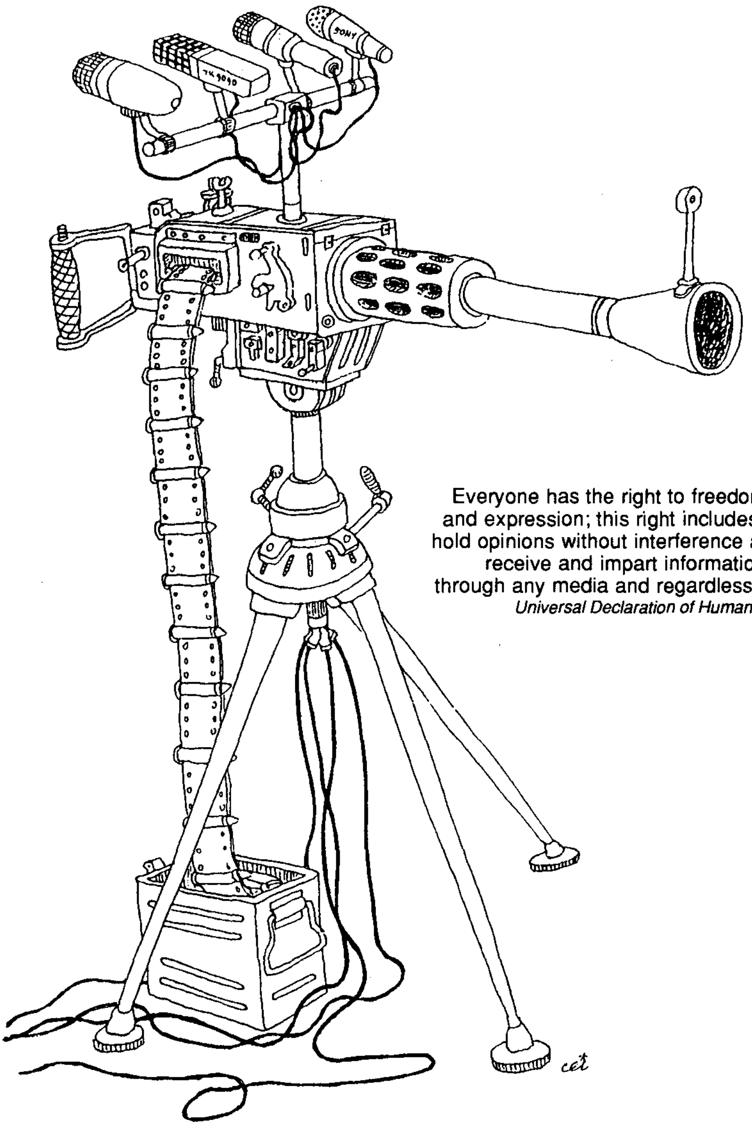

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion
and expression; this right includes freedom to
hold opinions without interference and to seek,
receive and impart information and ideas
through any media and regardless of frontiers.
*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 19*

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# A Tyranny of Images

## MONROE E. PRICE

IT IS GENERALLY TAKEN FOR GRANTED that "independence" is a good thing for the press, that an independent press is necessary for democratic government, and that we know what we mean when we say a newspaper or television or radio station is "independent."

In the American view, independence for the press largely means immunity from government interference. But throughout the former Soviet Union, independence has come to mean not only independence from government, or independence from ancient theologies of reportage, or independence, even, from the influences of the West. In the emerging battle for identities in Ukraine or Kazakhstan, Estonia or Azerbaijan, independence has often meant, above all, freedom from televised images produced by Russia.

In a shakily independent Ukraine or Kazakhstan or Estonia in 1992 and after, a major question was autonomy from the imperial center, from the cultural forces that held sway for 70, if not for hundreds, of years. The monumental television transmitter in Moscow was symbolic of the process. A steel pylon with a huge concrete base, massive in proportion like the Egyptian pyramids, it represented the power to

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send a signal throughout the vast domain not only of Russia but, metaphorically, through the entire territories of the former Soviet Union. It epitomized the power of the desire to assert a monopoly over public thought. The transmitter became an encumbering remembrance of the past and an indication, through the signals it transmitted, of the complexities of defining the independence of the future.

In Kiev, for example, Russian, not Ukrainian, had predominated as the language of both the state and the media. Surprised at its independence, Ukraine had to determine what attention should be given to the cultural element of its identity. This was not only a question of changing street names, or of finding new purposes for the palatial but empty Lenin Museum. The very imagery of nationhood was to be forged.

Nevertheless, for an average household in the Ukraine, on an average evening in the early days of independence, the television set was turned to Moscow, to the glitz and professionalism of Ostankino, the First Channel, as opposed to the more amateurish, more unpracticed presenters at home. Moscow was the home of a post-Soviet teenage music culture, producing short videos with quick cuts, computer graphics and the look of the West. Lights flashed on and off, electronic effects cast their technological spell. Ukrainian folk songs and country dances could not compete. And the tendency of the young Parliament to demand time for its deliberations compounded the problem of fashioning a Ukrainian alternative to the Moscow diet.

In the remembered days of the USSR, Gostelradio had been the supreme voice of the state and the party. There had been no competition, and the stolid presentation had been a tribute to political and cultural monopoly. Television in the republics had been organized with some minor modicum of separateness, but the organization in Kiev had been subordinate to the administration in Moscow. The executives and the news presenters had all understood what it meant to be in a command society and what risks not to take. They had been charged, as well, with using the medium not to underscore divisive differences but to reinforce solidarity and the cultural and political superiority of the center—Moscow.

It was not only in the living rooms of Ukraine that one could see the consequences of these practices of cultural domination. In the offices of Ukrtelradio—the Ukrainian state radio and television monopoly—there was a virtual acknowledgment, in 1992, of the continued drawing power of Moscow television. The officials there had to compete with television from Moscow that had become miraculously younger and Westernized in the Gorbachev period. Programs had more razzle-dazzle; rock videos appeared together with culture and news. Anchors had brand name recognition. There were glamorous hosts and hostesses, fashionable and daring clothes and beguiling, softly erotic shots of 15-year-old rock stars. Moscow, in its new regional incarnation, had chosen to deal with the problem of which culture to carry by going global.

MOSCOW'S TRANSFORMATIONS were important; they reverberated all over the old empire. At the beginning of 1992, with the decline of the Soviet Union, the First Channel, formerly the flagship for Gorbachev and for each leader before him, was in danger of abandonment. The enterprise, a centerpiece of the Soviet Union, now needed a client. Russia itself was the major candidate, but there was an intriguing alternative: an all-commonwealth channel, one dedicated to maintaining an informal sense of the region, with a voice that acknowledged the new sovereignties but remembered the old ties. Such a role might have been all the more important if the budget of the First Channel were to be dependent on specific allocations from each of the republics. And indeed, a Council of Presidents of all the republics initially considered such an arrangement.

But this view placed the newly sovereign nations, like Ukraine, in an unusual position. In the first year of their independence, Ukrainian officials were sensitive to every slight. Tested on all fronts as to their distinctiveness (from military to language policy), trying to appear separate and distinct, they believed that Moscow television was inflammatory, insulting and particularly biased on Ukraine-Russia relations. Daily news and interview shows were scanned for a pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian perspective.

For the media czars in Kiev it was a matter of concern, if not embarrassment, that although they had obtained political severance from Russia, Russian television dominance still continued. Indeed, the ministers of the new Ukraine considered alternatives: pressing for the closure of the Moscow First Channel and the dividing of its assets, jamming its signal or imposing a governing structure—through the Council of Presidents—that would make the channel less biased, at least from the Ukrainian or non-Russian perspective.

Instead, there was a temporary but complex compromise. Ukraine and the other republics would no longer finance program production on the First Channel; Russia would pay the bill. On the other hand, Ukraine would not charge for the transmission of the signal to its country's inhabitants. The consequence was a curious, impermanent, and intermediate cultural imperialism—one that recognized historic links between the former Soviet republics and the substantial continuing Russian population in Ukraine and elsewhere. The force of this now-external Russian programming was so ingrained that no government, particularly at a time of economic deprivation, could risk the consequences of its elimination.

THE STRUGGLE for "independence," then, assumed many forms—human, historical, geographical, financial. The formerly Moscow-controlled Ukranian state television sought a new future and a charter to find and promulgate a national identity that would support the new status quo. Its citadel in Kiev would be a large modern complex built in the last decade of the Soviet empire. Rather than consider the new edifice an inappropriate symbol for the press in a post-totalitarian state, the old bureaucrats of Ukraine dedicated this broadcasting city to a brave new world of statist broadcasting for Ukraine, where a new officialdom and a new national identity needed buttressing. Maybe architecture would be as good a guide to its future as the images that scurry across the reformed television screen.

Three years later, the question of imagery and geographical independence from Moscow was sharpened as the relations between Ukraine and Russia became momentarily more severe (as would be true between Russia and many of the former Republics). In spring

1994 the tense relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation found a spark in disputes over Russian broadcasts thought to encourage a breakaway Crimea, and over the rights of Russian journalists—now called "foreign correspondents"—to accreditation in Kiev and Kharkov. Leonid Kravchuk, then president of Ukraine, had stated that coverage on Ostankino and in other Russian media was biased against Ukraine, and that it was weakening support for his state. Ostankino journalists working in Kharkov and Odessa were denied accreditation. Was this action retaliation for an ill-received slight, the start of a "media war" or something else? An adviser to the Ukrainian embassy in Moscow, Vadim Doganov, contended that the action was specific to these journalists and was because of their "nonobjective reporting." He claimed that the government acted in accordance with the new Ukrainian media law.

"Independent" broadcasting was emerging in Ukraine and elsewhere but it was not necessarily serving the goals which inspired its advocates. The central broadcasting empire had been weakened. That was certain. But it was far from evident that the gap had been filled with indigenous broadcasters independent of the state, using that independence to ferret out truth, to empower ordinary citizens in the democratic process and to provide access to means of self-expression. True, a generation of publishers, editors and journalists was training itself and being courted from abroad. True, the process of adaptation was proceeding full tilt. But as elsewhere in the world, the hoped-for commitment to more independent television news and public-service broadcasting was little in evidence in a society where an appetite for advertising and a new mood of deregulation were the call of the day.