government policies are portrayed more critically by independent than state news outlets.

The propagandistic qualities of Russian state television might deter some viewers who either prefer neutral coverage of politics or coverage that is more critical of the current regime. However, the pro-Putin, pro-Russian framing of state television news might actually enhance its appeal to some viewers. Previous research drawing on focus groups suggests that Russian audiences tend to like the content of state media and therefore watch it more—in some cases

even if they perceived commercial news outlets as more objective and trustworthy (Oates 2006). An extensive literature on selective exposure suggests that people tend to prefer messages that conform to their priors, particularly with respect to deeply held political beliefs (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Stroud 2017; de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019). This preference for confirmatory content may stem from a preference to avoid information that could provoke cognitive dissonance and seek information that resolves existing dissonance (Festinger 1957; Aronson 1968). People may experience a positive feeling of validation when they encounter information confirming their beliefs or suspicions (Hart et al. 2009). They may consume information with the goal of better positioning themselves to defend their beliefs (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989; Kunda 1990). In democratic countries, preferences over news content often align with partisanship (Morris 2005; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy 2012). In Russia, where party identification is weak, the more relevant political division may be in attitudes toward Putin. Strong supporters of the president may like state television because it never criticizes the president and consistently celebrates his accomplishments. Adversarial independent news outlets, by contrast, highlight evidence of government failures and provide more discussion of those seeking to challenge the existing regime. Such messaging may appeal to Putin’s detractors but deter his supporters.

In addition to its more positive depiction of Putin, state television’s appeals to Russian patriotism and celebratory coverage of Russia’s status on the world stage might also attract audiences (Oates 2006; Hutchings and Szostek 2015; Tolz and Teper 2018). As Aronson (1968) suggests, dissonance may be most concerning to people when it threatens their self-concept. For those deeply attached to their Russian identity, the relatively positive coverage of Russia on state television may be appealing. Not only is the coverage on state television more positive about Russia, but also it frequently includes messaging about anti-Russian bias on the part of the West and western media. Such coverage may be vindicating to those who feel Russia and Russians are frequently belittled.

Several scholars have posited that emotions, particularly emotional appeals to Russian identity, are central to state television’s popularity. Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker (2018) argue that state television news is designed to play into audiences’ feeling of humiliation by the West

and bolster their sense that the tables have now turned. State news outlets tried to encourage a feeling of pride in their viewers, which audiences actively sought:

Contrary to the claim that inaccurate ‘news’ drives viewers away, the raw and aggressive propaganda on pro-Kremlin TV attract[s] larger audiences than before. Our explanation is that what the state channels were selling was not accurate information but emotional gratification. They offered versions of reality that—although not infrequently untrue—made Russians feel good about themselves and their country.

Greene and Robertson (2019, 2022) similarly argue that emotions, especially positive emotions such as pride and enthusiasm, are central to the product that state television provides. They describe audiences glued to their televisions in the wake of the Crimean annexation, joining in the experience of “collective effervescence” as they watched the triumphant extended coverage of the events unfold on the evening news.

Empirical Implications

The observable widespread consumption of Russian state television suggests that state media outlets have succeeded in some way at appealing to audience demand. However, measuring and disentangling the complex preferences underlying this demand is a difficult challenge. It is unclear the extent to which this revealed preference would persist in the absence of the stark accessibility differences that exist between state and independent media. If news consumers are choosing to consume state or independent media for other reasons, then they should evaluate the content these outlets produce more positively even when these accessibility differences are removed.

If state media’s audience members value it, in part, because they like the content itself, then they should tend to evaluate state media content more positively than independent media content even when they do not know its source and when accessibility differences are removed. They should tend to find state news content interesting, important, relevant, unbiased, and

emotionally appealing in an absolute sense and in comparison to available alternatives. Conversely, if content differences explain the choice by a smaller subset of the population to consume independent media, then these consumers should react more positively to independent news content under the same conditions.

H1) State news consumers find the reporting of state news sources to be:

- (a) more interesting,
- (b) more important,
- (c) more relevant,
- (d) less politically biased, and
- (e) more emotionally appealing

than reporting by independent sources.

H2) Independent news consumers find the reporting of independent news sources to be:

- (a) more interesting,
- (b) more important,
- (c) more relevant,
- (d) less politically biased, and
- (e) more emotionally appealing

than reporting by state sources.

If beliefs about sources and brand loyalties are relevant to media choice, then the preference for state media content among regular state media viewers and the preference for independent media content among regular independent media consumers should be even stronger when the source is known. Attributing news content to a favored source should cause an increase in its

perceived value while attributing content to a disfavored source should cause a decrease in its perceived value.

H3) State news consumers will find a given report to be more (less)

- (a) interesting,
- (b) important,
- (c) relevant,
- (d) politically biased, and
- (e) emotionally appealing

when its source is revealed to be the state (independent) news media.

H4) Independent news consumers will find a given report to be more (less)

- (a) interesting,
- (b) important,
- (c) relevant,
- (d) politically biased, and
- (e) emotionally appealing

when its source is revealed to be the independent (state) news media.

Research Design

To evaluate these hypotheses, I conducted an online survey via Qualtrics of 1020 Russian respondents in August and September 2021. Respondents were recruited from existing panels of participants who agree to take surveys in exchange for compensation. The survey included several different modules designed to measure different kinds of news preferences. In addition,

respondents completed a brief general survey about their news habits and political beliefs. The details of the design for the different survey sections are described below.¹

Blind and Non-Blind Taste Tests

In the main portion of the study (Modules A and B), respondents were presented with a series of excerpts from recent news reports by prominent state and independent news outlets and asked to answer several questions about each one. In Module A, the “blind taste test,” news excerpts were presented without source attribution. This allows for assessing what content audiences prefer when they cannot be influenced by their prior beliefs about sources. In Module B, news excerpts were presented with their true source revealed. Comparing responses in Module B (revealed condition) to Module A (concealed condition) allows for identifying the effect of prior beliefs about sources on how people evaluate the news. The design additionally controls for differences in accessibility between state and independent news outlets that exist in the real world.

Respondents saw three news excerpts of approximately the same length from a state news outlet and three from independent news outlets in each of the two conditions (concealed, Module A, and revealed, Module B).² Respondents were asked seven questions about each news excerpt.³ The first question asks about the respondent’s overall interest in the news report on a scale from 0-10 (H1a, H2a). The second asks about the importance of the news report on a scale from 0-10 (H1b, H2b). The next four questions ask respondents to indicate their level of agreement with several statements about the news report on a scale from 0-10. The first three statements pertain to different dimensions of relevance (H1c, H2c). The first statement concerned a civic duty to know about such issues. The second concerned the personal significance of the story

1. A pre-analysis plan for this study can be found at <https://osf.io/euarn>. The hypotheses presented in this paper have all been renumbered and rephrased from how they are presented in the PAP to improve clarity. However, their substantive meaning is consistent with that which is included in the PAP. The design of the different modules is consistent with what is described in the PAP. Some aspects of the analysis have deviated from the PAP, as noted in the paper.

2. A still image accompanied the text if there was any imagery or video in the report. News excerpts were approximately 100 words. The excerpt included the headline and the first few paragraphs of the report. Excerpts were edited only for length and to conceal the source. All were given identical formatting.

3. The full text of the Modules A and B questions and an example news excerpt from Module A can be found in Appendix A. Example Module B excerpts can be found in Appendix B.

to the respondent. The third concerned the likelihood that the story would be a topic of conversation. The last statement asks about the extent to which the news report is politically biased (H1d, H2d). In the final question, respondents were asked to indicate how the news excerpt made them feel (H1e, H2e). Respondents could select as many emotional reactions as they wished.

The representativeness of the news excerpt sample used in Modules A and B was essential to the design. Excerpts were collected over the course of a 10-day period immediately prior to the survey. Although each respondent saw only 12 excerpts in Modules A and B, these excerpts were randomly sampled for each participant from a larger pool of excerpts. The state news excerpts were all taken from *Perviy kanal* (Channel 1), one of the two most popular state television news outlets in Russia. All of the news reports included in the channel’s prime time evening news broadcast, *Vremya*, were included in the study (109 in total). The independent news content was drawn from four relatively well-known independent news outlets: *Ekho Moskvy* (Echo of Moscow), *Dozhd* (Rain), *Meduza*, and *Novaya gazeta* (New Newspaper). These four sources were chosen because of their popularity and focus on general interest social and political issues. However, they may not be representative of the full independent media landscape. In particular, these four sources have been described as “critical” news outlets based on their adversarial reporting on the Kremlin. The news excerpts drawn from the four independent news outlets were those that were featured as top news by the news outlets either in daily newsletters or in the featured news sections of their websites (221 in total). Using news stories featured as top stories was intended to obtain a sample of reports most comparable to those featured in the prime time state news broadcast.⁴

Each respondent completed Module A prior to Module B. This was to reduce the likelihood that respondents would be thinking about the lack of source attribution when completing Module A. A given news report appeared in the Module A pool for approximately half of the respondents and the Module B for the other half of respondents. This ensures that there is

4. *Perviy kanal* includes approximate transcripts of its television news content on its website, which were used in the study. *Dozhd* and *Meduza* send daily newsletters that feature top stories, all of which were included in the sample. *Ekho Moskvy* includes a daily “Top 7” list of news stories, all of which were included. *Novaya gazeta* publishes a daily news summary highlighting top news stories, all of which were included.

no systematic difference in the pool of excerpts in Module A and Module B across the sample. News excerpts were grouped by date such that each respondent would see one state and one independent news excerpt from the beginning of the news collection period, one each from the middle, and one each from the end.

Additional Measures

Respondents also completed two additional modules intended to measure specific kinds of news preferences. In Module C, respondents were presented with two brief excerpts drawn from a state source and an independent source on a given topic in which the source of the excerpt was excluded. They were asked then asked to simply choose which news story they would be more interested in reading. The purpose of Module C was to measure preferences for the framing of news stories, holding the topic selection constant (unlike in Module A). The news excerpts and analyses of Module C can be found in Appendix C.

Module D, a single-question survey experiment, was intended to assess the effects of perceived popularity on judgments of reporting quality. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions or a control condition. In each of the three treatment groups, respondents were provided with information about the high popularity, the declining popularity, and the declining popularity due to bias of state news outlets prior to evaluating the quality of these networks. All were then asked to indicate their assessment of the overall quality of state television’s news reporting. More details about the experiment and the results can be found in Appendix D.

General Survey

Finally, respondents also completed a brief survey about demographics, media habits, attitudes toward the media, and political beliefs. The full text of the survey questions can be found in Appendix F. In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate which news outlets from a list of 37 nationally-oriented news outlets they had watched, read, or listened to in the past few

months. In a follow up question, they listed the frequency with which they use the selected sources. Responses were used to sort respondents into subgroups for analyses based on the news sources they regularly use.

News outlets were sorted into four categories: state, pro-state, “Kremlin-friendly,” and independent. State news outlets are those that are owned by the state or a state-owned company (such as Gazprom) and in which the state substantially influences content. Pro-state news outlets are not owned by the state but their content closely mirrors that of the state-owned news outlets. Kremlin-friendly publications (including RBC and *Vedomosti*) are news outlets that are privately owned and operated. These news outlets do not generally produce pro-state propaganda similar to that of the first two news outlet categories. However, they have succumbed to some degree of editorial pressure from the state. Finally, independent news outlets include both the foreign press and domestic independent news outlets that adopt an adversarial position toward the state.⁵ A list of the news outlets and their categorization can be found in Appendix F. The hypotheses predict different response patterns depending on regular news consumption habits. In the analyses, respondents are treated as regular state news users if they use at least one state news source three times or more per week. Independent news consumers are those that use at least one independent news source at least three times per week. An additional important respondent category of interest are those who exclusively consume state media but not independent or even Kremlin-friendly privately owned sources.

Survey Sample

Descriptive statistics about the sample demographics can be found in Appendix G. A quota sampling method was used to approximate Russia’s internet-using population. However, because some groups were difficult to recruit, it was necessary to relax some quotas to ensure the timely completion of the study resulting in a sample that is somewhat younger, more highly educated, more male, and more urban than the population as a whole.

5. The use of the word “independent” to describe such outlets refers to independence from the Kremlin but includes news outlets affiliated with foreign governments that are not “independent” in a more general sense.

Analysis and results

If content and beliefs about sources affect demand for state and independent news, then people’s reactions to state and independent news content should differ based on the sources they regularly use. Approximately 66% of respondents reported regularly using a state news source, and 24% reported regularly using an independent news source. About 39% of respondents regularly used state sources but did not use independent or “Kremlin-friendly” non-state news outlets. Only 7% of respondents used independent news sources but not state sources. In most analyses, I focus on the comparison between independent news audiences (including those who also use state sources) and state-only audiences.

To measure content-based preferences, I compare how respondents evaluate state and independent news content when the source is concealed. More specifically, the outcome of interest for each survey response is,

$$StateContentPref_i = \mathbb{E}[Y_i|state, concealed] - \mathbb{E}[Y_i|nonstate, concealed]$$

where Y is the numeric response to the scale questions or an indicator for whether a response was selected in the binary response questions. These differences are estimated at the individual level using a simple difference in means, as follows:

$$StateContentPref_i = \frac{1}{N_s} \sum_e Y_t(state_e, concealed_m) - \frac{1}{N_{s'}} \sum_e Y_e(nonstate_e, concealed_m)$$

where Y_e is the response to a given excerpt, N_s is the number of state news excerpts $N_{s'}$ and is the number of non-state news excerpts for which there is a response. Although respondents all saw three state and three non-state news excerpts in Module A, they had the option to refuse to answer any question. If content-based preferences matter, then evaluations of state news content should be more positive among state news audiences, while independent news content should be evaluated more positively than state news content by independent news audiences.

If audience beliefs about news sources affect their choices, then people might evaluate news content differently when they know its source. The differences in how people evaluate state and independent news content should be stronger when the source is known than when it is unknown. To test the effect of revealing the source on the difference between how respondents evaluate state and independent news, I fit the following regression model for each of the main responses:

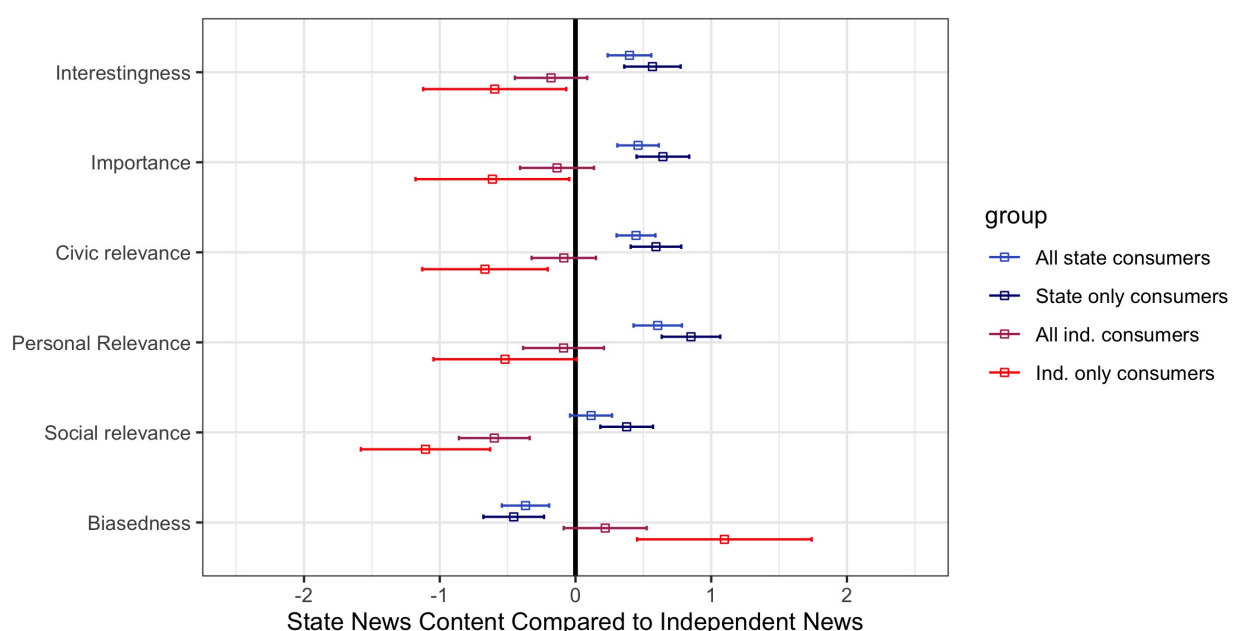
$$Y_{i,e,m} = \beta_1 \text{Revealed}_m + \beta_2 \text{State}_e + \beta_3 \text{Revealed}_m * \text{State}_e + FE_i + \epsilon_{i,e,m}$$

where “Y” is the response, “Revealed” is an indicator of whether the source is shown (varying at the module level), “State” is an indicator of whether the source of the excerpt is state-controlled (varying at the excerpt level), and “FE” is a respondent fixed effect. The interaction between the source of the excerpt and the revealed condition represents the effect of source priors on responses.

I find compelling evidence of content-based preferences among state news audiences in the analysis of Module A. The main results from the Module A analyses can be found in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 shows the difference in responses to state and independent news excerpts for different audience groups. Figure 2 shows the average response to state and independent news excerpts for state-only and independent news audiences. Focusing first on state news users, I find evidence that, when the source is concealed, state news audiences evaluate state news content more positively than content produced by the four independent news outlets.

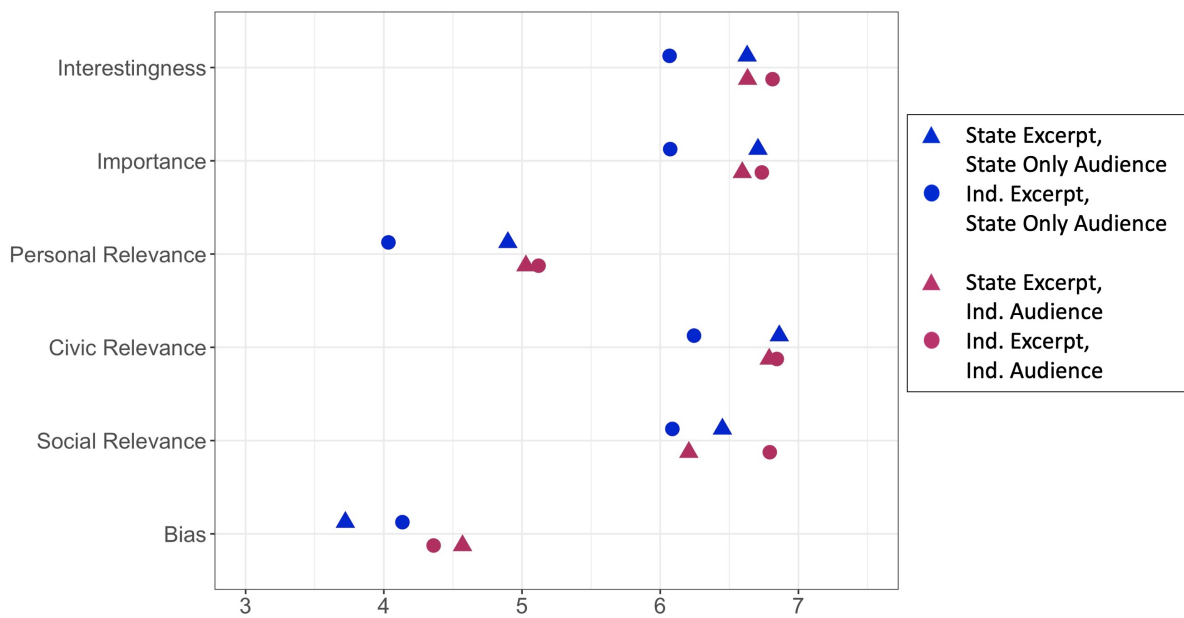
Consistent with H1a, state news audiences expressed stronger interest in state excerpts. In addition, consistent with H1b, they considered the state news excerpts to be, on average, more important and, consistent with H1c, more relevant across all three dimensions of relevance. Consistent with H1d, there is evidence that state news audiences consider independent news content to be more biased than state news. Audiences may be more likely to recognize political biases in the news if those biases seem directed against their side. That state news audiences perceive independent news content as more biased may stem from the perceived direction of this bias. As would be expected, those who use state news outlets exclusively show an even

Figure 1: Differences in Responses to State and Independent News, Module A (Concealed Source)



Differences in evaluations of news content in Module A (concealed condition). All responses are measured on a scale from 0 to 10. Color refers to audience group.

Figure 2: Evaluations of State and Independent News, Module A (Concealed Source)

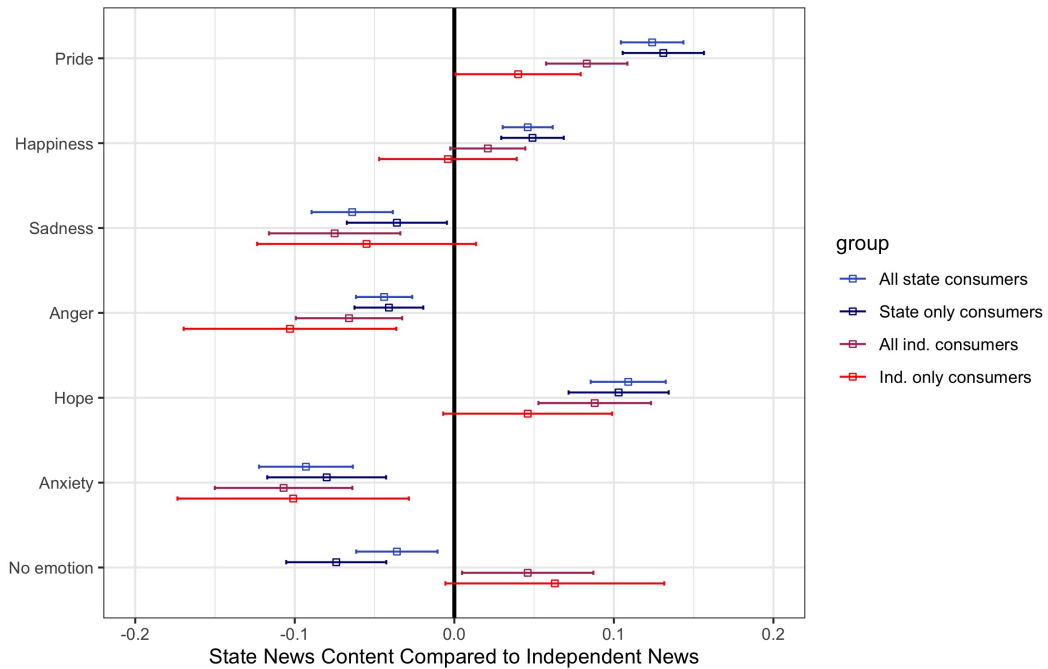


Average evaluations of news content in Module A. All responses are measured on a scale from 0 to 10. Color refers to audience group while shape refers to the source of news excerpt, which was concealed from the respondent.

stronger preference for state news content.

For independent news audiences, the results are more ambiguous. For the full group of independent news consumers, many of whom also watch state sources, there is no statistically significant difference in responses to state and independent news content with the exception of the question on social relevance. Independent news audiences were more likely to say that independent news excerpts would be a topic of conversation than state news excerpts, which may stem from the attention independent news outlets give to controversial topics. For the small group of respondents who rely on independent news exclusively, the results in Figure 1 show evidence of a preference for state news content. The results are also noisy, given the relatively small number of respondents in this group. The lack of a preference for independent news content among the broader group of independent news consumers that includes those who also use state sources is surprising, given the additional effort these consumers are expending to access the independent content.

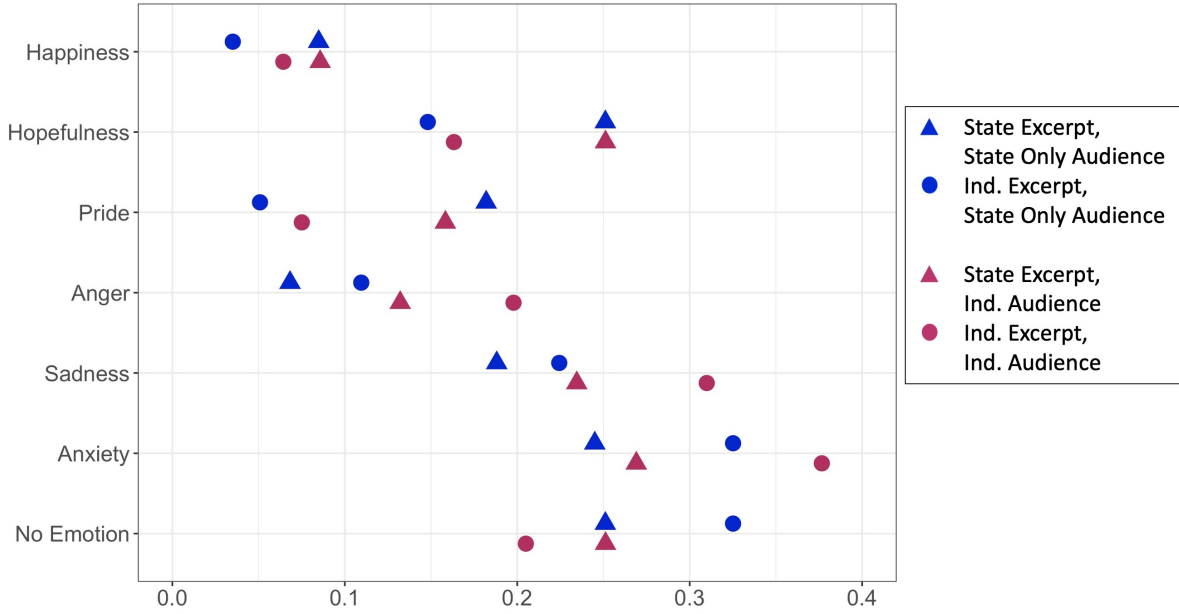
Figure 3: Differences in Emotional Reactions, Concealed Condition



Differences in the proportion of respondents indicating a given emotional reaction to state vs. independent news excerpts. Respondents are divided by audience group. Respondents were asked how the news excerpt made them feel, and were able to select as many options as they wished.

H1e posits that part of the appeal of state television news may be its emotional effects.

Figure 4: Average Emotional Reactions, Concealed Condition



Average emotional reactions to news content in Module A. Color refers to audience group. Shape refers to the excerpt's source, which was concealed.

State news audiences may have a stronger emotional reaction to state news content than to independent news content and may be more likely to have a positive emotional reaction. Responses suggest that positive emotional reactions to news content are overall less common than negative emotional reactions or neutral reactions. Figure 3 shows the differences between how respondents evaluated state compared to independent news content. There is evidence consistent with H1e that respondents were less likely to say that they had no emotional reaction to state news content compared to independent news content. They were also less likely to mention a negative emotional reaction (anxiety, sadness, anger) and more likely to indicate a positive emotional reaction (pride and hope especially) in response to state content compared to independent content. Figure 4 shows that negative emotional reactions were, in general, more common than positive emotional reactions.

I find evidence that emotional reactions to news content are correlated with interest. Respondents tended to express greater interest in stories that they said made them feel happy, sad, anxious, proud, and hopeful. There was a negative relationship between interest in news

stories and expressed lack of emotional reaction to the story. These findings may suggest that audiences like state television for its emotional appeal.

While there is compelling evidence for a modest but statistically significant content-based preference among state news audiences, there is no evidence that these preferences are strengthened by revealing the source. The results for state news audiences, shown in Table 1, are not consistent with strong attachments to sources affecting how these audiences evaluate news. The difference between average responses to state and average responses to independent news content does not significantly increase by revealing the source.

Table 1: Effect of Source Revelation, State News Only Audiences

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Interestingness	Importance	Civic Relevance	Personal Relevance	Social Relevance	Bias
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Revealed	-0.162 (0.105)	-0.182* (0.107)	-0.151 (0.105)	-0.201* (0.119)	-0.249** (0.110)	-0.211* (0.124)
State source	0.555*** (0.108)	0.642*** (0.102)	0.618*** (0.095)	0.832*** (0.114)	0.377*** (0.104)	-0.423*** (0.117)
Revealed * State source	0.235 (0.146)	0.211 (0.142)	0.116 (0.139)	0.100 (0.150)	0.245* (0.148)	0.133 (0.155)
Respondent fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	4,532	4,529	4,439	4,443	4,455	4,286
R ²	0.445	0.413	0.425	0.480	0.426	0.489

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

For independent news audiences, the results are more ambiguous. When the source is revealed, there is evidence of a statistically significant preference for independent news over state news. On average, independent news audiences find independent news content to be more interesting, more important, and less biased than state news content when they know its source. However, as reflected in the results in Table 2, there is little evidence of a statistically meaningful difference between the concealed condition and the revealed condition. There is some suggestive evidence that differences in interest become stronger when the source is revealed, although the results do not meet conventional standards of statistical significance. The results in Table 2 suggest that it is hard to differentiate in this case between the preference for content and the preference for sources.

Given the design of the study, it is not possible to distinguish between the positive effects

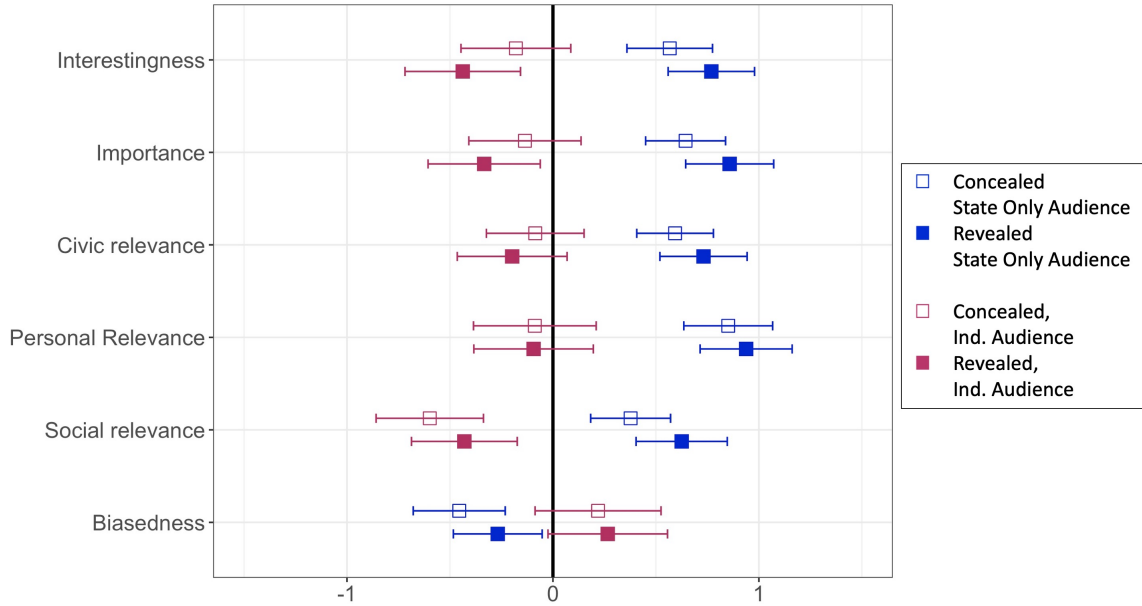
Table 2: Effect of Source Revelation, Independent News Audiences

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Interestingness	Importance	Civic Relevance	Personal Relevance	Social Relevance	Bias
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Revealed	-0.133 (0.132)	-0.185 (0.130)	-0.179 (0.130)	-0.315** (0.151)	-0.395*** (0.123)	-0.327** (0.150)
State source	-0.182 (0.143)	-0.145 (0.145)	-0.089 (0.127)	-0.090 (0.157)	-0.602*** (0.136)	0.223 (0.163)
Revealed * State source	-0.266 (0.186)	-0.197 (0.185)	-0.099 (0.171)	0.006 (0.206)	0.171 (0.177)	0.046 (0.198)
Respondent fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	3,349	3,347	3,304	3,286	3,297	3,237
R ²	0.416	0.383	0.385	0.408	0.402	0.449

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 5: Preferences for State Over Independent News in the Revealed and Concealed Conditions



Difference in reactions to state and independent media in the concealed and revealed conditions. Color refers to audience group while shape refers to treatment condition. Respondents were asked to evaluate news excerpts on a scale from 0-10.

of revealing a favored source or the negative effects of revealing a disfavored source. In general, the scores given in Module B (the revealed condition) are lower than those given in Module A (the concealed condition), as shown in Tables 1 and 2. This could suggest that respondents are reacting more negatively to disfavored sources as opposed to positively toward favored sources. However, because Module B was after Module A for all respondents, the lower levels of interest

in the news excerpts in Module B may be driven by fatigue rather than the effect of the source revelation.⁶

Unpacking Content-Based Preferences: Exploratory Analyses

The previous results suggest that state news audiences generally evaluate state news content more positively than independent news content along a variety of dimensions. What explains these content-based preferences? In this section I explore the predictors of interest in state news content to better understand who it is that likes state news and what it is about the content that they like.

Audience priors and state news interest

As discussed, the pro-Putin slant of state news might deter the president’s critics but appeal to his supporters. To test whether the consistency of state television news messaging with audience priors is part of its appeal, I evaluate the relationship between political beliefs and evaluations of state news content in Module A (concealed condition). I regress responses to state news content in Module A on a series of demographic variables and approval of President Putin (measured on a four point scale from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve)). The results, shown in Table 3, provide compelling evidence that support for the president is

6. The models used to evaluate the effect of source priors on responses differ from those described in the PAP. The models described in the PAP focus on the difference between how individuals respond to a given news source in the revealed and the concealed condition, rather than the difference in the difference between state and independent news outlets. Such an approach could potentially better differentiate between the positive effects of revealing a preferred source and the negative effects of revealing a non-preferred source. However, in pre-specifying this model, I did not consider the possibility that Module B responses could be systematically different from Module A responses not only because of the effect of revealing the source but also because of survey fatigue. Survey fatigue could reduce interest in news excerpts as the survey progressed. The order of Module A and Module B could not be randomized because of the risk that, if Module A were after Module B, respondents in Module A might be thinking about the lack of source attribution and attempt to guess the source. This could then mean that differences identified in the analysis of Module A could be due to source priors rather than content. Because Module B had to always be after Module A, the difference in difference specification is more appropriate as survey fatigue should equally effect responses to state and independent news in Module B.

predictive of greater interest in state news content, the perception that state news content is more important, and the perception that state news content is less biased. I show the results first with several demographic controls alone. I also show results with controls for political interest, as expressed in the survey. In Models 3, 6, and 9, I control for average responses to independent news content. Supporters of the president tend to give more positive evaluations of all news content. However, their added interest is significantly greater for state news content than independent news content.⁷

There is also evidence that emotional attachment to Russia is predictive of interest in state news content. Table 4 shows the relationship between expressed emotional attachment to Russia and evaluations of state news content. Emotional attachment to Russia is correlated with views toward Putin. However, the positive association persists even when controlling for attitudes toward Putin. This finding is consistent with Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker (2018) and Greene and Robertson (2022) which suggest that the celebratory, patriotic coverage of a rising Russia is an important part of its appeal to audiences.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess what Russian news audiences value in their news consumption and whether preferences over content and sources correspond to regular media diets. The results show that regular consumers of state news preferred the content produced by state news outlets to that produced by independent news outlets, even when they did not know its source. These preferences did not become significantly stronger when the source was

7. One concern whenever using public opinion data from an authoritarian country is that respondents might not be willing to express negative views toward the authoritarian leader. Prior research suggests that, in Russia, respondents are generally relatively honest in their assessments of Putin (Frye et al. 2017). A concern with these survey results is that a reasonably large number of respondents (15.7%) did not indicate their approval of President Putin. One plausible explanation could be that respondents were completely neutral toward the president, and therefore could not decide whether they approved or disapproved of his performance. Another plausible explanation is that respondents disapproved of the president, but were unwilling to express such a preference. Either of these reasons could result in non-random missing data that could bias the results. In the main results presented here, those who refused to express their assessment of the president's performance are simply dropped. However, in additional tests, I find that the results are robust to changes in the handling of missing approval data. In one set of analyses, I treat all "do not know" responses as .5 (mid-level score). In another set of analyses, I treat all missing responses as 0 (strong disapproval). I find a strong positive relationship between approval of Putin and interest in the state news content regardless of the specification.

Table 3: Slant and Evaluations of State News Content

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Interest - state			Importance - state			Bias - state		
Putin Approval	2.057*** (0.229)	1.943*** (0.223)	1.678*** (0.189)	2.025*** (0.218)	1.938*** (0.215)	1.769*** (0.183)	-1.446*** (0.266)	-1.465*** (0.268)	-1.126*** (0.214)
Female	0.364* (0.161)	0.488** (0.158)	0.188 (0.132)	0.452** (0.153)	0.555*** (0.152)	0.191 (0.129)	-0.094 (0.187)	-0.088 (0.189)	0.0004 (0.150)
Age	0.007 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.012* (0.005)	0.011 (0.006)	0.009 (0.006)	0.013** (0.005)	-0.035*** (0.007)	-0.035*** (0.007)	-0.023*** (0.006)
Higher Ed	0.073 (0.178)	-0.026 (0.174)	0.135 (0.146)	0.047 (0.170)	-0.034 (0.168)	0.130 (0.142)	-0.064 (0.207)	-0.085 (0.209)	-0.027 (0.165)
Big city	0.201 (0.185)	0.112 (0.181)	0.073 (0.152)	0.036 (0.177)	-0.037 (0.174)	-0.123 (0.148)	-0.168 (0.216)	-0.166 (0.217)	-0.208 (0.173)
Political interest		0.669*** (0.092)			0.545*** (0.088)			0.056 (0.110)	
Interest - Alt.			0.528*** (0.026)						
Importance - Alt.						0.506*** (0.026)			
Bias - Alt.									0.623*** (0.028)
Region fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	859	853	859	860	854	860	846	840	829

Standard errors in parentheses.

Note: Predictors of evaluations of state news. All models are OLS. The dependent variable in models 1, 2, and 3 is the average interest score in Module A for state news. In models 4, 5, and 6, it is the importance score. In models 7, 8, and 9, it is the level of agreement with the statement that a news excerpt is politically biased. To account for the fact that those with greater interest in politics might evaluate Putin more positively and react more positively to news, models 2, 5, and 8 include political interest as a covariate. Models 3, 6, and 9 include the average response to the same question as the dependent variable but for independent news. Approval of Putin is measured on a 4 point scale from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve). Those who approve of Putin tend to evaluate all news more positively, but state news to a much greater extent. Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 4: Attachment to Russian Identity and Evaluations of State News Content

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Interest - state			Importance - state			Bias - state		
Russian Attachment	0.318*** (0.029)	0.248*** (0.033)	0.132*** (0.029)	0.296*** (0.028)	0.233*** (0.032)	0.132*** (0.028)	-0.099** (0.034)	-0.042 (0.040)	-0.039 (0.032)
Putin Approval		1.337*** (0.240)	1.299*** (0.201)		1.346*** (0.230)	1.383*** (0.195)		-1.333*** (0.288)	-1.019*** (0.232)
Female	0.335* (0.146)	0.268 (0.156)	0.142 (0.131)	0.460*** (0.139)	0.364* (0.149)	0.150 (0.127)	-0.159 (0.170)	-0.086 (0.187)	0.007 (0.150)
Age	-0.006 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.006)	0.006 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.006)	0.002 (0.006)	0.008 (0.005)	-0.027*** (0.007)	-0.033*** (0.007)	-0.021*** (0.006)
Higher Ed	-0.033 (0.160)	0.064 (0.172)	0.122 (0.144)	-0.105 (0.153)	0.038 (0.164)	0.115 (0.139)	0.009 (0.186)	-0.071 (0.207)	-0.034 (0.165)
Big city	0.039 (0.169)	0.146 (0.180)	0.055 (0.150)	-0.048 (0.161)	-0.018 (0.171)	-0.140 (0.145)	-0.006 (0.197)	-0.149 (0.216)	-0.191 (0.174)
Interest - Alt.			0.502*** (0.026)						
Importance - Alt.					0.481*** (0.026)				
Bias - Alt.									0.623*** (0.028)
Region fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	1,006	857	857	1,007	858	858	986	845	828

Note: Predictors of evaluations of state news. All models are OLS. The dependent variable in models 1, 2, and 3 is the average interest score in Module A for state news. In models 4, 5, and 6, it is the importance score. In models 7, 8, and 9, it is the level of agreement with the statement that a news excerpt is politically biased. Because emotional attachment to Russia and approval of Putin are strongly correlated, models 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9 control for Putin approval. Models 3, 6, and 9 include the average response to the same question as the dependent variable but for independent news. Expressed attachment to Russian identity is measured on an 11-point scale from 0 (no attachment) to 10 (strong attachment). Mean attachment is 7.7 and the modal response is 10. Approval of Putin is measured on a 4-point scale from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve). Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

revealed. While this study does not directly test the effects of content-based preferences or source loyalties on the choices that people make about where they get their news, the results suggest that part of the appeal of state television news to its audience comes from the content itself. In the absence of source cues, state news audiences found state news reporting to be more interesting, more important, more relevant, and less biased than news produced by four well-known independent news outlets. What explains these preferences? State news audiences were more likely to say that the events described in state news reports would affect them personally and be a topic of conversation. These respondents also tended to agree more strongly that they had a civic duty to know about the events described in the state news reports compared to the independent news reports. The results also reveal differences in the emotional reactions to news content produced by state and independent news outlets. State news audiences were more likely to have a positive emotional reaction to state news content than to independent content. Finally, the slant of state news content might increase its appeal to some audiences. I show that interest in state news content is positively associated with approval of President Putin and with a sense of emotional attachment to Russia.

To better understand the content-based preferences revealed by the study, I conducted additional analyses on variation in interest depending on the topic of a news story. A more detailed discussion of these analyses and the results can be found in Appendix E. I find that certain news topics related to opposition activity and state repression that are prominently featured in independent news were relatively uninteresting to state news audiences. However, adjusting for differences in the distribution of topic coverage between state and independent news does not eliminate the preference for state news content among state news consumers, suggesting that framing within topic also matters.

The extent to which the study captured preferences relevant to real-world choices depends on representativeness of the news content used in the study. However, having a truly representative sample of news content is a challenge. News outlets often produce far more news related content in a given day than a typical news consumers actually watches or reads. In this study, I decided to focus on top news stories, including those in prime time news broadcasts or featured on websites and in newsletters. The design of this study depends somewhat on the comparability

of these featured stories across news outlets. As discussed, an important source of variation across news outlets is the extent to which they focus on a particular topic. A given news event may be reported by both state and independent news, but appear much more prominently in one source than another. Given the way that news reports were selected to be included in the study, I am able to capture the variation in the number of news stories reported on a given topic by each news outlet. However, the length of any given news report does not affect the extent to which that report is represented in the study. For example, if *Meduza* and *Perviy kanal* had each reported one news story on a given day about a news outlet being designated as a foreign agent, but *Meduza's* story is three times as long as *Perviy kanal's* story, a 100-word excerpt from each of these stories would be equally likely to end up in the study for a given participant. This would lead in this case to under-representing the divergence in content between the two sources.

The content-based preferences identified in the study depend on the specific news events occurring at the time of the study. The prominent news events at the time of this study centered on the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, the labeling of several independent news outlets and human rights organizations as foreign agents or undesirable organizations, a series of natural disasters in Russia and around the world, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that the level of content-based preferences could vary substantially if the main news events at the time were more or less politicized. The results might have also been different had the study been conducted at a time when there were fewer major global news events happening. Future research could use a similar approach to this study to assess how content-based preferences vary across time as the news cycle evolves.

A key difference between the five news outlets included in this study is the medium. I designed the study such that these differences were minimized. All the content was presented to audiences in the form of text. Images were always still images. The formatting was always the same. Part of the reason for taking this approach was practical: concealing the source of information and presenting the content to respondents was more tractable using text rather than using video or audio. The other rationale for this approach was to focus on the differences across sources in the substance of what they report rather than the medium. However, text

cannot encompass everything that may be meaningful to a viewer when evaluating content. If audiences have a preference for the specific way that some sources use video, for example, that is not captured in this study. Future research could specifically focus on the role of visualizations and audio in shaping demand in this context.

In the second part of the study, respondents again evaluated news content by state and independent news sources along several dimensions. Unlike in the first section, the source of the news excerpts was revealed. In the revealed condition, state news audiences tended to prefer state news content and independent news audiences tended to prefer independent news content, but there is not clear evidence that respondents' beliefs about sources changed their perceptions of news content. However, one concern in trying to distinguish between content-based preferences and beliefs about sources is that we do not know whether audiences attempt to or succeed at guessing the source of the news excerpts when the source is concealed. Given that real news excerpts were used in the study, some respondents might have actually recognized some of the news reports that were used in the study. If this was the case, then what may appear to be a content-based preference could actually be driven by respondents' views of the source. Presenting the content in the form of text rather than video should reduce the likelihood that people were able to correctly guess the source of news content in the concealed condition. However, it still is a concern.

Conclusion

There are several plausible explanations for state media drawing an audience. It is readily available through every medium, well-known, and has an established reputation. Alternative information sources, on the other hand, are newer, harder to find and access, and are constantly maligned by the state. The results of this study suggest, however, that many Russians might still choose state news even if none of these differences applied. They value it for the content itself.

These findings help to explain the Putin regime's success in using media dominance as a

political tool. Even when alternative sources were available, many in Russia did not bother to seek them out. Moreover, they did not turn their televisions off in response to propaganda. Despite their biases, state-controlled television networks sufficiently satisfied audience preferences to retain their attention.

This has important implications for understanding the effectiveness of the Kremlin's information strategies in the past and present. Over the course of Putin's long tenure in office, the state has incrementally cracked down on independent media, rendering it more difficult for journalists and news outlets to operate. Yet, for many years, it did not explicitly ban or limit access to independent news outlets. Like many modern authoritarian regimes, Russia under Putin had maintained some of the trappings of democracy, including official guarantees protecting press freedom. The results from this study provide some insight into why that strategy worked. If enough people genuinely like and valued state news, as these results suggest that they do, then the Kremlin could maintain large audiences for its state propaganda without having to impose more costly restrictions on independent media.

At the time this study was conducted, the differences between state and independent media were relatively subtle. Certain topics related to the opposition and crack downs on the free press were reported by independent news outlets, but largely ignored by state news outlets. State news outlets would often report on events with a clear pro-Kremlin and pro-Russian bias. However, much (though certainly not all) of what appeared on state television news was factually accurate on some level, albeit misleading. The depiction of current events between state and independent news outlets was not dramatically different, which may explain why even those who sought out independent media showed interest in state news reports.

The media landscape has changed drastically since Russia invaded Ukraine in February, 2022. The Russia-based independent news outlets used in this study all suspended operations in light of the new laws criminalizing the publication of news on the Ukraine invasion that deviates from the Kremlin's narrative. (Some have since returned in limited form). The websites of independent news outlets that continue to operate (mostly from abroad) have largely been blocked by the state and accessing them requires a VPN. The difference between state

and independent media coverage is no longer subtle. Before they were forced to shut down, Russian independent news outlets accurately reported on the devastation wrought by Russia's attacks, including for the civilian population of Ukraine. They also reported on the new repressions being implemented in Russia. Russian journalists based abroad have continued to do so since the adoption of new censorship laws. By contrast, state media denied that a war was happening. They adopted the Kremlin narrative that this "special military operation" aimed to "demilitarize" and "de-Nazify" Ukraine, with a particular focus on protecting Russian speakers in the Donbass. They have denied the reality that civilians have been targeted and killed in large numbers. The extreme censorship policies quickly enacted by the Kremlin suggest that the regime did not believe that its previous information control strategy would be sufficient to sustain this narrative. The Kremlin might have also expected a relatively high level of interest in Ukraine and likely feared the consequences of public opinion turning against the war when the Kremlin's aspirations for fomenting a quick and easy change of leadership in Kyiv failed to materialize.

As a result of these new censorship policies, accessing alternative information to that of the state-aligned media is not impossible, but the friction news consumers encounter in trying to do so is far greater. That added friction may dissuade some of the marginal previous independent news consumers from putting in the effort, especially the large number of independent news consumers who also used state-controlled or Kremlin-friendly sources. The already high popularity of state media prior to the implementation of these censorship policies likely made it easier for the Kremlin to eliminate alternatives. The results of this study provide insight into how state news outlets were able to sustain this loyal following, even in the face of competition. State news outlets were able to package pro-Kremlin propaganda in a news product that audiences found interesting and sufficiently informative. Whether the strategy will continue to work in the current political environment may depend on whether state news consumers continue to believe that state news outlets are giving them the content they want.

Beyond the Russia case, this paper expands our understanding of how authoritarian regimes can effectively use propaganda in an era of information abundance. While much of the existing literature has focused on the supply of propaganda, this paper highlights the significance of

demand. As technological advances have made it harder to block access to alternative information entirely, authoritarian regimes can still dominate the media landscape by catering to audience preferences.

References

- Arceneaux, Kevin, Martin Johnson, and Chad Murphy. 2012. "Polarized Political Communication, Oppositional Media Hostility, and Selective Exposure." *The Journal of Politics* 74 (1): 174–186.
- Aronson, Elliot. 1968. "Dissonance Theory: Progress and Problems." *Theories of cognitive consistency: A sourcebook*: 5–27.
- Austin, Erica Weintraub, and Qingwen Dong. 1994. "Source v. Content Effects on Judgments of News Believability." *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (4): 973–983.
- Baum, Matthew A. 2002. "Sex, Lies, and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive Public." *American Political Science Review* 96 (1): 91–109.
- Baum, Matthew A., and Tim Groeling. 2009. "Shot by the Messenger: Partisan Cues and Public Opinion Regarding National Security and War." *Political Behavior* 31 (2): 157–186.
- Bennett, Philip, and Moises Naim. 2015. "21st-Century Censorship." *Columbia Journalism Review*.
- Carter, Erin Baggott, and Brett L. Carter. 2018. "Propaganda and Electoral Constraints in Autocracies." *APSA Comparative Politics Newsletter*, no. 11.
- Carter, Erin Baggott, and Brett L. Carter. 2021. "Propaganda and Protest in Autocracies." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65 (5): 919–949.
- Chaiken, Shelly, Akiva Liberman, and Alice H. Eagly. 1989. "Heuristic and Systematic Information Processing Within and Beyond the Persuasion Context." In *Unintended Thought*, edited by James S. Uleman and John A. Bargh. Guilford Press.
- Chen, Jidong, and Yiqing Xu. 2017. "Information Manipulation and Reform in Authoritarian Regimes." *Political Science Research and Methods* 5 (1): 163–178.

- Chen, Yuyu, and David Y. Yang. 2019. "The Impact of Media Censorship: 1984 or Brave New World?" *American Economic Review* 109 (6): 2294–2332.
- De Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, Matthew A. Baum, Adam J. Berinsky, and Teppei Yamamoto. 2019. "Persuading the Enemy: Estimating the Persuasive Effects of Partisan Media with the Preference-Incorporating Choice and Assignment Design." *American Political Science Review* 113 (4): 902–916.
- Dias, Nicholas, Gordon Pennycook, and David G. Rand. 2020. "Emphasizing Publishers Does Not Effectively Reduce Susceptibility to Misinformation on Social Media." *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (1).
- Enikolopov, Ruben, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2011. "Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia." *The American Economic Review* 101 (7): 3253–3285.
- Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Freedom House. 2021. "Russia: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report." Freedom House. Accessed September 28, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2021>.
- Frye, Timothy, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter. 2017. "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33 (1): 1–15.
- Geddes, Barbara, and John Zaller. 1989. "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes." *American Journal of Political Science* 33 (2): 319–347.
- Gehlbach, Scott. 2010. "Reflections on Putin and the Media." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26 (1): 77–87.
- Gehlbach, Scott, and Konstantin Sonin. 2014. "Government Control of the Media." *Journal of Public Economics* 118:163–171.
- Gentzkow, Matthew, and Jesse M. Shapiro. 2006. "Media Bias and Reputation." *Journal of Political Economy* 114 (2): 280–316.
- Greene, Samuel, and Graeme Robertson. 2019. *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- . 2022. “Affect and Autocracy: Emotions and Attitudes in Russia after Crimea.” *Perspectives on Politics* 20 (1): 38–52.
- Greer, Jennifer D. 2003. “Evaluating the Credibility of Online Information: A Test of Source and Advertising Influence.” *Mass Communication and Society* 6 (1): 11–28.
- Guriey, Sergei, and Daniel Treisman. 2019. “Informational Autocrats.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33 (4): 100–127.
- . 2020. “A Theory of Informational Autocracy.” *Journal of Public Economics* 186:104158.
- Hart, William, Dolores Albarracín, Alice H. Eagly, Inge Brechan, Matthew J. Lindberg, and Lisa Merrill. 2009. “Feeling Validated Versus Being Correct: A Meta-Analysis of Selective Exposure to Information.” *Psychological bulletin* 135 (4): 555–588.
- Hass, R. Glen. 1981. “Effects of Source Characteristics on Cognitive Responses in Persuasion.” *Cognitive responses in persuasion*: 141–172.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015. “Propaganda as Signaling.” *Comparative Politics* 47 (4): 419–444.
- . 2018. “The Pathology of Hard Propaganda.” *The Journal of Politics* 80 (3): 1034–1038.
- Hutchings, Stephen, and Joanna Szostek. 2015. “Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis.” In *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*. E-International Relations.
- Ibelema, Mineabere, and Larry Powell. 2001. “Cable Television News Viewed as Most Credible.” *Newspaper Research Journal* 22 (1): 41–51.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Kyu S. Hahn. 2009. “Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use.” *Journal of Communication* 59 (1): 19–39.
- Jakesch, Maurice, Moran Koren, Anna Evtushenko, and Mor Naaman. 2018. *The Role of Source, Headline and Expressive Responding in Political News Evaluation*. SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3306403. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107 (2): 326–343.
- Knight Foundation. 2018. *An Online Experimental Platform to Assess Trust In the Media*.
- Kravets, Daria, and F. Toepfl. 2021. "Gauging Reference and Source Bias over Time: How Russia's Partially State-Controlled Search Engine Yandex Mediated an Anti-Regime Protest Event." *Information, Communication & Society* 0 (0): 1–17.
- Kunda, Ziva. 1990. "The Case for Motivated Reasoning." *Psychological Bulletin* (US) 108 (3): 480–498.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1948. *The People's Choice*. Columbia University Press.
- Lipman, Maria, Anna Kachkaeva, and Michael Poyker. 2018. "Media in Russia: Between Modernization and Monopoly." In *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia*, edited by Daniel Treisman. Brookings Institution Press.
- Morris, Jonathan S. 2005. "The Fox News Factor." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 10 (3): 56–79.
- Oates, Sarah. 2006. *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia*. Routledge.
- Peterson, Erik, and Ali Kagalwala. 2021. "When Unfamiliarity Breeds Contempt: How Partisan Selective Exposure Sustains Oppositional Media Hostility." *American Political Science Review* 115 (2): 585–598.
- Pop-Eleches, Grigore, and Lucan A. Way. 2021. "Censorship and the Impact of Repression on Dissent." *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Roberts, Margaret E. 2018. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton University Press.
- Rozenas, Arturas, and Denis Stukal. 2019. "How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia's State-Controlled Television." *Journal of Politics* 81 (3).

- RSF. 2021. "Russia Stifling Atmosphere for Independent Journalists." RSF. Accessed September 28, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/russia>.
- Soldatov, Andrei, and Irina Borogan. 2015. *The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries*. 1st Edition. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Stroud, Natalie Jomini. 2017. "Selective Exposure Theories." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson.
- Stukal, Denis, Sergey Sanovich, Richard Bonneau, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2022. "Why Botter: How Pro-Government Bots Fight Opposition in Russia." *American Political Science Review* 116 (3): 843–857.
- Tolz, Vera, and Yuri Teper. 2018. "Broadcasting Agitainment: A New Media Strategy of Putin's Third Presidency." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34 (4): 213–227.

Appendices

A Module A Example Excerpts and Survey

Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Путиным



Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Владимиром Путиным. Она сказала, что считает неприемлемым приговор оппозиционному политику и настаивает на его освобождении.

Российский президент в свою очередь ответил, что не видит политической подоплеки в деле Навального. По словам Владимира Путина, граждане России не ограничиваются в своих политических взглядах и праве на высказывание мнения.

How **interested** are you in this story on a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating extremely interested and 0 indicating not at all interested? Please slide the bar below.

In your opinion, how **important** is this news story on a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating extremely important and 0 indicating not at all important? Please slide the bar below.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the news article? Please slide each bar below.

- I think we have a duty to know about the kinds of issues the article discusses.
- The information in this report might affect me, my family, and/or friends.
- People will be talking about this news story.
- This story is politically biased.

How does the story make you feel? Please check all that apply. [Answer order randomized]

- Proud
- Happy
- Angry
- Sad
- Hopeful
- Anxious
- Other
- Nothing in particular
- Prefer not to answer

B Module B Sample Excerpts



Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Путиным

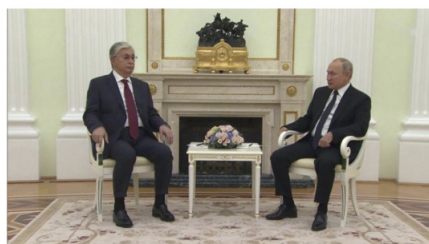


Канцлер Германии Ангела Меркель вновь подняла вопрос о ситуации с Алексеем Навальным на переговорах с Владимиром Путиным. Она сказала, что считает неприемлемым приговор оппозиционному политику и настаивает на его освобождении.

Российский президент в свою очередь ответил, что не видит политической подоплеки в деле Навального. По словам Владимира Путина, граждане России не ограничиваются в своих политических взглядах и праве на высказывание мнения.



Владимир Путин провел встречу в Кремле с президентом Казахстана



Прежде чем отправиться в Нижний Новгород, Владимир Путин в Москве встретился с президентом Казахстана. Касым-Жомарт Токаев прилетел по приглашению российского лидера. Обсуждали двустороннее сотрудничество. Товарооборот между нашими странами, несмотря на пандемию, в этом году увеличился на треть. Но основное внимание, конечно, ситуации в Афганистане и региональной безопасности.

«Мы активно сотрудничаем в международных организациях, включая наши объединения. Я имею в виду и ШОС, Евразийский экономический совет наш, по всем направлениям есть хорошее продвижение вперед, наши союзнические отношения укрепляются, приобретают все новые и новые качества. <...>»

C Module C Analyses and Excerpts

In Module C, respondents were asked to choose between two news stories on a given news event, one of which was drawn from a state source and one of which was drawn from an independent source. No source information was included. The choice for one excerpt over the other should therefore depend entirely on framing. The results from Module C do not provide compelling evidence of a preference for how state or independent news outlets frame their stories on specific news events. There was no evidence of a correlation between choices in Module C and the regular use of state or independent news media as revealed by the survey. Additionally, there was no relationship between responses in Module C and responses in Module A. Finally, respondents' choices were inconsistent across the three story pairs in the study. The full distribution of responses for Module C across the three event pairs can be found in Tables 5 and 6. Overall, the results from Module C are difficult to interpret but suggest that audiences do not have consistent sources preferences that stem from the subtle differences in framing reflected in these news excerpts.⁸

Table 5: Mod. C Results - State News Only Audience

Story	State	Alt	Refuse
Proekt	0.44	0.32	0.24
Navalny	0.30	0.44	0.26
Ukraine	0.54	0.34	0.12

Table 6: Mod. C Results - Independent News Audience

Story	State	Alt	Refuse
Proekt	0.45	0.42	0.13
Navalny	0.36	0.48	0.16
Ukraine	0.52	0.32	0.15

Module C Excerpt Pairs

Proekt

Excerpt A (alt)

«Проект» признали «нежелательной организацией» после запроса антикоррупционера

Издание «Проект» признали «нежелательной организацией» после запроса в Генпрокуратуру руководителя Федерального проекта по безопасности и борьбе с коррупцией Виталия Бородин.

8. Another concern is that a large number of respondents refused to choose between the two stories in Module C. This may reflect the political sensitivity related to these stories or an inability among respondents to choose between the stories. However, it is also worth noting that Module C appeared relatively late in the survey and was a cognitively intensive task. It is possible that refusal to answer reflects survey fatigue.

Согласно запросу, опубликованному изданием, Бородин обратился в Генпрокуратуру еще зимой после выхода статьи RT под названием «Гарант независимости: на чьи деньги готовятся расследовательские материалы международного издания «Проект».

Excerpt B (state)

Работа “Проект Медиа” в России признана нежелательной

Работу неправительственной организации “Проект Медиа” в России признали нежелательной. Об этом сообщили в Генеральной прокуратуре.[...]

По сообщениям СМИ, этот информационный ресурс, позиционирующий себя как независимый, получал финансирование из США.

В Генпрокуратуре признали, что деятельность “Проект Медиа” несет угрозу “основам конституционного строя и безопасности РФ”.

OPCW and Navalny

Excerpt A (alt)

Германия объяснила найденную Захаровой ошибку в докладе ОЗХО об отравлении Навального

Нестыковка в проекте доклада Организации по запрещению химического оружия (ОЗХО) об отравлении Алексея Навального была вызвана технической ошибкой. Об этом заявил на брифинге представитель МИД Германии Райнер Бройль. “Сегодня у нас 17 июля. Мы до сих пор ничего внятного, ни единого комментария со стороны техсекретариата не услышали,” – сказал он в эфире YouTube-канала “Соловьев Live.” В этой связи Шульгин высказал мнение, что группа стран, которые всем известны, намеренно пытается удержать “на плаву тему с мнимым отравлением Навального”.

Excerpt B (state)

Техсекретариат ОЗХО так и не сказал России ничего внятного

Технический секретариат Организации по запрещению химического оружия не дал ни единого комментария относительно нестыковок в докладе по инциденту с Алексеем Навальным, заявил постоянный представитель России при ОЗХО Александр Шульгин. В первой редакции доклада сообщалось, что ОЗХО направил группу из-за подозрения на отравление российского гражданина 20 августа 2020 года — в тот же день, когда Навальный был госпитализирован. . . Бройль заявил, что Германия на самом деле обратилась в ОЗХО 4 сентября. . . «Ошибку секретариат увидел и во второй редакции исправил, чтобы не было никаких недопониманий», — сказал Бройль.

Ukraine

Excerpt A (alt)

Россия пожаловалась на Украину в ЕСПЧ, возложив на Киев ответственность за гибель мирного населения Донбасса и крушение рейса MH17

Власти России обратились в Европейский суд по правам человека с первой межгосу-

дарственной жалобой на другое государство — Украину, сообщает Генпрокуратура РФ.

В жалобе приводятся нарушения, ответственность за которые, по мнению Москвы, лежит на Киеве.

Excerpt B (state)

Россия впервые подала жалобу в Европейский суд по правам человека на другую страну

Украина ведет войну против мирных жителей Донбасса, дискриминирует русскоязычных граждан, перекрыла пресную воду для Крыма, не расследует массовое сожжение людей в Доме профсоюзов в Одессе. Это далеко не полный перечень всех претензий к властям в Киеве. Терпение Москвы, говорят эксперты, иссякло.

D Reputation Experiment

Module D includes a single question survey experiment to test the effect of reputation on attitudes toward state media. In Module D, respondents are randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions or control condition. All respondents are asked the following question:

On a scale of 0 to 10, how would you evaluate the overall quality of the reporting on the main state television news programs?

Respondents in the control condition are asked this question alone. Respondents in each of the three treatment conditions sees one of the following statements immediately prior to the survey question.⁹

Treatment Group 1: Positive Reputation Condition

State television channels remain the most popular source of news for Russians. Vremya on Channel 1 and Vesti on Russia-1 are regularly among the most watched television programs in Russia. The majority of Russians find the state television channels to be reliable sources of information.

Treatment Group 2: Negative Reputation Condition

An increasing number of Russians are turning away from the federal television channels for news and instead are seeking out alternative online news sources.

Treatment Group 3: Negative Reputation + Bias Condition

An increasing number of Russians are turning away from the federal television channels and instead are seeking out independent online news sources. They are driven by the fear that federal TV channels are biased in providing information.

A simple difference in means is used to estimate the effect of each treatment relative to the control. The results are shown in Table 7. The results do not provide evidence that priming people to think positively or negatively about the reputation of state media affects their assessments of its quality. However, this does not preclude that reputation may, in fact, matter. The treatment may be relatively weak and respondents may already have relatively solidified beliefs about both state media's popularity and state media's quality.

9. Treatment 1 describes the current popularity of Russian state media while Treatments 2 and 3 highlight trends. This difference in structure was necessary for avoiding deception.

Table 7: Reputation Experiment Results

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Overall quality of state television		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
T1 (Positive)	0.444 (0.287)		
T2 (Negative)		0.259 (0.283)	
T3 (Negative + bias)			-0.044 (0.280)
Constant	5.453*** (0.188)	5.453*** (0.188)	5.453*** (0.188)
Observations	506	504	506
R ²	0.005	0.002	0.00005

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of state media on a scale from 0 to 10 with higher values indicating higher quality. The constant represents mean responses in the control condition. In expectation, the coefficient would be positive for Treatment 1 and negative for Treatments 2 and 3. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

E Topic Selection and Framing

To further examine the relationships among content-based preferences, topic selection, and framing, I coded the news excerpts used in Modules A and B by news topic and assessed variation in response patterns across and within news topic. These topics were relatively broad. For the first set of analyses, I first constructed a list of important topics that were in the news at the time of the study. I then use key words to code each news excerpt as relating to or not relating to a given news topic. Many news excerpts related to more than one news topic.

The first topic of interest was news related to opposition activity and state repression, including news related to opposition activist Alexei Navalny and his supporters, protest activity, corruption allegations, and the designation of several media outlets and human rights organization as either “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations.” Unsurprisingly, this topic appears prominently in independent news (comprising approximately 27% of news excerpts) and hardly at all in state news (comprising about 2% of news excerpts). I find that this topic was also, unsurprisingly, divisive across audiences. In Tables 7 and 8, I show the results of a series of regression model in which each outcome is a different survey response and the independent variable is an indicator of whether the excerpt was on this topic. Table 7 shows the results for state news only audiences and Table 8 shows the results for independent news audiences. The results suggest that part of the reason state news users are less interested in independent news content is that they are relatively disinterested in this topic and find it to be less important and less relevant than other news topics. This topic is heavily covered by independent news outlets, which may deter some state news audiences. Although the results in Table 7 compare this topic to news coverage across all news outlets, state news audience also show a preference against news on this topic even when compared only to other independent news coverage. For independent news audiences, the pattern of responses is quite different. Independent news audiences tend to perceive news on this topic to be especially relevant and important compared to other news topics. Given that this topic is largely avoided by state news outlets, interest in this topic may motivate some to seek out independent news outlets. Notably, both state and independent news audiences detect more bias in the coverage of this topic compared to other topics. Given the controversial and politically charged nature of the subject matter, it is not surprising that people are more perceptive of any kind of bias (in either direction) on this topic.

Table 8: Topic-Based Preferences: Opposition and State Repression, Independent News Audiences

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Interestingness (1)	Importance (2)	Civic Relevance (3)	Personal Relevance (4)	Social Relevance (5)	Bias (6)
Opposition/repression topic	0.209 (0.163)	0.283* (0.171)	0.108 (0.163)	0.426** (0.190)	0.363** (0.156)	0.576*** (0.174)
Observations	3,349	3,347	3,304	3,286	3,297	3,237
R ²	0.001	0.001	0.0002	0.002	0.002	0.004

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

State-only and independent news audiences also differed in their emotional reactions to news on the topic of opposition activity and state repression. Among independent news audiences, negative emotional reactions were common, with 61% of respondents listing at least one negative emotion: 39% listed anxiety, 30% listed anger, and 28% listed sadness as emotional reactions

Table 9: Topic-Based Preferences: Opposition and State Repression, State News Only Audiences

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Interestingness	Importance	Civic Relevance	Personal Relevance	Social Relevance	Bias
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Opposition/repression topic	-1.314*** (0.138)	-1.482*** (0.137)	-1.253*** (0.128)	-1.177*** (0.140)	-1.126*** (0.127)	0.651*** (0.146)
Observations	4,532	4,529	4,439	4,443	4,455	4,286
R ²	0.024	0.032	0.024	0.015	0.018	0.005

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

to news on this topic. Only 21% said that news on this topic made them feel “nothing in particular.” Among state-only news audiences, emotional reactions to news on this topic were more muted, with 39% listing at least one negative emotion: 19% listed anxiety, 14% listed anger, and 17% listed sadness. Perhaps most notably, state-only audiences were far more likely than independent news audiences to say that news on this topic made them feel “nothing in particular”, with 46% of respondents giving this response. For news unrelated to this topic, the “nothing in particular” emotional response is only given 30% of the time. This suggests that for many of those who rely exclusively on state news, the topics that are a central focus of independent news coverage but largely ignored by state news are not especially emotionally engaging.

The Taliban’s resurgence in Afghanistan was another major topic in the news during the time of the study. The topic appeared in 18% of state news excerpts and 26% of independent news excerpts. Interest in this topic was high among both state and independent news audiences. When limiting the observations to only include news on this topic, state-only news audiences show no preference for state news content and independent news audiences show no preference for independent news content in terms of expressed interest, perceived importance, perceived relevance, and perceived bias. Interestingly, however, emotional reactions to state news content related to this topic are, on average, more positive than emotional reactions to independent news content related to this topic, among both state and independent news audiences. Positive emotional reactions such as happiness, hope, and pride were given for 27% of state news excerpts but only 15% of independent news excerpts that relate to this topic. By contrast, negative emotional reactions were listed for 60% of independent news excerpts but only 44% of state news excerpts. These differences may stem from the different emphases of state and independent news coverage within this topic and the pairing of news on Afghanistan with coverage of other topics. Independent news coverage on this topic was focused on activity within Afghanistan. By contrast, state news coverage tended to focus on the response to the situation by Russia and Western countries. Many news reports in state coverage featured meetings between Putin and various world leaders in which this topic, among other topics, was discussed.

Another topic of particular interest is news related to public health and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. News excerpts discussing the pandemic comprise 14% of state news excerpts and 6% of independent news excerpts.¹⁰ For state-only news audiences, excerpts on this topic

10. To identify news excerpts related to COVID-19, I first use key word searches to identify relevant texts. However, I then excluded certain news excerpts that mention the pandemic but provide no reporting related to public health. For example, some news excerpts briefly mention COVID-19 as an explanation for why a meeting or event was held remotely. These are not treated as COVID-19 news. However, if COVID-19 is mentioned as

were perceived as especially interesting and important. Independent news audiences showed no particular interest or disinterest in news excerpts on this topic.¹¹ There is no evidence that either state-only or independent news consumers show a particular interest in state or independent news coverage of this topic or perceive the importance or relevance as different depending on the source.

In addition to relevant news events at the time of the study, I also consider news coverage of President Putin. Putin's name is mentioned, on average, .4 times per state news excerpt and .3 times per independent excerpt. For independent news audiences, interest in news discussing the president was neither particularly interesting nor uninteresting and there was no evidence of a preference for state or independent news content within this topic. State-only news consumers, by contrast, show a greater level of interest in news that mentions the president and perceive it to be especially important. Moreover, they tend to find the state news coverage mentioning the president to be especially interesting and important relative to that of the independent news outlets. State news audiences are especially likely to say they have a civic duty to know about news stories that mention that president.

Taken together, these results suggest that both topic selection and framing within a topic matter to audiences. State and independent news audiences differ somewhat in the topics that most interest them and that they perceive to be most important and relevant. As would be expected, state news audiences show a particular interest in news relating to the president and disinterest in news relating to the opposition and state repression. Independent news audiences, by contrast, perceive news related to the opposition and state repression to be especially important and show no particular interest or disinterest in news about the president. Both state and independent news audiences considered news coverage of the pandemic and Afghanistan to be interesting and important.

one of several topics discussed at a meeting, this is included.

11. While independent news audiences tended to score news on COVID-19 similarly to state-only news audiences, they also tended to score all news more highly. Therefore, pandemic-related news was not especially interesting.

F General Survey

Please indicate your gender.

- male
- female
- I prefer not to answer

In what oblast/krai/republic do you live? [Select from dropdown list]

How old are you?

What is your level of education?

- Primary or lower, junior high school (7-8, now grade 9)
- Secondary school (10, now 11 grades)
- Primary vocational education
- Secondary vocational education
- Incomplete higher education (at least 3 years of university)
- Higher

How would you describe your material situation?

- We don't even have enough money for food
- There is enough money for food, but buying clothes is difficult
- There is enough money for food, clothes and small household appliances, but it would be difficult to buy a TV, refrigerator or washing machine now
- There is enough money for large household appliances, but we could not buy a new car
- There is enough money for everything except the purchase of real estate (summer cottages or apartments)
- We are not experiencing material difficulties. If necessary, we could purchase a cottage, an apartment
- I prefer not to answer

Which phrase best describes the area where you live?

- A big city
- The suburbs or outskirts of a big city
- A town or a small city

- A country village
- A farm or home in the countryside

[Followup] Which city do you live in? [Select from dropdown list]

How many times in the past week have you watched or listened to a news program or read a news publication?

- 6 or more times
- 3-5 times
- Once or twice
- Not at all

What are your preferred means of accessing the news? Please check all that apply. [Order randomized]

- Television
- Yandex News, SMI2, Mail.ru, Rambler or other online news aggregator
- News publication websites (such as kp.ru, tvrain.ru, lenta.ru, rg.ru etc.)
- Social networking sites (such as VKontakte, Live Journal, Twitter, Facebook etc).
- Messaging services (such as Telegram, WhatsApp etc.)
- YouTube or other video sharing platform
- Radio
- Newspaper (printed)
- Podcasts
- Other:
- I do not follow the news

Which of the options you selected is your favorite way to access the news? [Include answers selected in prior question, order randomized]

Which of the following news sources have you watched, read, or listened to in the past few months? Please check all that apply. If there is another news source that you have used that is not on the list, please list that at the end.

- Forbes
- Lenta.ru
- L!fe (LifeNews, Life.ru)

- Republic.ru
- Moskovsky Komsomolets (MK.ru)
- Argumenti i Fakti (aif.ru)
- BBC Russian Service
- *Vedomosti*
- Gazeta.ru
- TV-Rain
- Kommersant
- Komsomolskaya Pravda
- Meduza
- Nezavisimaya Gazeta (ng.ru)
- Novaya Gazeta
- Pravda
- Radio of Russia
- RBC
- RIA Novosti
- Rossiskaya Gazeta (rg.ru)
- TASS
- Echo of Moscow
- Yandex News
- Snob.ru
- RT
- Izvestia (iz.ru)
- Euronews
- NTV
- Rossiya-1
- Channel 1
- Rossiya-24 (Vesti.ru)
- OTR

- Vesti FM
- Radio Free
- VTimes
- The Bell
- Istories
- Other:
- I have not been following the news

How often do you use each of these sources? [include for each source selected in previous question]

- Daily/ Almost daily
- A few times per week
- A few times per month
- Once per month or less

How reliable do you find the reporting on the three main federal television channels (Channel One, Russia-1 and NTV)?

- Completely reliable
- Somewhat reliable
- Somewhat unreliable
- Completely unreliable
- It completely depends on the source
- Find it difficult to answer

How reliable do you find the reporting in the main independent news publications (such as Echo of Moscow, Dozhd, Novaya Gazeta, VTimes, Meduza etc.)?

- Completely reliable
- Somewhat reliable
- Somewhat unreliable
- Completely unreliable
- It completely depends on the source
- Find it difficult to answer

Some people say that the state television channels (Channel One, Russia-1, NTV) are biased. Would you say that you generally agree or disagree with this?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Find it difficult to answer

Some people say that the major independent news outlets in Russia (Echo of Moscow, Dozhd, Novaya Gazeta, VTimes, Meduza) are biased. Would you say that you generally agree or disagree with this?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Find it difficult to answer

Do you generally approve or disapprove of Vladimir Putin's performance as president of Russia?

- Definitely approve
- Somewhat approve
- Somewhat disapprove
- Definitely disapprove
- I find it difficult to answer

Do you generally approve or disapprove of the activities of the Russian Duma?

- Definitely approve
- Somewhat approve
- Somewhat disapprove
- Definitely disapprove
- I find it difficult to answer

Do you think that, on the whole, the country is heading in the right direction, or does it seem that the country is going off track?

- It's heading in the right direction
- It's heading in the wrong direction
- I find it difficult to answer

How interested are you in politics?

- Very interested
- Rather interested
- Hardly interested
- Not at all interested
- I find it difficult to answer

How much would you say that the political system in Russia allows people like you to have an influence on politics?

- Not at all
- Very little
- Some
- A lot
- A great deal
- I prefer not to answer

How emotionally attached do you feel to Russia? Please choose a number from 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all emotionally attached and 10 means very emotionally attached. [Slider bar]

How do you normally access the internet? Please check all that apply.

- Through a Wifi or wired network at home
- Through a Wifi or wired network at work
- On a mobile device
- Through public wifi networks
- Other:

What category would you classify yourself in by occupation?

- Head of an enterprise, organization
- Department Manager

- Specialist with higher education
- Employee without higher education
- Service staff
- Doctor
- Teacher
- Working
- Student
- Small business, self-employment
- No job, NOT looking for a job (doing housekeeping, etc.) (
- Unemployed (no job, but looking for a job)
- Other (what exactly?)
- I prefer not to answer

Categorization of News Outlets

State

- Perviy kanal (Channel 1) (State TV)
- Rossiya-1 (Russia-1) (State TV)
- Rossiya-24 (Russia-24) (State TV)
- NTV (State TV)
- OTR (State TV)
- RT (State TV)
- TASS
- Ria Novosti
- Rossiskaya gazeta
- Argumenti i fakti
- Vesti FM
- Radio of Russia

Pro-State

- Gazeta.ru
- L!fe
- Komsomolskaya Pravda
- Izvestia
- Lenta
- Pravda.ru

“Kremlin-Friendly” Non-State

- RBC
- Vedomosti
- Kommersant
- Moskovskii Komsomolets
- Forbes

Independent

- Meduza
- Dozhd (Rain)
- Nezavisimaya gazeta
- Novaya gazeta
- Ekho Moskvy (Echo of Moscow)
- Radio Svoboda (Radio Free)
- BBC Russian
- Euronews
- Snob
- IStories
- The Bell
- Republic

G Sample Summary Statistics

Table 10: Sample Descriptive Statistics

1	Median Age	38
2	Female	46.7%
3	Higher Ed	32.2%
4	Central	33.41%
5	Far Eastern	2.42%
6	North Caucasus	2.75%
7	Northwestern	12.86%
8	Siberian	8.13%
9	Southern	10.33%
10	Ural	8.24%
11	Volga	21.87%