

SECTION FOUR

Western Radio's Place in the USSR Media Environment

4.1. Information Sources Used for National and International News

In 1981, the MIT computer simulation methodology was applied to data gathered during the late 1970s in order to ascertain how Soviet citizens received information on local, national and international topics.¹ The study was based on 4,496 interviews conducted with Soviet travelers from the urban parts of the USSR. A major aim of the analysis was to determine how Western radio fit into the larger media consumption patterns of Soviet citizens.

Figure 29 shows the main sources of national and international information in the urban USSR. Interestingly enough, the main source for local news (not shown here) was word-of-mouth (49%) followed by newspapers (49%), domestic radio (44%) and meetings (43%). Television, the most popular source for national and international news ranked only fifth for local information at 38%, suggesting that the rather centralized Soviet TV lagged in its coverage of local events.

Overall, TV led as an information source on both national and international events, but was followed closely by newspapers at the national level. Radio was in third place, followed by word-of-mouth² and *agitprop* meetings.³ The importance of word-of-mouth communication at all three levels is symptomatic of an underlying skepticism toward domestic media sources. It correlates highly with Western radio, which was clearly a

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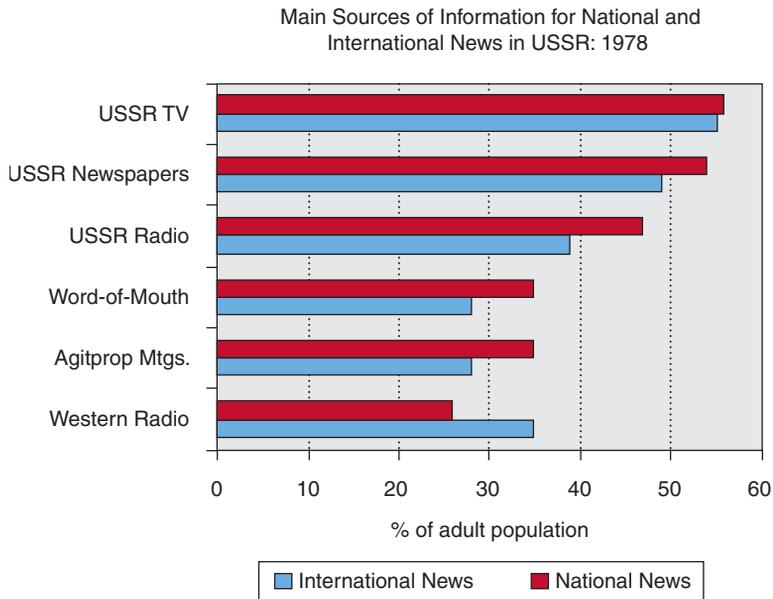


FIGURE 29. Sources of Information in the USSR for National and International News: 1978 (Adult Urban Population)

player on the media scene, scoring 26% as an important source for national news and 35% for international news.

Two inferences can be drawn from the media consumption patterns shown here. First, rather than relying on a single source of information, Soviet information-seekers preferred to draw on a broad combination of sources. Secondly, the relatively low utilization of all official sources for information (Soviet TV came in at only 55% and 56%), along with the importance of face-to-face communication, and the fact that a significant part of the population apparently did not seek information at all, suggest that, for information purposes at least, official Soviet media were failing to reach a substantial segment of the population. The relative importance of Western radio enhances the impression that official information channels were perceived as inadequate.

4.2. Media Use by Demographic Characteristics

Media consumption patterns varied according to age, gender, education and Communist Party membership.

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Age. Reliance on newspapers and domestic radio increased with age. Inversely, the use of Western radio and word-of-mouth diminished with age. Young people showed the least interest in TV and *agitprop* meetings, while the 30–49 year group showed the most. The media consumption patterns of the young indicated a mild “generation gap,” corroborated by their attraction to more unconventional sources of information, such as Western radio. The over-fifties showed a higher reliance on newspapers and radio, and lower utilization of TV, meetings and personal contacts.

Education. Those with less than secondary education showed lower rates of use of all domestic information channels, although TV and newspapers ranked highest. In contrast, those with secondary or higher education ranked higher on all media with the exception of word-of-mouth. Respondents with higher education showed the highest rates of newspaper use and Western radio listening.

Gender. Women showed lower rates than men in all categories, although their scores were similar on word-of-mouth communication. Their scores on using Western radio for national or international information were less than half those of males.

Communist Party Membership. As a group, Communist Party (CPSU) members scored highest of all categories in their aggregate use of Soviet media for information. TV ranked first among them, with official meetings as the number two source. CPSU members ranked lowest of all the demographic groups on word-of-mouth communication, at a rate about half that of non-members. It's noteworthy that the scores for Western radio listening for Party members and non-members were essentially the same.⁴ In other words, membership or non-membership of the CPSU was not an important predictor of Western radio listening. Party members were as likely as non-members to listen to Western radio for information on national and international topics. Given their need for accurate information and high level of interest in politics this is not surprising, although it does run counter to conventional stereotypes.

Geographic Regions. Geographically, newspapers scored highest in Leningrad, Moscow and the Baltic States, and lowest in Siberia, Central Asia and European Russia. Television was highest in Moscow and Leningrad, and lowest in Moldavia, the Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia. Radio followed a similar pattern. In terms of word-of-mouth communication, the Trans-Caucasus,

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Leningrad, Moscow and the Baltic States scored highest. Aggregate use of media for information was highest in Moscow, Leningrad, the Baltic States and the Trans-Caucasus, with the lowest rates found in Central Asia, Siberia and Moldavia.

4.3. Media Use by “Factor Types”

In terms of national news, a factor analysis conducted on the sample defined three major types of media consumer: “independent-official,” “orthodox-official” and “independent-critical.”

- The “independent-official” group made use of all official media sources, but was more inclined to use Western radio than the average respondent. This group was dominated by men over thirty who were members of the the intelligentsia, but not the Communist Party.
- The “orthodox-official” group relied most heavily on the official domestic media channels. It was closely associated with middle-aged, male, white-collar members of the Communist Party.
- The “independent-critical” group used Western radio and word-of-mouth more extensively than the other types. Demographically, the “independent-critical” group differed from the “independent-official” group in that it was younger, included a larger proportion of Muscovites, and used official media sources less.

In terms of international news, two factors were generated, the “independent-critical” and the “orthodox-official” groups. Both groups were relatively well-informed, but the “orthodox” group, heavily influenced by CPSU membership, relied much more on official media sources, while the “critical” group depended much more on Western radio and word-of-mouth sources. Although the “orthodox” group showed scant predilection for word-of-mouth communication, they were still above-average users of Western radio. CPSU members were much less likely than non-members to discuss their Western radio listening with others.

In terms of individual stations, Radio Liberty and BBC showed the highest correlation with the “independent-critical” group. VOA and Deutsche Welle showed higher correlations with the “orthodox-official” group, although they also had links to the “independent-critical” group.

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The fourth area, use of “unofficial” media sources—word-of-mouth and Western radio—wasn’t covered in the Soviet source material but the SAAOR data tallied closely with other Western research in this area. A high positive correlation was found between Western radio use and word-of-mouth communication. As noted earlier, this link provided an amplifier effect for the messages contained in Western radio broadcasts, and indirectly increased their reach and impact throughout the Soviet population as a whole.

An additional behavioral pattern was noted which did not appear among the media consumption groups generated at either national or international information levels, but which clearly emerged from the correlation matrix used in the factor analysis. Word-of-mouth was the only information channel used to any extent among this residual group, and strong negative correlations were shown with other information sources. In other words, these people were “non-consumers” of official information. That is not to say that they weren’t exposed to official media. That would be highly unlikely. What the data show is that they did not use the official media for *information*. This relatively uninformed and uninterested group appears to represent a substantial segment of the sample population. In effect they are information drop-outs, the equivalent of the “indifferent” group noted above in the attitudinal typology (see Figure 20).

The media study provided what was at the time an unprecedented opportunity to compare the results of SAAOR data with internal Soviet studies on media use⁵ and to gain numerous insights on Soviet media consumption patterns. The findings lined up closely in the three main areas examined: general selection of media sources, demographic characteristics of users of different media, and typologies of media selection behavior.

The overall consistency between SAAOR data and internal USSR media studies increases our confidence in the reliability of SAAOR findings on the role of Western radio in the Soviet media context.

4.4. Trends in Media Use: 1978–1988

By 1988 *glasnost*’ was the order of the day in USSR media, and it became apparent that Soviet citizens did not use media for information gathering in the same way they had done in the

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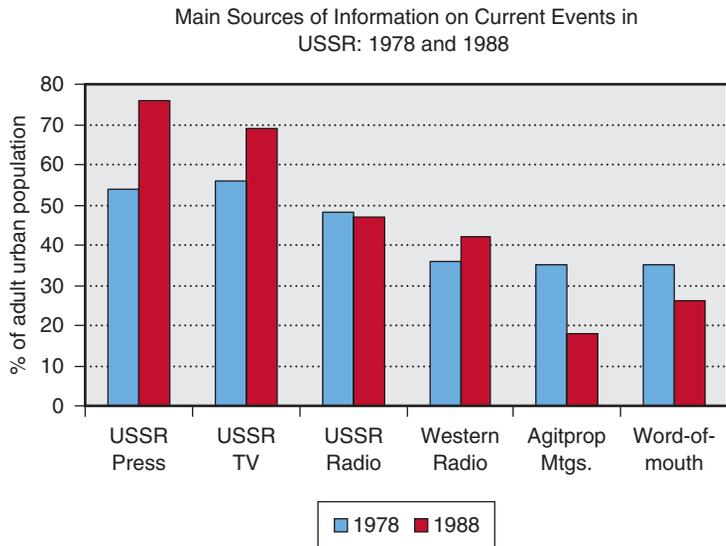


FIGURE 30. Main Sources of Information on Current Events in the USSR: 1978 and 1988 (Adult Urban Population)

late 1970s. Overall, Soviet domestic media were being used more as a source of information in 1988 than in the Brezhnev period. The press, which perhaps best reflected the new openness brought by *glasnost'*, had overtaken television, which remained under tighter state control (see Figure 30). Soviet citizens also appeared to have more confidence in their media than in pre-*glasnost'* days.

While use of domestic radio remained essentially steady at just under half the adult urban population, the use of Western radio increased slightly. In 1988 Radio Liberty was the only Western station still jammed. The drop in *agitprop* meetings and word-of-mouth in 1988 is noteworthy. *Glasnost'* was moving Soviet media usage patterns more in the direction of other modern industrial societies, where official propaganda methods carry less weight. The drop in word-of-mouth communication as an important source of information also reflected the growing freedom and credibility of the Soviet media under *glasnost'*. A high degree of reliance on word-of-mouth communication is a hallmark of authoritarian and totalitarian societies, where it is often viewed as more credible than official sources of information.⁶