Finding a Home for Television in the USSR, 1950–1970

Kristin Roth-Ey

In the 1970s, the massive Ostankino television tower in Moscow was known in nonconformist circles as the “needle,” for its supposed role in injecting propaganda into the supple veins of the Soviet masses.¹ By that time, Soviet television was a vast enterprise employing tens of thousands throughout the union, broadcasting on multiple channels across eleven time zones, and reaching into the homes of the overwhelming majority of the population.² From the perspective of the regime’s opponents inside the USSR and beyond its borders, there was an ineluctable logic to the medium’s growth: television was naturally “at home” in a Soviet media system predicated on mass indoctrination and pacification.³ Yet television’s trajectory in its first two decades in the USSR—roughly 1950 to 1970—was far more chaotic, and far more fraught with political, social, and cultural tensions, than the thrusting lines of Ostankino’s needle tower suggest.⁴

Research for this project was funded by Princeton University, the International Research and Exchanges Board, and the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York. I would like to thank the *Slavic Review* editor and two anonymous reviewers for their generous and constructive critiques.

1. Scott Shane, *Dismantling Utopia* (Chicago, 1994), 153. The phrase “Ostankino syringe” as a critique for Soviet television also appeared in the official press in a short story by Vladimir Kuprin in 1981. See V. Kuprin, “Sorokovoi den’,” *Nash sovremennik*, no. 11 (1981): 72–117. *Nash sovremennik* was reprimanded for publishing Kuprin’s story, among other materials. See Dirk Krechmar, *Politika i kul’tura pri Brezhneve, Andropove i Chernenko 1970–1985 gg.* (Moscow, 1997), 136–37.

2. By the early 1970s, Soviet television broadcasting signals reached upwards of 70 percent of the Soviet population, and there were an estimated 35 million television sets in the USSR. T. N. Matiushchenko et al., *Gazeta “Pravda” o sovetskom televidenii i radioveshchanii* (Moscow, 1972), 27. Roughly 67 percent of Soviet families owned a television set in 1974. That figure approached 90 percent for urban areas on average. Ellen Propper Mickiewicz, *Media and the Russian Public* (New York, 1981), 19. Leningrad approached saturation levels for television ownership far earlier (85.9 percent of Leningraders owned a set by 1967), and Moscow levels were similarly high. B. M. Firsov, *Televidenie glazami sotsiologa* (Moscow, 1971), 108.

3. The dissidents’ “needle” reference is in fact a striking parallel to one of the main early theories of mass communications in the west, the “hypodermic effects” model. See Todd Gitlin, “Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm,” *Theory and Society*, vol. 6 (1978): 205–53. Mickiewicz also discusses the parallel; Ellen Mickiewicz, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in Soviet Society* (New York, 1988), 181–83.

4. Technically speaking, the 1950s and 1960s were not television’s first two decades in the USSR. Experimental broadcasts began as early as the 1920s, and regular broadcasts began in both Moscow and Leningrad in 1939. Suspended for the duration of World War II, broadcasting resumed in the postwar 1940s and took off in the early and mid-1950s. On the pre-World War II period, see A. Iurovskii, *Televidenie: Poiski i resheniia* (Moscow, 1983), 29–39; A. Iurovskii, “Pervye shagi,” *Problemy televideniia i radio* (Moscow, 1971), 95–108.

Although there were plans to build a new television center in Moscow with a record-breaking tower as early as 1956, construction did not begin at Ostankino until 1960 and

The “moment of any new technology is a moment of choice,” in the words of Raymond Williams, and the Soviet regime made a clear choice when it came to investing in television in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ As the cutting edge in communications technology, television could provide a potent symbol of Soviet scientific prowess; as an industrial product promising knowledge and pleasure to millions with the flick of a switch, television could stand as an emblem of the socialist “good life” and proof of Soviet competitiveness on the Cold War’s home front. Television broadcasting also promised an audience of unprecedented size and, critically, one largely limited, for technological reasons, to programming made-in-the-USSR. For a regime struggling, and mostly failing, to prevent its citizens from tuning in to foreign radio, television was a very alluring alternative.⁶ In short, both symbolically and practically, television presented tremendous opportunities, and the Soviet regime did not hesitate to invest in its development. With the press cheering heartily off screen, people across the USSR in the 1950s and 1960s learned that a modern socialist marvel called “Soviet television” was fast becoming an ordinary feature of Soviet life.

However, what seemed so clear on the pages of *Pravda* and the latest plan presented a far fuzzier picture on the ground. Choosing to invest in a technology was not the same as deciding how to use and administer it. And in this respect, as even Soviet scholars acknowledged, the leaders of the “propaganda state” were disorganized, uncreative, even detached.⁷

was then repeatedly delayed due to a series of technical problems. The eventual complex had 200,000 square meters of workspace, including fourteen separately equipped studio blocs. The tower itself stands more than 500 meters tall. Iurovskii, *Televidenie*, 42. As the Ostankino center took shape, the Soviets were also busy extending their television network on the ground and, even more important, as of 1965, in space, with satellite technology. By 1967, the satellite system had connected far-flung regions in Siberia, the Far East, Central Asia, and the far north to Moscow.

5. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York, 1975), xv.

6. In the days before satellite technology, broadcasters relied on relay stations and cables to carry signals. While this put most of the Soviet population out of reach of foreign television broadcasters, the western borderlands—most notably, Estonia—formed an important exception. On the importance of foreign broadcasting in these regions, especially in 1968, see Amir Weiner, “Déjà Vu All Over Again: Prague Spring, Romanian Summer and Soviet Autumn on the Soviet Western Frontier,” *Journal of Contemporary European History* 15, no. 2 (June 2006): 159–94. Satellites raised the specter of another hostile “invasion” by foreign broadcasters. In the 1970s, the USSR would be a staunch proponent of international regulations to block the use of satellites for broadcasts to private homes without government consent—a position that had the support of many countries fearful of even greater American domination of the global television market. Kerry Segrave, *American Television Abroad* (Jefferson, N.C., 1998), 110. On the foreign radio “invasion” in the 1950s and the Soviets’ inability to block it, see Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (London, 1997). On the connection between foreign radio and television development in the USSR, see Kristin Roth-Ey, “Mass Media and the Remaking of Soviet Culture, 1950s–1960s” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2003), 250–60.

7. For the now classic formulation of the USSR as a “propaganda state,” see Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1985* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985). The leading Soviet-era historian of Soviet television policy and development, A. Iurovskii, wrote that the regime had made “serious errors” in developing

This indecision at the top opened a door to initiative at lower levels, and in the 1950s, especially, we see consumers, scientific hobbyists, and local political elites all playing important roles in pushing television development forward. But here again, enthusiasm for the technology did not translate into effective management, nor did it address critical questions about how television should be used. What were the answers? One obvious tack was political communication. Yet local political elites, while pushing hard to bring television technology to their regions, seemed largely indifferent to its propaganda potential and kept their distance from the camera. Another tack was cultural uplift, and the Soviet press bubbled over with enthusiasm about television's matchless ability to bring culture to the masses. At the same time, though, many professionals in the established arts— theater, film, literature, dance—gave the new medium a cold shoulder. Television in the USSR, then, was in a paradoxical position.

In the 1970s and 1980s, American social scientists, most importantly, Ellen Mickiewicz, pioneered the study of television in the Soviets' system of political communication.⁸ This essay builds on their insights as well as on new archival materials and other sources to sketch out a fresh interpretive framework for television's first two decades in the USSR. My approach is perforce not comprehensive, yet it strives to be multidimensional, interrogating not only political but also cultural and social factors in television's development—and pointedly so. In my view, only by examining the history "in 3D" can we grasp the nature of the problem of television in the Soviet context. The cultural education that Soviet television provided (or failed to provide) and the social phenomenon of television-watching—these were political questions in the Soviet context. Similarly, the reaction of political elites to the opportunities and challenges of a new medium had a great deal to do with the ways they defined such things as art and leisure—that is, their responses were inflected with cultural and social understandings.

If initially the Soviet regime did a better job propagandizing and funding television technology than figuring out how to use it, that is because, in many ways, television looked better in the Soviet context as a symbol

television in the 1950s due to its "underestimation of its propaganda potential." Iurovskii, *Televidenie*, 106; see also Iurovskii, *Televizionnaia zhurnalistika* (Moscow, 1998), 71. For the concurring views of western scholars, see Mickiewicz, *Media and the Russian Public*, 18; Kristian Feigelson, *L'URSS et sa télévision* (Paris, 1990), 58; Mark Hopkins, *Mass Media in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1970), 251; Reino Paasilinna, *Glasnost and Soviet Television: YLE-Finnish Broadcasting Company* (Yleisradio, Finland, 1995), 94.

8. Mickiewicz's main works on Soviet-era television are: *Media and the Russian Public: Split Signals*; and *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (Durham, 1999). See also Kendall Bailes, *Soviet Television Comes of Age: A Review of Its Accomplishments and a Discussion of the Tasks Facing It* (New York, 1968); Rosemarie Rodgers, "The Soviet Mass Media in the Sixties: Patterns of Access and Consumption," *Journal of Broadcasting* 15, no. 2 (1971): 127–46; Gayle Durham Hollander, *Soviet Political Indoctrination: Developments in Mass Media and Propaganda since Stalin* (New York, 1972); David E. Powell, "Television in the USSR," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 287–300; Jonathan Saunders, "A Very Mass Media," *Television Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1986): 7–27; Thomas Remington, *The Truth of Authority: Ideology and Communication in the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh, 1988).

than as a reality. Home-based broadcasting was the modern standard worldwide after World War II, but it was an uneasy fit, at best, with political, cultural, and social practices in the USSR. Even in the controlling hands of the Soviet state, television effectively opened the door to many *new* practices and raised troubling *new* questions, particularly when it came to its mode of consumption.

The individual home, signpost of Soviet achievement in the 1950s and 1960s, was also a Soviet conundrum. How would propaganda and cultural uplift operate when mediated by a glowing box in the corner? Who knew for sure if viewers were snoozing their way through symphonies and lectures on Vladimir Lenin, laughing at lecturers and gossiping about their hairstyles, or not even tuning in for important political and cultural programming at all? And if people were at home in front of the set, was this not drawing them away from concert halls and movie theaters, amateur sports, and civic activism? Did television watching fit the profile of a people who, as Nikita Khrushchev promised, would “catch up and overtake” the west and achieve communism in their lifetimes? Where Soviet tradition was geared to mass political and cultural mobilization, television looked like immobilization; where Soviet tradition privileged collective, public settings, television broadcasting reached individual and anonymous viewers in their homes. Never had the Soviet regime had a medium for reaching so many people with its messages, and never had a medium appeared so potentially out of sync with the messages it was to deliver.

In the end, television technology did find a home in the Soviet system, despite the ambivalence that first greeted it at the door. The dynamism of local broadcasting and its tremendous popularity with consumers helped force the new medium to the fore, and the Soviet central authorities began to make clearer choices about using the technology and to place more explicit demands on political and cultural elites for their involvement. By the 1970s, Soviet television, with Ostankino, the world’s largest television center as its hub, had been designated the leading source for propaganda, culture, and entertainment for people across the USSR.⁹ But while all this may seem as predictable now as the anchor’s “Good evening, comrades” on *Vremia*, Soviet television’s iconic nightly news program, the task of adopting television technology was marked by multiple, unforeseen complications. There was no *Vremia* until 1968, no Ostankino needle tower until November 1967. The symbolism of a television set in every Soviet apartment as proof of socialism’s ability to deliver the “good life” made an irrefutable case for the technology. The challenge was bringing this symbolism to life as Soviet politics, Soviet culture, and a Soviet “way of life.”

9. Although the Ostankino complex was inaugurated in 1967, many former television professionals and scholars consider 1970 a watershed because, in that year, television’s official status was codified with a change in leadership and in bureaucratic structures: what had once been the State Committee for Radio and Television under the USSR Council of Ministers was now renamed the State Committee of the USSR Council of Ministers for Television and Radio, or Gosteleradio; this was an elevation of status for broadcasting overall, but especially for television, which now got first billing. The revamped Gosteleradio was also headed by a powerful new chairman, as discussed below.

"Wild about Television"

Many foreigners who visited the USSR in the first years after Iosif Stalin's death were struck by the presence of television technology in a country evidently still struggling to provide the basics of quality food, clothing, and shelter. American journalist Marguerite Higgins reported "one of the strangest sights in Russia" was that of television antennas atop wooden houses on the outskirts of Moscow. "Although the houses are so dilapidated they literally sag sideways into the mud, each of the two families crammed into the tiny space possesses a set of its own," she marveled.¹⁰ This was in 1955, when there were perhaps 1 million such households in the Soviet Union, most in Moscow. By 1960, that number would rise to nearly 5 million, doubling again by 1963 to 10.5 million, and reaching roughly 25 million by the end of the decade.¹¹ These were modest figures in comparison to the contemporary United States, where two-thirds of families bought a television set between 1948 and 1955. But the United States was in a league all its own when it came to television development. In total number of sets, the Soviet Union bested all of continental Europe and ranked fourth in the world in the late 1950s.¹² The Soviets naturally fell in standing once their population size was taken into account, but even so, they fared relatively well when compared to fellow socialist countries in eastern Europe (although not Cuba).¹³ And comparisons aside, the larger point, Higgins's point, remains: the Soviets were choosing to produce and purchase television sets at a blistering pace.

There is no disputing the USSR's strong financial commitment to television technology. The head of Soviet broadcasting in the mid-late 1960s, Nikolai Mesiatsev, contended that "the government spared no expense on the development of mass broadcasting," and this "despite the fact that the country lived rather poorly."¹⁴ In 1960, the year the Soviets broke ground on the Ostankino complex, approximately 30 percent of collective farms (and this according to *official* statistics) were still operating without electricity, and millions of urban families were living in cramped communal

10. Marguerite Higgins, *Red Plush and Black Bread* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955), 40.

11. *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1970 g.* (Moscow, 1971), 466; *Problemy televideniia i radio* (Moscow, 1971), 210, 246. There was of course tremendous variation in television ownership from republic to republic. The overwhelming majority of sets was always to be found in the RSFSR, with Ukraine a distant second. The proportion of sets in the RSFSR did decline over time, however (from 78 percent of the total in 1958 to 63 percent in 1965). Regional variation, although an extremely important subject, is beyond the scope of this study.

12. The top three countries were the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.

13. A 1964 UNESCO publication reported a saturation level of 13.9 sets per 100 inhabitants for the Federal Republic of Germany, 7.5 for France, but only 3.2 for the USSR. Their figure for the number of sets overall—7 million—is significantly lower than the 10 to 11 million one finds in Soviet sources, however. The 1964 UNESCO report tallied a saturation level of 2.7 sets per 100 inhabitants for Hungary, 3.3 for Poland, 0.3 for Bulgaria, 10 for Czechoslovakia, 9 for the German Democratic Republic. See *World Communications: Press, Radio, Television, Film* (New York, 1964).

14. N. N. Mesiatsev, interview, Moscow, July 2002. Mesiatsev was chairman of the State Committee for Radio and Television from 1964 to 1970.

apartments.¹⁵ Television, though, was never treated as a luxury, although the Soviets did bypass many other technologies for major investment in the postwar period. In 1960, there were only 4.3 million telephones in this country of over 200 million people, and more than half were public phones.¹⁶ Overall automobile production topped out that year at around 525,000, and the regime used a variety of methods to discourage individual car ownership.¹⁷ Yet the regime constantly expanded production and promoted consumption of television; more important still, it chose to promote an individualized, domestic version of television (something not dictated by the technology). When prices on luxury consumer items were raised in 1959, not only were television sets excluded, but the price was lowered.¹⁸ Two years later, the USSR Council of Ministers announced a further boon: an end to the license fees levied on television owners.¹⁹

Soviet consumers were also eager investors in the technology. Across the union, there were waiting lists for would-be set buyers, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s, factories struggled to keep pace with demand.²⁰ Judging from the reports of various foreign correspondents, a new set cost anywhere from 850 to 2,600 rubles in the late 1950s and about the same in the mid to late 1960s.²¹ These prices put a new set at several times the

15. *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1970 g* (Moscow, 1971), 378.

16. *Ibid.*, 466.

17. S. Frederick Starr, "New Communications Technologies and Civil Society," in Loren Graham, ed., *Science and the Soviet Social Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 19–50. This figure included trucks and buses as well as cars. Starr argues that the postwar promotion of television fits a Soviet pattern with roots in tsarist state practices of promoting "vertical" rather than "horizontal" technologies for communication.

18. Wilson Dizard, "Television in the USSR," *Problems of Communism* 12, no. 6 (1963): 39.

19. Wireless radio sets were also exempted from fees under the new dispensation, which *Izvestiia* proclaimed a "nice gift" to Soviet owners. "Podarok desiat' millionam," *Izvestiia*, 27 August 1961, 6. Fees, collected quarterly from radio and television owners, provided a major revenue stream—almost 95 million rubles in 1961 alone. This figure nearly covered the overall budget for investments in radio and television for that year (102 million rubles). Ob"iasnitel'naia zapiska k proektu proizvodstvenno-finanasovogo plana Goskomiteta Soveta Ministrov SSSR po radioveshchaniu i televideniiu na 1963 god," Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow (GARF), f. 6903, op. 7, d. 542, l. 10. In 1962, the fee on televisions was technically replaced by a one-time tax included in the price of the set. Poland, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, and Hungary all maintained their licensing systems for radio and television into the 1970s. See Burton Paulu, *Radio and Television Broadcasting* (Minneapolis, 1974).

20. Higgins reported a ten-month wait in 1955. Higgins, *Red Plush*, 42. The first mass-produced set (known as KVN-49) dates to 1949; by 1961, there were more than seventy models for sale. M. Likhachev, "Sovetskie televizory dolzhny byt' luchshim v mire," *Ekonomicheskaiia gazeta*, 18 July 1961.

21. In 1959, Irving R. Levine of CBS reported that the Rubin, with a 12-by-14-inch screen, was the most expensive at 2,600 rubles. Levine, *Main Street, USSR: Selections from the Original Edition* (New York, 1960), 66. Joseph Evans of the *Wall Street Journal* saw a set "with a microscopic screen" selling for 850 rubles and one "with only a slightly larger screen" for 2,000 rubles in 1957. Joseph Evans, *Through Soviet Windows* (New York, 1957), 60. Marguerite Higgins saw sets ranging from 1,600 to 4,000 rubles (for a 17-inch screen). Higgins, *Red Plush*, 42. For the 1960s, we can cite Mark Hopkins's report of a 240-ruble set in Khabarovsk, and *Ekonomicheskaiia gazeta*'s listing of the Temp-6 at 280 rubles. Hopkins,

typical monthly salary, even for urban professionals.²² A Soviet consumer in the 1950s willing and able to spend such a hefty sum would usually get a set with a screen the size of a postcard and, more important, a set almost certain to break down.²³ By the government's own admission, the majority of new sets in the late 1950s failed at least once within their first six months of use.²⁴ The press in this period frequently ran letters from readers who described their frustration at bringing home a new set only to have it sit idle in the corner; not only was their set defective, but the parts needed to repair it were nowhere to be found.²⁵ In addition, consumers who invested their money and time in this new technology would have done so for the pleasure of only a few hours of viewing a day: in the late 1950s, Moscow TV, by far the country's most developed station, was offering four hours of programming daily (as of 1956, on two channels); in the rest of the country, many stations broadcast less regularly and for fewer hours. Finally, judging by the many letters of complaint in the press and recollections of former television professionals, the technical quality of the broadcasts was often abysmal. As was true of early television the world over, early Soviet television consisted (apart from the rebroadcast of films) almost entirely of live broadcasts, and viewers watched this toddler medium fall flat on its face again and again.²⁶

Nevertheless, as *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury observed as early as 1954, Muscovites were "frankly wild about television," and they were not alone.²⁷ Sociological research in the 1960s found no direct correlation between a person's decision to buy a television set and either salary level, professional activity, or educational background; people of all social groups were buying.²⁸ For the same amount of money (and as-

Mass Media, 253; *Ekonomicheskaiia gazeta*, 18 July 1961. These later prices reflect the 1959 currency devaluation.

22. Evans estimated the average monthly salary in 1957 at 600–650 rubles, with urban professionals earning considerably more (for example, 1,100 rubles per month for an interpreter in Tbilisi). Evans, *Through Soviet Windows*, 13, 21. Television sets were also among the first goods that Soviet consumers could buy on installment plans.

23. The screen for the popular KVN model measured just 18 centimeters diagonally. Magnifying lenses were often attached to sets for this reason.

24. V. Kuibyshev, "Nuzhdy teletzritelei," *Izvestiia*, 26 October 1958, 4.

25. V. Bezgulyi, "Za ekranom televizora," *Izvestiia*, 17 July 1960, 8; L. Shumov, "Bel'mo na televizore," *Ogonek*, 1960, no. 48; "Posle vystupleniia Ogonka: Kogda zhe prozreliut televizory?" *Ogonek*, 1961, no. 6. The task of locating the right parts was made more complicated by the large number of different sets in production, up to eighty-seven by 1965. V. A. Urvalov, *Ocherki istorii televideniia* (Moscow, 1990), 152.

26. Viewers complained about problems with broadcast quality (wavy, unclear images, whistles and hisses, and so on) and about fingers and other extraneous objects making their way on camera. Given the conditions, it is a wonder many television studios put out any programming at all. Riga's first studio in the 1950s, for example, was so small that they could only fit one person on camera at a time. It was also terrifically hot (42 degrees Celsius), as were most Soviet studios due to the low quality of their lighting technology. "Stenogramma soveshchaniia u nachal'nika upravleniia po voprosam razvitiia televideniia, 1.II.1956," GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 499, l. 92.

27. Harrison Salisbury, "What Russians See on TV," *New York Times*, 11 July 1954.

28. Family situation, however, was the one factor that did correlate: families with children were more likely to buy a television set than families without; married couples were

suming these products were available—an admittedly broad assumption), a consumer might have purchased other household appliances then promoted as part of a “modern” lifestyle: a vacuum cleaner, a small refrigerator, or both. And surely many people did. Yet just as surely, millions of consumers chose television sets instead (or first), despite the costs, their well-earned reputation for breaking down, and the limited and low-quality programming. The Soviet people showed an instant and overwhelming attraction to television; if the moment of any new technology is a moment of choice, Soviet consumers chose television with gusto.

Choosing Television on the Local Level

As both the production and consumption of television sets increased dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s, so, too, did the infrastructure for broadcasting. Figures for the number of television stations in the USSR tell a dramatic story: in 1955, there were just 9 stations, in 1958, 12. But by 1960, the number had rocketed up to 84, and by 1965, it had reached 121.²⁹ The number of people employed by the new medium accordingly ballooned from 400 to nearly 18,000 in the same period.³⁰ Figures like these would seem to indicate a well-orchestrated campaign from the center to develop this technology. But in fact, at least until the early 1960s, the explosive growth owed its momentum in large measure to local initiatives.

Who were these local enthusiasts for television? In Vladivostok, it was Viktor Nazarenko and his comrades, a group of engineers, who built the first studio in 1956.³¹ An analogous group in Dnepropetrovsk convinced the local mining institute to let them use a tower in their building for broadcasting.³² In Kazan', Kharkov, and many other cities, ham radio clubs, typically run by civil defense organizations, were the new medium's pioneers.³³ With Soviet culture's emphasis on scientific knowledge, many people had the motivation and the skills to develop television in their own communities. What is surprising is how little their activities were regulated. Certainly, no studio could have taken shape without the approval of local party and state officials; often enough, the regional party secretary was the first person in town to have a television set in his apartment and the main instigator in getting a local station up and running. But not un-

more likely to have sets than people living on their own. B. M. Firsov, *Puti razvitiia sredstv massovoi kommunikatsii* (Moscow, 1977), 114–15.

29. Iurovskii, *Televidenie*, 43. These are the official Soviet-era figures, but there were also a large number of unofficial and semi-official stations, as discussed below. A recent study focusing on television technology estimates that 275 stations were in operation in 1960, with numbers continuing to rise in the early 1960s. Urvalov, *Ocherki istorii televideniia*, 150, 146.

30. Iurovskii, *Televidenie*, 43, 108.

31. G. Khaliletskii, “Goresti mestnogo televideniia,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 27 August 1957, 2.

32. Ivan Mashchenko, *Telebachennia Ukraini* (Kiev, 2004), 1:52.

33. “Na ekrane televizora—dosaafovtsy,” *Sovetskii patriot*, 13 September 1961, in “Stat'i o televidenii, opublikovannye v tsentral'noi i mestnoi pressy za 1961 g.,” GARF, f. 6903, op. 3, d. 175, l. 73; Mashchenko, *Telebachennia*, 91.

til 1957, when the audience already numbered in the millions, did the party's Central Committee put together a group to manage television (a division in its Department of Propaganda and Agitation) and did the industry win firm footing in such state structures as the State Committee for Radio and Television or the Goskomitet.³⁴ Prior to that time, the Ministries of Culture and of Communications shared oversight over television, with Communications responsible for technical issues, including new studio construction, and Culture supervising programming. Or so matters stood on paper. In practice, there were Viktor Nazarenkos and party secretaries championing the new medium in many localities, and even after the 1957 administrative reorganization, the central authorities could not say with any precision how many television stations the country had.

In 1958, the head of the Goskomitet lodged an official complaint with the Central Committee about "so-called amateur television centers" that had cropped up alongside official studios "with the foreknowledge and the protection of local organizations" (a reference to regional party structures). These centers, fumed the Goskomitet, had been "built in a slipshod fashion using funds given by local organizations, without the permission of the Council of Ministers . . . and without taking into account the basic conditions for television programming." In some instances, "local organizations" were moving their homegrown studios to neighboring towns once an official center opened in the area, while in others, the "amateurs" were now petitioning for official status and funding.³⁵ According to the Goskomitet, these local organizations "disorganized state television," by stimulating television sales in the wrong areas and causing shortages in the right ones (that is, in nearby cities with official centers) and by robbing the state of revenues (since viewers who watched the amateur stations were failing to pay their license fees).³⁶ But the Goskomitet's chief complaint about the amateurs was that they provided a substandard service.

Here is how its deputy chairman described the situation at a meeting of Ukrainian studio heads in 1963: "Whoever made a better case to the Ministry of Communications, or was more convincing, or had more nerve, that is where a studio sprang up. So, not long ago, they opened a studio in one place . . . and it turned out there is no theater in the area, no [musical] ensembles. And you have to work . . . you have to put the equipment to use. So every night they put two soloists on the air: one on the balalaika,

34. Officially, the Goskomitet was a committee of the USSR Council of Ministers. Goskomitet is an abbreviated form of the full name in Russian, Goskomitet po radioveshchaniiu i televideniiu pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR. After 1957, all Soviet republics (excluding the RSFSR) developed analogous committees in their state administrations.

35. "Pis'ma v TsK KPSS i SM SSSR o rabote Goskomiteta po radioveshchaniiu i televideniiu pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR," GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 543, l. 79. Some "amateur" (sometimes also called "dwarf") stations were capable of broadcasting their own programs; others were simply relay stations for broadcasts from other stations. There were more stations of all kinds in the industrially developed areas of Russia and Ukraine than in other parts of the USSR.

36. *Ibid.*, 80.

the other on the accordion.”³⁷ The fact that the Goskomitet was still complaining about amateur studios as late as 1963—and, back in Moscow, asking the central authorities to sanction local party secretaries who refused to reign them in—speaks volumes about early Soviet television development.³⁸ The disjuncture between investment and administration was colossal.

Although there does not seem to have been a particular catalyzing event, the central authorities did step up their scrutiny of television’s performance and their demands around 1959–60. One clear factor was the perceived threat of foreign radio broadcasting. Although the regime continued to pour money into jamming in the late 1950s, there was also a growing recognition of its futility and a push to develop alternative strategies for protecting the Soviet population from its enemies (as the issue was framed). The notion of using Soviet television programming to redirect people’s attention figured in discussions leading up to the Central Committee’s 1959 decree “On the Battle against Enemy Propaganda.”³⁹ Boris Firsov, then a rising star in the Komsomol and future head of the Leningrad studio, also suggested 1959 as a turning point in attitudes, but pointed to Khrushchev’s travels in the United States that year as the crucial factor; only then, Firsov argued, did the Soviet leader understand both the potential power of television and the necessity to control it effectively.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, another contemporary observer, Aleksandr

37. “Stenogramma vystupleniia t. Chernysheva—zam. pred. Gosudarstvennogo Komiteta na soveshchaniia direktorov teletudii Ukrainy,” Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv vysshikh organov vlasti i upravleniia Ukrainy (TsGAVO), f. 4915, op. 1, d. 3438, l. 5.

38. At a 1963 meeting, Goskomitet’s chief directed his staff to write the regional party organizations as follows: “The Central Committee is demanding that we straighten things out, otherwise there will be a thousand television centers in the country, and each one will offer its own programs. We in Moscow are not satisfied with your programs.” If the Goskomitet was unable to “come to an agreement” with these regional party organizations, he said, then it would “take the matter up with the CC CPSU biuro [*sanktsioniruem eto mero priatie cherez biuro TsK KPSS*].” “Protokol no. 8 i stenogramma zasedaniia Goskomiteta i materialy k nim,” GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 783, l. 109. Problems with amateur television operations in Ukraine continued into 1964. “Dokladnye zapiski, pis’ma, spravki otdelov TsK KP Ukrainy,” Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads’kykh ob’iednan’ Ukrainy (TsDAHO), f. 1, op. 31, d. 2562, ll. 134–38.

39. For materials related to the decree, “O bor’be s vrazhdebnoi propadandoi,” see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 5, op. 33, d. 106. For references to the importance of developing television as a means of protecting the population from enemy radio, see *ibid.*, l. 26. Khrushchev also mentioned television development in these terms at an April 1963 meeting of the Central Committee Presidium. See A. A. Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS, 1954–1964: Chernouye protokol’nye zapisi zasedanii, stenogrammy, postanovleniia* (Moscow, 2003), 714.

40. According to Firsov, Khrushchev was greatly concerned about the possibility of hostile outsiders seizing the airwaves. Within a few days of Khrushchev’s return, Firsov reports, a new security system (with guards and identification cards) was introduced at all of the country’s television stations. B. M. Firsov, interview, St. Petersburg, June 2002. It is interesting to note that Mikhail Kharlamov, head of Gosteleradio from 1962 to 1964 (and a close associate of the Khrushchev family) accompanied Khrushchev on his 1959 trip to the United States. Pierre Salinger, John F. Kennedy’s press secretary, told a *Washington Post* reporter in 1962 that he believed Kharlamov’s appointment was one reason for what he

Iakovlev, linked the attention to television around 1960 to the development of satellite technology and concerns that it would soon bring a foreign television invasion. Once scientists determined there would be no way to wall off the population entirely from satellite broadcasting, he wrote, the center decided the best defense was a good offense, in the form of better, Soviet-made programming.⁴¹

In 1960, the Central Committee issued its first major statement on television in a decree unusual both for its harsh tone and for the publicity that attended its release.⁴² A scorching critique of television's quality, the decree laid blame on staff, whom it accused of rank incompetence, and on local officials, who, it said, had failed to monitor and nurture the new medium. The pot calling the kettle black? In a sense, yes: many local officials had shown more interest in television by 1960 than their counterparts in Moscow. But in fact, local and central authorities took quite similar approaches. Both groups had been interested in the new technology primarily as a symbol (of regional status, of Soviet modernity) and so had set great store on numbers (of sets, stations, staff, programming hours). The fact is, getting involved in the day-to-day business of broadcasting—not simply building, but using television—never ranked high on either group's list of priorities.

Television and the Soviet Tradition of Political Communication

We may marvel at the reluctance of professional propagandists to seize on television, but we should remember that they did not come to the medium empty-handed. On the contrary, party secretaries from Tomsk to Tashkent, First Secretary Khrushchev included, came armed with a powerful tradition and an extensive apparatus devoted to direct oral agitation—lectures, rallies, question-and-answer sessions, and so on.⁴³ By comparison, television and all mass media are anonymous, fluid means of conveying messages. An individual watching television, listening to the radio, or reading the press can easily “tune out”—fall asleep, flip the dial, use the paper to roll cigarettes. But as sociologist Alex Inkeles noted in his classic

called the “Soviet TV boom.” Salinger had recently returned from discussions on cultural exchange in the USSR. Laurence Laurent, “Soviet TV Boom at Familiar Stage,” *Washington Post*, 18 June 1962.

41. Aleksandr Iakovlev, *Omut pamiati* (Moscow, 2001), 142.

42. For the text of the decree, “O dal’neishem razvitii sovetskogo teledeniia,” see L. S. Klimanova, ed., *O partiinoi i sovetskoi pechati, radioveshchani i teledenii* (Moscow, 1972), 536–41. According to Mark Koenig, in the post-Stalinist era, only two other Central Committee decrees on propaganda rivaled the 1960 decree for the amount of publicity that attended their publication (decrees concerning ideology issued in May 1979 and July 1983). Mark Koenig, “Media and Reform: The Case of Youth Programming on Soviet Television (1955–1990)” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1995), 93.

43. Although agitation is technically different from propaganda (propaganda delivers many ideas to a few people, agitation communicates a few ideas to the masses), I follow Kenéz’s lead in *Birth of the Propaganda State* and use the terms interchangeably. For a discussion of the tensions between the Soviet propaganda tradition and broadcast technologies, see Mickiewicz, *Split Signals*, esp. chap. 5.

study of public opinion in the Stalinist era, the physical presence of an agitator has distinct advantages: it “gives the party additional assurance that its message will get across” and eliminates the need for complicated research techniques; direct agitation also means that “the audience does not have to be attracted or mobilized to act—since the agitator comes to the audience, and not the other way around.”⁴⁴ It was common Soviet practice to combine methods of communication (in organized radio listening, for example) and theoretically, at least, the personal contact with a skillful agitator, plus peer pressure, would reduce the risk of audiences disengaging. In reality, plenty of people “tuned out” all the same. Party and Komsomol workers knew this. Yet they demonstrated an enduring preference for the older methods, as *Kommunist* complained in 1959: “To some people, reading a lecture on television seems not a terribly important affair, while appearing in a hall seating 300–500 people seems so much more responsible: after all, you can count how many people were there and how many questions were asked.”⁴⁵

Kommunist blamed the force of “habit” for the “bean-counting” approach, but there was more to it than that. The persistent orientation toward direct agitation and group settings was rooted in party elites’ traditional attitudes: their doubt of rank-and-file Soviets’ ability to understand political messages, their suspicion of individual rather than group activities, and their trust in monitoring, measuring, and controlling. It also made good career sense. In the mid-1960s, central Komsomol authorities were still urging local leaders to take an interest, calling on them to “transform the youth divisions of radio and television into their direct organs.”⁴⁶ Yet as Stephen Solnick has most recently elucidated, focusing on an increase in the membership rolls or in attendance at mass rallies was the safest route to career advancement for aspiring young *apparatchiki*, in the center and the regions alike.⁴⁷ Why involve oneself with television—potentially explosive or just plain embarrassing—when a meeting would do?

The Central Committee’s 1960 decree made a point of ordering local officials to appear more regularly on television, and this order was repeated in 1962.⁴⁸ But one year later, an assessment team found that Kharkov’s leaders had such a “bad attitude” toward television that the local station had even struggled to find someone who would speak on the

44. Alex Inkeles, *Public Opinion in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 122.

45. G. Kazakov, “Televidenie—moguuchee sredstvo kommunisticheskogo vospitaniia,” *Kommunist*, 1959, no. 8: 68.

46. One practical suggestion was to include radio and television *redaktory* (editors) in the ranks of their nomenklatura. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 1M, op. 32, d. 1168, l. 21.

47. See Stephen Solnick, *Stealing the State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), esp. chap. 4.

48. In addition, every television studio was to “regularly broadcast at a set day and time a program with answers to questions from the population by leaders from the ministries and administrations, as well as local party, Soviet, and social organizations, and people’s deputies.” Klimanova, *O partiinnoi i sovetskoi pechati*, 539. For the text of the 1962 decree, which also covered radio, see *ibid.*, 542–48.

forty-fifth anniversary of socialist Ukraine. Some people, like the secretary in charge of propaganda for the region, admitted to auditors that they were "afraid to go on the air,"⁴⁹ while in other cases, political figures found themselves butting heads with television staff over issues of style and presentation. Journalist G. V. Kuznetsov recalled one such clash with the minister of the press who was to make a taped appearance on his program, a weekly news magazine, in the mid-1960s. Kuznetsov first tried to convince the minister that it would make for better television if he agreed to be interviewed about his topic, an international book fair, than if he simply lectured. The minister balked and commanded that the camera operator begin shooting. Kuznetsov recalled: "He took out a volume of Lenin's works from his bag, raised it to the level of his face, and started lecturing. He then put the book on the table and bent over for the next one, disappearing from the frame. There were a lot of books. The camera operator barely managed to change the tapes."⁵⁰

Holding forth with volume 5 of Lenin's collected works half-obscuring your face was neither a stylish nor an effective mode of presentation in the eyes of Soviet television's newly minted professionals. It was a political style, all the same, and the one with which most Soviet authorities felt comfortable. Television broadcasting put them, like all political elites at the time, on unfamiliar terrain and demanded they adapt. By the mid-1960s, a Soviet minister may have grudgingly accepted the necessity of a televised appearance; indeed, he may have even given rousing lectures, in person, about the importance of television in political education. But he was not about to abandon his bag of Lenin for a tête-à-tête with a journalist or take advice on how to pitch his message. Paradoxically, for all the investment it attracted and the energy directed toward its development, Soviet political elites remained ambivalent about television; when it came to their *personal* involvement, they kept it at arm's length, and there was very little incentive for them to bring it closer. In the world of Soviet political communication, television was, in many respects, a second-class citizen.

Television and Soviet Culture's "Table of Ranks"

If the Soviet propaganda tradition was one factor in television's paradoxical position, another was its relationship to the idea of art and, more specifically, to Soviet cultural elites. As was the case in other countries, early television in the USSR was on uneasy footing with the performing arts and cinema. On the one hand, television relied on them for content, and won

49. "Sokrashchennaia stenogramma zasedaniia kollegi Gosudarstvennogo Komiteta Soveta Ministrov SSSR po radioveshchaniu i televideniiu," TsGAVO, f. 4915, op. 1, d. 3430, l. 34.

50. The story had an unhappy ending for Kuznetsov, who decided to scrap the minister's tape and run his own commentary. Although the head of the Goskomitet had authorized the change, he was powerless to protect Kuznetsov's job when his party superiors objected. Kuznetsov was banished from on-air appearances for six months. G. V. Kuznetsov, "Zapiski lishnego cheloveka," in Ia. N. Zasurskii, ed., *Televizionnaia mozaika* (Moscow, 1997), 38–39.

praise precisely for that. Television was “aesthetic education’s most widespread and flexible instrument . . . a powerful tool for the propaganda of the beautiful,” glowed *Kommunist* in 1965.⁵¹ Yet throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, people who worked in television complained of being snubbed by the creative establishment and forced to feed the air with second-rate productions. Celebrated comedian Igor Il’inskii was unusual in taking a strong stance against this resistance to the medium on the pages of *Literaturnaia gazeta*: “How can we give the people the worst examples of art instead of the best and . . . disseminate them to a huge audience?” he browbeat fellow artists. “Who are we, after all? Business people, or policymakers?”⁵²

Part of the problem, as Il’inskii noted, was hostility to competition. In the film industry, some people cast a worried eye toward the United States and Europe, where television’s rise was often followed by drastic declines in ticket sales. As early as 1951, when there were only three studios operating in the country, the Ministry of Cinematography lobbied to limit television to broadcasts of documentary films and cartoons—in effect, banning feature films from television.⁵³ The campaign was unsuccessful, and the concerns did not go away. In 1966, screenwriter E. V. Braginskii told an audience of his peers: “When people say, ‘It does not matter, the viewer will always go to the movies,’ I feel like sending a telegram to television saluting them for doing a bad job, and people still do go. . . . But if they start to present more talented programming, we will be completely out of work.”⁵⁴ Many theater managers had similar concerns and experimented with strategies for self-defense. In Kharbarovsk, for instance, one theater decided it would only open its doors to television cameras if the local station agreed to buy up any empty seats in the house.⁵⁵ And even the Bolshoi Theater for a time limited broadcasts to performances by visiting foreign companies. Central television countered by inviting Bolshoi talent to perform in its Moscow studios.⁵⁶

Protective policies such as these won sharp official rebukes, and most were short-lived.⁵⁷ By western standards, Soviet television’s access to re-

51. A. Iakovlev, “Televidenie: Problemy, perspektivy,” *Kommunist*, 1965, no. 13: 74.

52. Igor Il’inskii, “Razmyshleniia u televizora,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 12 May 1956, 1.

53. “Proekt postanovleniia Soveta Ministrov SSSR ‘O merakh pomoshchi Ministerstvu kinematografii SSSR po vypolneniiu plana dokhodov ot kino,’” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 133, d. 339, ll. 75–77.

54. “Stenogramma zasedaniia pervogo plenuma Vsesoiuznoi komissii kinoprokata ot 23 noiabria 1966 g.,” Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i isskustva (RGALI), f. 2936, op. 4, d. 1308, l. 93. In point of fact, film attendance did decline in the USSR as elsewhere in the world with the spread of television technology. The statistical high-water mark for attendance was 1968. M. Zhabskii, *Kino: Prokat, reklama, metodika, praktika* (Moscow, 1982), 16.

55. Norman Sklarewitz, “Themes and Variations: TV—Soviet Style,” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 September 1964.

56. For the Goskomitet’s letter protesting the Bolshoi’s policy in 1958, see “Spravka o propagande opernykh proizvedenii po radioveshchaniiu i televideniiu,” GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 542, l. 49.

57. The Central Committee’s 1960 decree addressed this problem and directed the film industry and administrators in theater, music, and sports to cooperate with televi-

cently released films was remarkable (with waiting periods between theatrical release and broadcast as short as one month) and, in the 1960s, it was also possible for a regional studio (Riga) to broadcast a city's *entire* theater repertoire. Still, there remained an implicit hierarchy in Soviet culture—a “table of ranks” as *Kommunist* put it, alluding to the hidebound tsarist bureaucracy. Television, the upstart, ranked low.⁵⁸ Many established creative professionals continued to approach the new medium with indifference, condescension, or even light contempt—attitudes shared, as we have seen, by many in the party elite.⁵⁹ Television's association with radio, also low in the cultural ranks, did not help.⁶⁰ But its status also had something to do with two factors unique to the medium: the nature of television production as a cultural milieu and of television consumption as an activity.

Early Soviet television was in many respects the terrain of young creative intellectuals *manqués*—self-described “dilettantes” and “losers.”⁶¹ In the 1950s, most people educated to be theater and film directors, actors, journalists, cameramen and the like did not go into television if they had a choice of employment. Established professionals in these fields, although they might (and did) participate as guests, rarely moved to television. One important reason was no doubt television's extremely low pay scale compared to other spheres (a sure sign of its lowly status).⁶² Televi-

sion. Later that year, however, the Goskomitet complained to the Central Committee that many local organizations were still refusing to comply with requests from the television studios. “Pis'ma v TsK KPSS i SM SSSR o rabote Goskomiteta po radioveshchaniiu i televideniiu,” GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 623, l. 148. According to the editor in charge of programming for literature and drama in the 1960s, many Moscow theaters were still refusing to cooperate at the end of the decade. V. N. Kozlovskii, interview, Gosteleradiofond Oral History Project, Moscow, February 2002.

58. Iakovlev, “Televidenie,” 71.

59. Notable cultures figures, such as Kornei Chukovskii and Iraklii Andronnikov, did participate in Soviet television programming right from the start. But, particularly in the 1950s, they were the exception rather than the rule. For Andronnikov's views, see Iraklii Andronnikov and Manana Andronnikova, “Zametki o televidenii,” *Iskusstvo kino*, 1963, no. 2: 98–102. The Andronnikovs' essay was part of an unusual series in *Iskusstvo kino* on television's relationship to theater and cinema.

60. As many commentators have observed, it is quite common for new media to struggle to establish their cultural legitimacy. In the Soviet context, cinema won the right to call itself “art” as early as the 1920s, thanks to the support of Bolshevik leaders, especially Lenin, and to a complicated campaign of self-promotion. See Ian Christie, “Canons and Careers: The Director in Soviet Cinema,” in Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, eds., *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (London, 1993), 142–70. Although radio also enjoyed official support in the USSR, its enthusiastic workers were far less successful in promoting radio broadcasting as artistry. See T. Marchenko, *Radiotear* (Moscow, 1970); A. A. Sherel', *Audiokultura XX veka* (Moscow, 2004).

61. See, for example, Rudol'f Boretskii's comments in A. Iu. Rozov, ed., *Shabolovka*, 53: *Stranitsy istorii televideniia* (Moscow, 1988), 148–58.

62. Low rates of pay applied to freelancers as well as staff, making it difficult to attract talented outsiders. See “Pis'ma v TsK KPSS i SM SSSR o rabote Goskomiteta po radioveshchaniiu i televideniiu,” GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 542, ll. 1–4, for letters from the Goskomitet pleading to the Central Committee to raise the rates in 1958. E. V. Beliaeva, host of the classical music program *Muzykal'nyi kiosk*, reported she was paid four rubles per show plus five rubles per script in the 1960s. E. V. Beliaeva, interview, Gosteleradiofond Oral History Project Interview, Moscow, 2002.

sion's young workers were often forced to be jacks-of-all-trades as a result; the same person might write and edit the script, design and construct the scenery, and shoot the program or read the voice-over. This rough-and-ready environment made for an exciting workplace, but it also led to a lot of rough-and-ready broadcasts and, unsurprisingly, to the continuing derision of many creative professionals.

In the long run, Soviet television did find a partial solution to its prestige problem by improving its performance. With the professionalization of its staff and technological advances (especially video), television was able to develop its own program genres and win a measure of cultural clout.⁶³ But arguably television never broke through to the top of Soviet culture's "table of ranks."⁶⁴ Genre filmmaking met a similar fate; there was little to be gained, in financial or social capital, from producing a box-office hit seen as frivolous. Yet even a genre filmmaker was an *artist* in the Soviet context; a movie faulted for frivolity was failed *art*. A journalist for a mass-circulation newspaper, too, while not producing art on a daily basis, per se, was a writer and perhaps had a major work, a *book*, on the way. Television, despite a clamorous campaign on the part of its enthusiasts, was rarely acknowledged as art—the highest honor. It was, on the contrary, rapidly assigned to the realm of *byt*: everyday, domestic life but also, and significantly, everyday personal needs and desires. This association with *byt* played a crucial role in establishing television's status in Soviet culture and helps further clarify the ambivalence with which party and cultural elites approached the new medium.

Television and Byt

Although statistically speaking, it was not until 1970 that a majority of Soviet homes had a television set, Soviet journalists began referring to television as a vital mass phenomenon years before.⁶⁵ As early as 1956–1957, press accounts routinely used the term *necessity* for the new medium and made the phrase "television immediately became a part of everyday life" (*televidenie srazu voshlo v byt*) an instant cliché. For the central press, this was, perhaps, understandable: any phenomenon that touches the city where a newspaper is published, and especially one that concerns its

63. Video technology was not widely available in the USSR until the 1970s. Professional training for television dates to 1958, with courses at the Journalism Faculty of Moscow State University. Iurovskii, *Televidenie*, 109. For a discussion of professionalization, see Koenig, "Media and Reform." For some of the implications of video for Soviet television, see Roth-Ey, "Mass Media and the Remaking of Soviet Culture," chap. 5.

64. Sergei Lapin, the new head of Gosteleradio beginning in 1970, took important administrative measures to raise the status of television in the Soviet cultural system—measures that went along with the shift in official status. Lapin, it is said, had an especially close working relationship with Brezhnev and was thus able to ensure that no real criticism of television made it into the press. Under his tenure, television professionals were decorated with state honors (such as People's Artist of the USSR) for the first time. For a discussion of the Lapin era, see the roundtable sponsored by the journal *Zhurnal*ist, "Zapreshchaetsia zaplyvat' dal'she vsekhi!" *Zhurnal*ist, 1988, no. 8: 24–29; *Ocherki po istorii rossiiskogo televideniia* (Moscow, 1999), 155–238.

65. Firsov, *Puti razvitiia*, 111.

elites, is typically bigger “news” than what happens in peripheral regions. (We can imagine that many editors and their friends in Moscow were buying *their* first television sets around that time.) But *Literaturnaia gazeta* also labeled television in faraway Vladivostok “a fact of everyday life” in 1957. The central press delighted in reports of television in distant regions and unlikely places—atop an ice floe, for example, or on a shipping vessel, or with a family on a picnic.⁶⁶ And local papers ran articles and letters testifying to television’s importance as well. Often, as in the report from Vladivostok, the press backed up consumers frustrated with the state of the technology and demanding action. One group of viewers from Magnitogorsk complained that the construction of the local television center had “really been dragging on too long. Please tell us when we will finally get the opportunity to relax in a cultured manner in a domestic setting in front of the television set?”⁶⁷ A viewer from Kirov wrote: “Some time ago, we were reconciled to our position as ‘provincials.’ But we don’t want to reconcile ourselves any longer because times have changed many things. The lives of millions of workers who live in distant cities and regions can be just as rich and full as those of Muscovites: there is television, and there is film stock. The only thing we cannot understand is why don’t they use it to film the best performers and companies?”⁶⁸

Although not a part of everyday life for most people in a literal sense, television did enter Soviet official culture and the realm of cliché with remarkable speed and a distinctive cast. The cast was domestic and demanding. When the press had television travel to remarkable places like ice floes, the “hook” for the story was the very incongruity of the locale: television was understood to be an essentially home-based phenomenon. It was also presented as something that took over the domestic world in an elemental and somehow urgent way.⁶⁹ Vladimir Sappak, the era’s most influential television critic, described its power in a lyrical, almost mystical light:

It is often difficult to tear ourselves away from that tiny little screen. Why this is so, even we cannot really explain. If I turn on the television by chance and see that there is a movie or a theatrical performance on, I can turn it off right away with a fearless hand, as they say. But all it takes is for me to see those announcers we all know so well now reading the news, or a soccer field with bustling players, an English lesson, or kids in white shirts and pioneer scarves reciting poetry written for the occasion in

66. *Izvestiia*, 27 November 1957, 4; “Televizory v more,” *Ogonek*, 1959, no. 20; “S televizorom v automobile,” *Ogonek*, 1965, no. 25.

67. *Magnitogorskii rabochii*, 10 December 1961, in GARF, f. 6903, op. 3, d. 175, l. 7.

68. *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 4 January 1962, in GARF, f. 6903, op. 3, d. 175, l. 19.

69. In this connection, it is interesting to note that television sets were often given pride of place in a corner near the window—the best spot in a room, according to Soviet standards. See, for example, the images in “V meblirovannye kvartiry,” *Ogonek*, 1960, no. 24. Svetlana Boym argues that the corner location, coupled with the tendency to drape the sets with lacey cloths, indicates that they had taken the place of icons in traditional Slavic dwellings. S. Boym, “Everyday Culture,” in Dmitri N. Shalin, ed., *Russian Culture at the Crossroads* (Boulder, Colo., 1996), 174. I am grateful to Susan Reid for sharing her observations about television sets and Soviet home décor.

their ringing voices, and my hand involuntarily hesitates on the off switch. Here [is a place] where you can look at any time and, without thoroughly investigating the heart of the matter; you can just observe the *movement of life* for a moment, and let the idler inside you wake up and gawk at how the birds are flying, how the grass is growing. . . . And your hand will not make a move to stop this living life on the screen, to turn it off, to cut it short.⁷⁰

As depicted here, the television set is a forceful and, one might say, intoxicating presence in the home. With its ability to convey “the movement of life,” the tiny screen takes on the qualities of a dynamic being; television itself is alive. Another of the era’s most influential voices on television, Sergei Muratov, cast the medium in a more ironic and vaguely threatening light: “Once you have acquired a ‘Rubin’ or a ‘Temp’ [a ‘Ruby’ or a ‘Tempo’ brand set], you very quickly start to notice that the tempo of your life . . . has changed in a fundamental way. And you can hardly estimate the loss of time in rubies. The blue screen dictates its terms and imposes its programming. *You thought it belonged to you, but, in fact, you belong to it.*”⁷¹

In the pages of the contemporary press, the television set was seen as a commanding presence; while viewers themselves were often represented as demanding and needy: complaints about faulty sets and boring or slapdash programming were never-ending.⁷² Soviet media had a long history of airing consumer grievances, and there was also a particular surge in the genre under Khrushchev.⁷³ But television was not just an industrial product (a set), but a complex of cultural products (programming) and a sociological phenomenon to boot (television watching). These were complaints and demands of a different order. Soviet media had consistently portrayed television as a “necessity” with the power to change people’s lives.⁷⁴ Once consumers became viewers, they refused to “make peace” with the privations of their pre-television lives any longer.

If television—good television—was suddenly a necessity of daily life, it was also something the viewer had earned through hard work. In this sense, television viewing was something quite close to a right, as in the aphorism “the Soviet person has the right to relax in front of the televi-

70. V. Sappak, *Televidenie i my* (Moscow, 1962), 42; emphasis in the original.

71. Sergei Muratov and Georgii Fere, “Telepanorama—Oktiabr’,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, 4 November 1965, 3; my emphasis.

72. One 1957 article made the point—twice—by promising that a new set “fully meets the demands of the demanding TV viewer.” “Vas vidiat i slyshat milliony,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, 18 June 1957. Another report on new sets from 1961 described a love for new products as “wholly natural” because each new product offered the consumer “greater convenience and more fully satisfies his needs.” “Novye tovary dlia sovetskogo cheloveka,” *Ekonomicheskaiia gazeta*, 7 August 1961, 39.

73. See Susan E. Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 211–52.

74. Radio, too, might be called a “necessity,” but it was not a new technology and did not figure in the culture as *life changing* in the same manner as television. Also, there were far fewer complaints about radio (sets and programming), and so the radio listener was less often portrayed as abused and demanding.

sion after a day's work," attributed to none other than Leonid Brezhnev.⁷⁵ At times, official Soviet culture was capable of acknowledging the joys of an evening alone ensconced in one's easy chair.

The whistle blows. Your working day is over. The day's labor is finished, and the evening's relaxation begins. People usually say: cinemas and theaters are open to you, parks of culture and dance pavilions are at your disposal, exhibits and libraries are there for you. To this stock phrase I would add: six to eight hours of television programming awaits you.

At work you were stern and reserved, but now you will laugh like a child; during the day you were restrained and tense, but in the evening, by the television set, you will abandon yourself to having a pleasant time. All in all you are going to have a glorious time, a 100 percent time, as they say.⁷⁶

In this vision, the viewer is alone in his own world and awash in his own pleasure.⁷⁷ This is television as a retreat into *byt*, or everyday home life. Note that the content of the programming is not clear and not terribly important: it is the medium of television itself that generates these remarkable effects. And what distinguishes the medium most of all is its location in the home; being at home is what facilitates the transformation of an active Soviet person into a passive and childlike viewer, from a worker into what Soviet media derided in other contexts as a person enmeshed in *byt* (*obyvatel'*). But in a context that privileged the notion of well-earned relaxation (*otdykh*), there was at least some room as well for a celebration of something very like a Soviet "couch potato."

Although the right to *otdykh* was not a new concept in Soviet culture, it did take on new forms and gain momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, thanks in part to official reductions in working time and to the post-Stalinist revival of sociological research. Soviet consumers had long cited their right to *otdykh* in appeals for more "light" music on radio and more comedies and musicals at the movies. But television as *otdykh* was different, because in the Soviet context, "watching television" carried distinctive connotations. "Going to the movies" was in step with the traditional ideal of *otdykh* as something collective, active, and educational. There was a history of people attending movies in organized groups from their workplaces. "Watching television," by comparison, while it certainly denoted aesthetic and other forms of education, also implied isolation and passivity; this was an activity that required no one else and no particular engagement with the physical world (no travel, no planning); a solitary viewer simply switched on the set at home and sat down. Somewhere in between "going to the movies" and "watching television" stood "listening to the radio." While it might entail passive reception, like television, radio did not demand stasis, in that people often performed other activities

75. *Ocherki po istorii rossiiskogo televideniia*, 143.

76. The article goes on in a humorous tone to calculate the actual enjoyment factor of evening programming on television at "6–7 percent." Viktor Slavkin, "Sem' protsentov vesel'ia," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 9 September 1965, 3.

77. I use "his" advisedly, considering the wide disparity in television viewership rates for men and women in the USSR discussed below.

while they listened, and it was also strongly associated with dancing, a social activity much like movie going.⁷⁸

For Soviet sociologists studying *otdykh*, the question was how “rational” and “cultured” people were in budgeting their free time, and the findings, to their minds, were often discouraging. A large-scale 1965 survey of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* readers concluded that there was “still a segment of the population with an undeveloped culture of leisure, insufficiently developed tastes and desires, and inadequate knowledge of how to organize their free time.”⁷⁹ These were people who shied away from such activities as concert- and museum-going, amateur arts, reading, and sports. Other studies found that it was these people—people identified as having immature tastes—who logged the most hours in front of their television sets. In Leningrad, where roughly 85 percent of families had a set by the mid to late 1960s, sociologist Boris Firsov created a typology of viewership, identifying four distinct groups of viewers based on how much they watched. The most important factor distinguishing the top of the scale, an impressive twenty-seven hours per week, from the bottom, a more moderate three, was education: the lower the educational level, Firsov found, the more hours in front of the set.⁸⁰ Gender was an important secondary factor, as there were many more men than women among the enthusiastic viewers.⁸¹ Subsequent studies found rural residents to be the most active viewers of all, despite the lower density of television sets in the countryside. Overall, 1970s research showed rates of viewership steadily on the rise for all groups.⁸²

Soviet sociologists were not anti-television, but they did object to what they saw as excessive interest in the medium, which was connected directly, in their eyes, to the “insufficient development of a person’s cultural needs.”⁸³ The paradox of Soviet television is that in its programming, it was oriented toward developing precisely those needs—uplifting its audiences culturally and propagandizing all of the “rational” leisure-time activities—and also providing a broadcast version of many of them; Soviet

78. There is an interesting distinction to be drawn here between the way “television-watching” figured in the culture conceptually and the way it functioned as an actual social practice. In point of fact, in the USSR at this time, most people watched television in groups (as was true of early television the world over). Nonetheless, in press accounts, “television-watching” very often figured as a solitary, isolating pastime.

79. “Kak vy provodite svobodnoe vremia,” *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 24 February 1966, 1.

80. Firsov identified the four groups as “highly moderate,” “moderate,” “enthusiastic,” and “highly enthusiastic.” The first group, about one-third of the total in his estimation, watched up to three hours of television per week, while the second group of roughly the same size, watched from three to ten hours. The “enthusiastic” groups, on the other hand, spent from ten to twenty-seven hours per week (with the top group, 16.5 percent of the total, logging fifteen to twenty-seven). Firsov, *Televidenie*, 118–19. This is the same Boris Firsov who headed up the Leningrad Studio in the 1960s.

81. Other studies from the period confirmed the gender gap. A study of viewers in Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporozh'e, Odessa, and Kostroma found that men watched eleven hours per week on average, while women watched only six. Firsov, *Puti razvitiia*, 118.

82. Mickiewicz, *Media and the Russian Public*, 19–23.

83. Firsov, *Televidenie*, 124.

Споров больше не будет.

Рисунок И. Массины.

Figure 1. "No more arguments." From *Ogonek*, 1960, no. 34.

television transported its viewers to the activities, sat them down in countless concert halls, theaters, sports arenas, and so on. But although television brought culture to the masses and exhorted active participation in cultural and social life away from the set, it did not, of course, require it. Television participated in a discourse about the traditional ideals of *otdykh* while at the same time challenging this discourse as a social practice.

The status of television in the broader official culture was thus mutable and ambiguous. Many clearly considered television watching to be an individual and comparatively easy, or even lazy, form of leisure. Print media poked fun at and sometimes criticized the television-obsessed. One columnist joked that archeologists a thousand years in the future would discover evidence of "the hypnosis of television" and conclude that it was a "religious ritual" for people of the twentieth century.⁸⁴ In cartoon images from the mass magazine *Ogonek*, people watching television are often alone in a space, or unaware of others around them. One cartoon, for example, shows a man and woman sitting akimbo and watching two sawed-off halves of a single set in an image that emphasizes the solitary character of television watching (figure 1). Cartoonists showed viewers—always male, in this case—so relaxed as to be sleeping—but they also showed

84. V. Slavkin, "Chto by my delali bez televideniia?" *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 11 November 1965, 4.

Figure 2. "Before we got the television, my husband suffered from chronic insomnia." From *Ogonek*, 1959, no. 1.

viewers of all kinds enraptured before the set (figure 2). Numerous cartoons represented television watchers as so wholly absorbed in the screen image that they fail to notice something important happening around them. One depicts two happy thieves who have outwitted a guard by giving him a television set; with him hypnotized by the screen image, they can slip past to rob a storehouse (figure 3). Another pictures a family crowded around the set oblivious to the water flooding their room from an overflowing sink in the distance; on screen: an image of a sinking ship (figure 4). On occasion, the press would even print photographs of people with their backs to their new sets, an interesting iconography that manages to celebrate the arrival of the technology in the home while subtly emphasizing people's independence from it.

— Это была гениальная
мысль — подарить старику те-
левизор.

Рисунок Б. Боссарта.

Figure 3. "It was a stroke of genius to give the old man a television." From *Ogonek*, 1965, no. 36.

In the late 1960s, the press began to offer darker representations of television, speaking of its "hypnotic effect" and the problem of "TV-gluttons," or people who watched indiscriminately (a particular worry about children). The most sinister images were of television in the west, which often picked up on and amplified western critiques of the medium. One example, a 1969 piece headed "The Home Screen: Friend or Foe?" described an "uncontrollable 'information explosion' that is steadily pushing people to critical stages of stress" and encouraging a "defensive reaction" of retreat into private life. "In the conditions of capitalism, the revolution in communications media . . . strengthens the alienation between members of an antagonistic society and the estrangement of the individual," warned the author.⁸⁵ But there is reason to wonder how effective critiques such as these were in quarantining problems to the west, or

85. Iu. Sheinin, "Domashnii ekran: Drug ili vrag?" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 29 January 1969, 8. Another critic posed the question thus: "Television: relaxation from work or from thinking?" Georgii Fere, *Tovarishch TV* (Moscow, 1974), 14.

Без слов.

Рисунок Б. Боссарта.

Figure 4. "No comment." From *Ogonek*, 1966, no. 22.

if, indeed, that was their objective. It seems likely that for at least some authors, this was also an effective method to introduce Soviet audiences to critical thinking about the medium in general. "The Home Screen," although ostensibly about the west, was accompanied by an image of *Soviet* television (a photograph of a soundstage at Ostankino).⁸⁶

The relevance of these examples lies less in whether there was a code in use than in the end result: the circulation of a critical vocabulary about television inside Soviet culture which, while never dominant, was influential, and especially with regard to children. Discussions of "television-addiction" in the Soviet context took pains to point out that it was only the uneducated and unprepared—a category that included children—who were in any real danger; the solution was to develop people's cultural interests more broadly and to teach them how to watch selectively.⁸⁷ Press

86. Similarly, Firsov's pioneering sociological study featured a ringing endorsement of "humanist" Soviet television but also managed to familiarize readers with contemporary critiques of television via a discussion of western media sociology. Firsov also took an entire chapter to dispute the existence of *telemania* in the USSR. Firsov, *Televidenie*, chaps. 2–5; for the discussion of "telemania," see chap. 10.

87. See G. Galochkina, ed., *Televidenie priglasiaet detei* (Moscow, 1976); V. S. Korobeinikov told readers that doctors had determined it was harmful to watch television after "intense emotional activity," especially for children; children also suffered, he said, from "immoderate, unsystematic television watching" in general. V. S. Korobeinikov, *Goluboi*

reports offered examples of parents who "saved their children from the captivity of television" by force of example and planning.⁸⁸ And in a general sense, all viewers, not only children, were encouraged to be active, discriminating, and well-organized in their relationship to television—to make television watching a "rational" form of *otdykh*, in effect. *Pravda* quoted a collective farm worker declaring: "It's a good gadget, a television set, but it's better [to watch] with another person," because that way, people can discuss what they see.⁸⁹ By promoting collective and engaged viewership, official culture worked to inscribe the new medium into traditional ideals of Soviet sociability and *otdykh*.

Television Technology and the Cold War Home

If a home-based medium presented such an obvious challenge to traditional ideals, how did television find itself in the Soviet home to begin with? After all, as Raymond Williams stressed in his study of television's development in the west, there is nothing inherently domestic about the technology itself.⁹⁰ There was nothing to stop the USSR from establishing a system of public viewership, as had been the case in Nazi Germany, for example, and as television companies pursued for a time in postwar Japan.⁹¹ The evidence for the Soviets' plans is mixed. Although Soviet industry produced very few sets in the prewar period, they included sets de-

charodei: Televidenie i sotsial'naiia sistema (Moscow, 1975), 125; V. Zhuravleva and G. Al'tov, "Sila telepritiiazhennia," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 29 May 1965, 1. Cinema's effects on children had aroused similar fears in the 1920s.

88. Korobeinikov, *Goluboi charodei*, 128. The research division of the Goskomitet also expressed concerns about television's effects on young viewers. In a 1966 report, researchers cited recommendations from the Institute of Hygiene that schoolchildren be limited to one hour of television a day on no more than three days per week. They also noted that researchers in capitalist and socialist countries had established that it was best for children to watch programs designed specially for them according to a strict schedule. Because Soviet television did not follow a strict schedule, they argued, it threatened their health. GARF, f. 6903, op. 3, d. 343, ll. 6–10.

89. Iu. Koginov, "Krest'ianin vernul'sia s raboty," *Pravda*, 2 January 1967, 2.

90. For Williams's argument about the domestic location of television in the west, see Williams, *Television*, 17–25. See also Mickiewicz, *Media and the Russian Public*, 40. Although it is hard to imagine now, in the 1930s and 1940s, there were many people, even in the United States and Great Britain, who had doubts about whether television was suited to home use. Some assumed that television would be too expensive to reach a truly mass audience, while others looked at the tremendous popularity of radio and assumed television could not compete. Others considered the tiny screen of the home set a problem and imagined television's future in theaters specially equipped with projection screens. Anthony Smith, ed., *Television: An International History* (Oxford, 1995), 110.

91. The decision to locate television in public spaces was a source of inter-ministerial conflict in Nazi Germany. See William Uricchio, "Television as History: Representations of German Television Broadcasting, 1935–1944," in Bruce Murray and Christopher Wickham, eds., *Framing the Past: The Historiography of German Cinema and Television* (Carbondale, 1992), 167–96. In Japan in the 1950s, the nascent industry put television sets in hundreds of outdoor locations. Upwards of 9,000 people gathered in front of these sets at any given time; throughout the 1950s, these sets were the Japanese people's main exposure to television. See Shunya Yoshimi, "Television and Nationalism: Historical Change in the National Domestic TV Formation of Postwar Japan," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 4 (2003): 459–87.

signed for both home use *and* public settings, like workers' clubs.⁹² In the 1950s and 1960s, there were many public sites for television watching in Soviet cities, from clubs to parks, from museums to children's homes.⁹³ When television came to the countryside, it was very often in the form of group viewings, sometimes organized by traveling brigades from regional studios. Television workers from Tomsk and Kiev, for instance, went on the road in the 1950s to "propagandize" the new medium to skeptical *kolkhozniki*, and Tomsk television was also running what it called "collective auditoriums of television-viewers" in town, sometimes for a fee. The Tomsk studio head told colleagues in Moscow that there were now "fewer amoral acts and police detentions" in the railway district where they had five such auditoriums. "Seven o'clock comes around and the kids are sitting in front of the televisions."⁹⁴

In the 1950s and 1960s, then, the Soviets were clearly experimenting with forms of public television viewership, motivated by a mix of practical considerations (how to reach the most *kolkhozniki*), social concerns (how to control youth after dark), and financial interests. Given the Soviet emphasis on collective activities—an overall ideological orientation that Khrushchev was trying to reanimate at this very moment—one might have expected quite a bit more. Yet the main thrust of television's development in the postwar USSR was indisputably domestic. Soviet consumers played an important role in this dynamic, as we have seen; had it not been for their overwhelming enthusiasm, television could not have entered the home as rapidly as it did. However, this enthusiasm was authorized by a centrally planned Soviet industry that produced sets primarily for individual, rather than group, consumption and by financial incentives (pricing policies, the end to licensing fees) that made owning a set broadly accessible.

The head of Soviet television in 1956 may have rallied his staff with the idea that they were "blazing totally new trails,"⁹⁵ but of course, Soviet television was not *sui generis*. On the contrary, like all Soviet culture, television was embedded in an international context that was an essential factor in its development. It mattered, in other words, that this technology burst on the scene just as the USSR was challenging the west, and more

92. *Ocherki po istorii rossiiskogo televideniia*, 37; V. V. Egorov, *Televidenie: Teoriia i praktika* (Moscow, 1993), 7.

93. Moscow's Sokolniki Park showed television in an open-air pavilion seating 200–300 people, while a Zhdanov district park had a special hall outfitted with nine sets and charged 2 rubles at the door. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 133, d. 339, l. 75. One veteran television professional recalled his first encounter with the medium in a workers' club in 1950. "All I remember is a big room where about forty people sat in the dark attentively watching a smallish box with a magnifying lens." They were watching a theatrical performance, *Pushkin*. Rozov, ed., *Shabolovka*, 67. According to Feigelson, programs from the main channel in Moscow were often re-broadcast in rural movie theaters in the mid to late 1950s. Feigelson, *L'URSS et sa télévision*, 53.

94. For examples from the Tomsk region (1956), see GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 499, ll. 17–20. For the Kiev studio's activities, see "Stenogramma zasedaniia GURI Ministerstva Kul'tury SSSR," GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 500, l. 37 (for 1956) and "Informatsii obkomov KP Ukrainy: Po voprosu uluchsheniia razvitiia radioveshchaniia i televideniia," TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, d. 2447, ll. 28–37 (for 1960).

95. GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 499, l. 5.

particularly, the United States, in a contest over which system could best build rockets and provide a satisfying, modern lifestyle for rocket scientists and everyone else. In the iconic moment of this duel at the 1959 American Exhibition in Moscow, Richard Nixon used a gleaming “miracle kitchen” to make the case for capitalism’s superiority.⁹⁶ But television also had a role on the Kitchen Debate: no less than a refrigerator, a television set served as a powerful symbolic marker of the Cold War nexus between scientific progress and the good life. Just prior to entering the exhibition’s now famous kitchen, Nixon drew Khrushchev’s attention to a few color monitors, which reportedly irked the Soviet leader. Color television was nothing special, he insisted, adding that the USSR would soon overtake the United States economically, “waving bye-bye” along the way. While Nixon conceded that the Soviets were ahead in space technology, he pushed the point about American superiority in television technology. No, Khrushchev insisted, the United States was not more advanced there, either.⁹⁷

Khrushchev was playing fast and loose with the facts (color broadcasts, for one, were nearly a decade away), but his prickliness was indicative of a broader sensibility: from the beginning, the Soviets had identified television as *Soviet*, as Soviet as Sputnik, and the regime was not about to be outdone by the capitalist west in the development of mass communications any more than in rocket science. Home-based communications were plainly the modern, international standard in the 1950s. At this time, the Soviet home was also developing into a highly potent symbol of the regime’s commitment to raise living standards, as Khrushchev declared that every family would have an individual apartment by 1980. The Soviet press made it clear, in photo-spreads and descriptions of new housing, that these would be “modern” homes, with “modern” furniture and, pointedly, with television sets. Even planners joined in the chorus identifying domestic television as a modern staple: “normative consumption budgets” for urban families identified only two electronic appliances as essential—refrigerators and televisions.⁹⁸

Soviet culture had marked television as fundamental to a modern lifestyle and as a symbol of Soviet science’s power to deliver that lifestyle and draw together people from across the USSR. Print media had comparatively little to say about programming: newspapers did not even print daily schedules until 1959, and they were far more likely to discuss mass events, like parades, books, or even cinema than television shows. What

96. See Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen.”

97. Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 272; William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York, 2003), 416. When the exhibition was winding down, RCA, the company that had supplied the television equipment, offered to sell it at an advantageous price; the Soviets turned them down. RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 95, l. 3.

98. Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen,” 219. An internal Goskomitet report on the future of television in 1960 also promised every family a set within twenty years. GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 655, l. 17. Six years later, television sets and refrigerators were still being singled out for attention, as noted in the *New York Times*. Harry Schwartz, “Soviets Stressing TVs and Refrigerators,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1966, 35.

the press did cover was the technology—both its failings and, even more, its conquest of time and space. In articles with titles such as “Another 1,000,000 Viewers,” journalists celebrated the end to “blank spots” in the television network, as ever more regions were connected to each other and to Moscow via coaxial cables, relay stations, and, as of the mid-1960s, satellite. On 7 May, “Radio Day,” every newspaper crowed that Russia was the birthplace of broadcast technology, and the USSR, with its expertise in satellite technology, the best steward of its future development.⁹⁹ In 1967, there was a clamorous campaign celebrating the new Ostankino complex as a triumph of socialist technology and administration and “a gift of almost cosmic proportions” to the Soviet people. Awe-inspiring in size, stridently superior to all foreign competitors, and built in Moscow, as per Soviet cliché, with materials and labor from the entire country, Ostankino became synonymous with Soviet television.¹⁰⁰ As celebrated in official culture, Soviet television—millions of people in millions of rooms keeping company with glowing boxes—was an essentially collective phenomenon and an essential one as well: Soviet television proved socialism’s superiority.

Finding a Soviet Home for Television

Taken as a whole, television’s trajectory in the USSR looks like an inevitable rise—the proud product of socialist science, administrative skill, and financial commitment (or of the drive to control minds, depending on one’s perspective) symbolized by the tower at Ostankino. Yet as we have seen, television’s development was far more circuitous and chaotic than such a picture conveys. Television was pushed to the fore from different quarters and with varying and, at times, conflicting ideals. Soviet consumers showed an instant affection for the new medium, and their personal investment helped drive development. So, too, did the enthusiasm and expertise of the people who established local studios in the 1950s and early 1960s. It was local political elites and technology buffs who first put television on the map at a time when, by and large, the men in Moscow had yet to focus their attention on the medium.

99. V. Danilov, “Eshche 1,000,000 zritelei,” *Pravda*, 3 May 1968, 1; “Moguchee sredstvo kommunisticheskogo vospitaniia,” *Pravda*, 7 May 1960, 1. The “birthplace” claim refers to Russian scientist A. S. Popov, who announced his first radio broadcast in 1895. Soviet television also celebrated itself, in programs such as *25 let televideniuiu* (1964) hosted by veteran journalist Iurii Fokin and the special 1967 “Radio Day” edition of *Goluboi ogonek*.

100. R. Boretskii, “When There Are Many Channels,” *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 11 September 1965, 2–3, in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 17, no. 39 (1965): 13. Soviet media made much of the all-union nature of Ostankino, as did television’s top official at the time in his recent memoirs. N. N. Mesiatsev, *Davnoe perezhitoe* (Moscow, 2000), 27. In early 1966, Mesiatsev and others traveled to Great Britain, France, and Italy with the express purpose of comparing the Ostankino project to existing facilities there. Upon their return, they reported that Ostankino would be comparable and, in some respects (e.g., its overall broadcast capacity), superior to European television centers. “Sravnitel'naia otsenka proekta stroitel'stva obshchesoiuznogo teletsentra s zarubezhnymi teletsentrami,” RGANI, f. 5, op. 58, d. 25, ll. 23–24.

Given the Soviets' tradition of political communication, this initial ambivalence was logical. Soviet political elites also shared with established cultural elites a certain disdain for television as a cultural milieu as well as anxiety about its social effects. Once again, there is a logic to this position. Television's performance in the earliest years was, even by the judgment of its partisans, often lackluster, if not laughable. At the same time, television was understood to be a potential threat to established cultural institutions and also to the notion of cultural consumption as a socially progressive activity. Television often worked better as a symbol than as a reality. There was a definite tension in Soviet rhetoric between the celebration of the technology and the reality of its use, or between the set as gift-box of socialism and television watching as a suspiciously uncreative, selfish, and passive pastime. Television's success was haunted by the image of millions of homebound viewers, stuck in the petty personal cares of everyday life. To be sure, television watching was not the only phenomenon wound up in this anxiety over *byt*. But television was a particularly potent symbolic site for the conflicts over the idea of a Soviet lifestyle both because it was so tremendously popular and because it was perceived to have a special power to transform people's everyday lives. The creation of a centralized, Soviet television system based at Ostankino was thus not only a question of infrastructure; it was a cultural, social, and a political question as well. From the regime's perspective, there were obvious and compelling reasons to develop television in the 1950s and 1960s, and develop it did. Yet making a Soviet home for television technology also meant locating a place in a Soviet socialist culture for television watching and for television watchers. It was this task that proved far more complicated and accounted, above all, for the many paradoxes of Soviet television—celebrated and denigrated, pampered and ignored—in the 1950s and 1960s.