

The Illusion of Freedom: Propaganda and the Informational Swamp

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Having found myself in Tallin as a school boy, I eagerly awaited a chance to watch TV. For those of us residing in Riga, Estonia was a place where you could catch a glimpse of the TV programming from Finland. Or so the rumor had it. My persistence paid off eventually, and when I had my wish granted I was treated to an excruciatingly boring concert of Finnish folk singing. Not a bit discouraged, I assumed that this first encounter with Europe was a programming fluke and that my curiosity would be rewarded next time. Never did I stop envying those lucky enough to watch broadcasts from the West.

The luckiest folks naturally lived in East Berlin. Unable to cope with the competition, the communist authorities built the tallest transmitting tower in Germany that still disfigures Berlin. This trick failed to block the competitor, however. Once that became clear, the Eastern rulers settled on point-by-point rebutting the news reaching its citizens from the West, offering instead a steady diet of Marxist propaganda. The whole operation was as futile as it was expensive – only the news coming from the West was deemed to be trustworthy.

It is easy to infer from this that inhabitants of the East German capital were best informed about the Western world. After all, TV is the face of a nation, its national character and ideals splashed all over the TV screen. Sitcoms and advertisements do much better job than sermons and constitutions in getting across a nation's ethos and etiquette, its unwritten yet pervasive laws.

I learned that much when I made my way to the United States where I encountered a language of mass culture unfamiliar to me. Such language is essential when it comes to reading subtle cues and hidden citations, understanding jokes and punch lines, and what is equally important – distinguishing kindred people from those of different kind. Surely, those watching a TV show like "Rosanne" will vote for different candidates than those favoring "Seinfeld" or M*A*S*H. This has nothing to do with a political message that the show producers might want to impart – viewers are the ones who attribute meaning to what they observe on the screen. Producers merely tap into their audience's fickle moods.

As any market phenomenon, mass culture is a risky investment. Even when pitched to a target audience, its product's impact is hard to calculate. Ever so tentatively, mass culture probes the consumer psyche in search of its subconscious desires. Which is what makes it so powerful.

The newcomer is more likely than a native to sense mass culture's tricks. That's the lesson Free West teaches Unliberated East. I learned this lesson only too well.

Right after graduating from the University, I worked at a huge corporation "Gosteleradio" where I edited a run-of-the-mill newspaper "Rigas Vilni" that published the upcoming programs of Latvian Radio and Television. This is where I had a chance to immerse myself into the mysterious world of soviet propaganda, which remained hidden to most of my compatriots.

I was the only person, it seemed to me, cognizant of the fact that day after day Soviet TV put out a show "Socialist Competition on the TV Screen" while radio stations broadcast to the entire nation "Agri News." These shows were mute artefacts which made as little sense to their producers as to the viewers. As long-forgotten rituals of some extinct religion, these newscasts

reminded me of Kafka's "Castle" where nobody dared to acknowledge that "God was dead" because still powerful high priests continued to issue their decrees.

Nobody bothered to observe these rituals anyhow. The intelligentsia stopped making fun of them, the official editorials published daily went unread, the dailies sporting the editorials were used for latest weather reports or as a substitute for toilet paper. Soviet television broadcasting was basically good for two things: tuning in on hockey matches (Brezhnev preferred figure skating) and keeping up with famous TV serials like "Stirlitz," a long running and enormously popular show serializing the life of a Russian spy. Sport helped suppress politics; TV series offered a window on the West. The latter had such an enduring appeal that viewers were willing to watch foreign news on official channels as long as they could catch a glimpse of an unemployed American worker wearing a nylon shirt, the kind you could buy in the Soviet Union for the equivalent of weekly pay, and that my father used to wear only on the biggest national holidays.

The efficacy of Soviet propaganda under Brezhnev tended toward zero. The intelligentsia satisfied its hunger for reliable information via Russian language broadcasts coming from abroad. The rest of the population settled for grape-vine news. Working as a fireman and flirting with alcoholism in my college years, I heard all sorts of stories that caught my whimsy. For instance, about the Jewish ancestors of Brezhnev, Lenin, and even Hitler. Similar tales made rounds in the newspapers run by Russian emigrants in New York. I also encountered them in Moscow during perestroika when I spotted a handmade poster pasted on a wall denouncing Yeltsin as "a scam artist conning Russia." (The intentional misspelling "Eltsin" was meant to suggest Boris Yeltsin's Jewish heritage).

Another conspiracy theory popular among my comrades at the fire station featured Jews blowing up the Ostankino TV tower. When I pointed out that the tower is still there for everyone to see, I was brushed off – "That's not the original one." After a while my colleagues refused to talk to me at all.

Propaganda tricks were the same all over the socialist camp. Its producers had no need to please their buyers. In fact, they didn't need any buyers at all.

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After this lyrical-historical digression, I want to go back to East Berlin. Given the two information systems available to Soviet citizens – one associated with the capitalist West, the other steeped in Soviet-style propaganda – it would be logical to assume that citizens in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe would sour on socialist principles. Paradoxically, the opposite turned out to be true.

After the Berlin Wall tumbled and the Stazi secret files came to light, the analysts discovered that the residents of East Berlin happened to be least radicalized among East German citizens. The farther away from Western broadcasts, the more immune to official propaganda East Germans proved to be and the more fervently they dreamed about ridding themselves of it.

Edward Luce who brought to light this phenomenon (Luce, 2017) offered an interesting and compelling explanation for this curious fact. East Berliners didn't notice the Iron Curtain because they had a chance to glimpse the life behind it. They had easier time adjusting to life without freedom because they enjoyed it vicariously by peeking into their neighbors' homes. True, that was merely an illusion of freedom, yet it sufficed to cover miserable realities with a gauzy veil.

Russians came to experience something similar after perestroika. In the 1990s, when my hungry friends used to say, “We aren’t millionaires to buy eggs,” the country developed a taste for glamour magazines advertising diamond jewelry, hyper-expensive watches, luxury cars like “Jaguars,” and more. Often, these were Russian language versions of big-brand publications circulating in the West, with the content adjusted for local audiences. I published in a good many of these hoity-toity magazines, so I know their MO. Whereas American readers of GQ magazine get an advice on how to buy a decent second-hand jacket for \$5, Russian readers of the same periodical were advised that a real man can’t get out of the house without a jacket that cost at least \$500.

I couldn’t figure out at first what was the point of disseminating such publications in a country as poor as Russia, until I understood that consumption became a spectator’s sport in my homeland. Having learned its lesson, the old propagandists had thoroughly revised their ways. Curiously, “perestroika intellectuals” who lead reform in the 1980s were often the first to master new propaganda tools.

Konstantin Ernst, the first general director of the most odious TV channel catering to Putin’s whims, had began his career as producer of bohemian television shows and took up journalistic ventures under a characteristic heading “Matador.” Eager to publicize postmodernist esthetics, his journals published some of my articles. Once he embraced the nationalistic creed, Ernst and his colleagues fashioned deconstructionist philosophy into a propaganda tool – servile in content, hypermodern in form. Taking a clue from the experience of East Berlin, the new propaganda lures Russian viewers into the illusory world inhabited by the rich and famous, the world where mass culture – homespun and imported – predominates. Along with a hefty dose of entertainment, the audience is given a chance to feel that it vicariously partakes in the global stream of news and gossip regurgitated by a planetary tabloid.

On my numerous visits to Moscow, I found myself ensconced in a Moscow hotel, flipping TV channels and watching late night programs, each more extravagant than the other. One night there would be a program about erotic embroidery, next one – a show about making sausage, and the one after that explained to a rapturous audience how to multiply fractions (?!).

Russian news programs were equally bewildering. Here, an imposing clergyman would counsel his audience that real prophets were inspired by God while gypsy fortune tellers did the devil’s work of confusing innocent victims. And there, a good-looking female announcer confided that UFO sightings increased manifold in the United States. Amidst all that, Putin made several appearances, reminding late-night watchers that this was a news program after all.

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“There is a method to his madness,” observed Claudius about Hamlet. The same applies to the seemingly random ways of today’s Russian propaganda, working overtime to muddy the water as yellow journalism does, steadily erasing the line between truth and fiction. Wittingly or unwittingly, consumers of this propaganda find themselves in the midst of a postmodernist swamp.

Stanislaw Lem took a good measure of this phenomenon in his novel *His Master’s Voice* (Lem, 1968/1984). (Note that in the socialist science fiction, action unfolds in an unfathomable future or in America – terra incognita in its own right). In the relevant episode, Lem tells his readers about American scientists who received a signal from extraterrestrials. To cover up this fact, the authorities turned to disinformation experts from the CIA who offered sage advice. This

is how Lem put it, “Soon the press was flooded with reports about little green men arriving on Earth. Every day, new facts appeared in the news, one more fanciful than the other, the whole operation serving as a diversion tactic. To deny everything was to attract unwanted attention to the extraordinary event; it is much easier to drown the truth in an avalanche of bizarre rumors.”

Herein we discover a practical guide for handling facts in the era of post-truth and fake news. The former was pronounced the word of the year in 2016, the latter – in 2017. Together they constitute a world in which alternative facts reign supreme.

As we know, two theories of evolution gained traction in the U.S. – one inspired by the Bible, the other advanced by Charles Darwin. Scientists, politicians, and school teachers debate the merits of each. But what about the Grand Canyon? There, I once heard a guide propound two theories about its origin: (1) A river, barely visible at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, burrowed its way through the mass of rock and created this magnificent spectacle; (2) Grand Canyon is a vestige of the biblical flood that once inundated this forbidding land. Eschewing the fight between science and religion, the guide chose to recount both stories, letting his listeners choose one or accept neither. The take away from this story is this: The world is unfathomable, truth is elusive, everyone can judge as he or she pleases.

The alternative to fact isn't falsehood, we are told, but another fact of equal merit that somebody believes. Another science fiction – *Omon Ra* – makes this point. In this magnum opus, Victor Pelevin (1998) span a tale about Soviet cosmonauts landing on the Moon. The point he sought to make was this: It is enough to convince somebody to create a sense of reality. “As long as there is one soul believing in what we do, our cause is alive.”

Science fiction paved the way for politicians who are now waging information wars in the brave new world. It's much easier to lie in this world because nobody hides the truth anymore – it is simply drowned in little and big lies. Even an experienced intellectual will have hard time navigating in this information swamp and telling apart malicious falsehood from sheer stupidity. All the more so in the age of social media that gives equal weight to all voices which combine to produce cacophony rather than symphony.

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As a young man, I spied in Nietzsche this line: “There are no facts, only their interpretations.” I adopted this motto as my North Star and stood by it for a long time. Nietzsche beamed the young critic and pointed the way toward a profession. What's important is interpreting the world, not discovering it; multiplying realities that carry the imprint of an author's personality. I followed Nietzsche's creed until it exhausted itself, along with his favorite genre of aphorism. When you read my aphorisms, asserted the German philosopher, you are jumping from one mountaintop to another. Karl Marx, another master of condensed wisdom, had a different opinion: “Aphorisms never tell the whole truth; they offer half-truth or truth-and-a-half.”

What this means is that Nietzsche was right and wrong at the same time. As all German idealists, he believed that we can never grasp reality in itself, only the fiction we find convincing. Hence, he extolled interpreters like himself, who create the world the rest of humanity inhabits. This idea is too flattering to be taken at face value. Today, facts are under assault on all fronts, but there are registers where facts still matter. Radical skepticism about the world out there is fertile philosophical ground and powerful esthetic fantasy. It passed under different names in disparate epochs, postmodernism being its most recent incarnation. Having placed the world into

ironic quotation marks, postmodernists kept peeling away illusions until they reached the core of nothingness from which one could weave anything. (This is what the young Pelevin showed us in his novels like *Chapaev and Emptiness*).

When advanced thinkers concluded that truth is unattainable, they gave up on gleaning the reality itself and settled on unravelling the play of illusion. This philosophical fancy devolved into a nightmare once it began to colonize everyday life where postmodernism emerged as a potent tool of political propaganda.

The authorities used to tell outrageous lies, so on rare occasions when they told the truth – nobody believed them. Bold-face lies are less dangerous, for they could be easily inverted. It's far scarier to muddle through the informational fog of half-truths and alternative facts. Smart men, Chesterton used to say, will hide the fox in the woods. Cunning propaganda buries the real fact in a bundle of alternative facts. It doesn't deny that truth exists, only that it is impossible to gauge. That is why postmodern politics loves to multiply realities, spin new versions – not to help us select the most valid interpretation but to discourage us from adopting any.

“Who shot down the Boeing over Ukraine?” asks a curious bystander.

“Anyone could have done it,” answers the Russian official evasively.

“Who tampered with the athletes' urine?”

“Who knows,” responds the authorized spokesman feigning bewilderment.

“How legitimate are the elections without opponents?”

“Other countries are no different,” chimes in the power broker.

Shunning the concrete and trading in vague generalities, the powers give the *intelligent* a way out, letting them choose their own version of reality without the need to move their derrieres off the sofa. This is postmodern propaganda at its best; it reigns unopposed on a TV screen. Blending someone else's picture of reality with local rumors, propaganda promotes willfulness in lieu of freedom, recreating its own favorite reality indistinguishable from fiction.

The cure from this postmodernist phantasmagoria is common sense. It may fail in quantum mechanics or new metaphysics, but it is indispensable in politics. Common sense tells us how to sort real facts from alternative, truth from half-truth, real news from fake news, serious journalism from the latest barrage of loud tweets.

Yes, for the philosopher the world might be unknowable, final truth unreachable, faith groundless, and human beings the most enigmatic creature in the universe. Yet, politics is not rocket science, and it hews to the mundane. Everybody looking for truth can find it when and if it really matters.

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Alexander Genis (born 1943, U.S.S.R.) is a writer, literary critic, and radio broadcaster. He was born Ryazan, grew up in Riga, Latvia, and immigrated to the US in 1977. Alexander Genis hosts a weekly audio magazine ‘American Hour’ (Radio Liberty), produces a TV Show “Letters from America” (TV channel ‘Culture’), and writes columns for several periodicals. He is a member of the Russian Academy of Verbal Arts, member of the jury administering Booker Prize and Liberty Prize, and recipient of the magazine *Znamya* prize for literary achievement. Genis pioneered the trend of cultural essayism, a genre combining lyrical narrative with methods used in cultural studies. Alexander Genis’s essays have been anthologized in various publications and translated into English, Japanese, German, French, Italian, Serbian, Hungarian, Latvian, and other languages. He published several books with Pyotr Vail, including *Russian Contemporary Prose* (1982), *Our Mother Tongue* (2015), and *The 1960s – The World of the Soviet Man* (1998). And single-authored over a dozen books, such as *American Alphabet* (2000), *Babylon Tower* (1997), *Darkness and Quietude* (2010), and most recently *A Return Address: Self-Portrait* (2016).