

Effects of Mass Media Ownership on Serving Public Interest

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Introduction

Information is now called “power” like money and authority. Mass media companies that exercise control over information transmitted to the masses are now seen as strong force in building public opinion. As the “fourth power” in society, mass media organizations attract attention of many scientists.

Mass media ownership and its effects on different aspects of mass media performance were the subject of many studies. This topic attracts many scholars due to importance of mass media in social life of society and its ability to affect publics.

Mass media are seen as a social medium that contributes to building strong nations, feelings of unity by transmitting values and norms in messages. Mass media play role of an agent of the secondary socialization process and can contribute to successful socialization of individuals into existing social life.

This research addresses the question of mass media ownership effects on ability to serve the public interest in society through transmission of values, knowledge and addressing interests of different groups of people present in certain society. Serving the public interest is part of a long-term welfare policy of government; it helps to build socially healthy society.

Building of market economy brought private capital to Russian media market. When new companies appeared, mass media were not longer subsidized by government and gained profit from advertisement placement. Content of mass media messages shifted: more entertainment programs appeared, the time devoted to children programs decreased, etc. As there is no policy in sphere of content regulation addressing issues of diversity and education of population,

Russian scholars and politicians are concerned with the quality of mass media content and its inability to serve the needs of society.

This research is based on data on Russian broadcasting stations. Russian mass media gained independence from the government in the early 1990s, but still several of them are controlled by government through ownership. The government, as an owner, is interested in affecting publics and building understanding of its policies. Private owners may have different interests in mass media – they may be interested not only in affecting publics, but also in making profit. This study will look for differences in serving the public interest in mass media organization with different ownership structures.

Information on effects that mass media ownership has on serving the public interest, if generalized, would be useful in building policy in sphere of mass media.

The public interest and mass media

When discussing the public interest, social scientists and policy makers refer to absolutely different things. The diversity of definitions of the public interest is caused by the presence of different layers of meaning. Napoli identifies three levels of the meaning: conceptual, operational, and applicational. The conceptual level is the broadest one and deals with how the public interest is defined in general. On the operational level specific principles are defined to constitute what is now defined as the public interest. On the applicational level principles of the operational level are transformed into actions and regulations (Napoli, 2006).

Simone (2005) identifies different levels of meaning: process, principle and policy. Process refers to the methods used to define what the public interest is. Principle refers to the concepts that are seen as constituting the public interest. Policy refers to the specific policies,

regulations, norms that are introduced to serve the public interest. Simone argues that ambiguity in defining the public interest is not a consequence of different layers of meaning, but that it results from a different vision of process.

Both conceptual and process levels give broad perspective on the public interest and define other levels. They give theoretical vision of the public interest, provide ways to approach it.

Croteau and Hoynes (2001) identify two perspectives on mass media— market model and public sphere model – which affect the way the public interest is seen. In the market model of media, content of media is seen as any other product. The interests of the public are served by demand and supply. The public interest is what public is interested in and what it demands. Audience of mass media is seen as consumers. The primary goal of media is to generate profit, and profit is a measure of success. Competition between media companies ensures that the public interest is served properly.

The main assumption of the public sphere model is market's inability to meet the society's needs. Based on the characteristics of the public sphere model, Croteau and Hoynes see the public sphere on a macro level as a social discourse that enables the circulation of ideas and knowledge, thereby ensuring the successful socialization of individuals into society. Mass media are seen as capable of affecting people's behavior (Lippmann, 1965). Having an effect on public media organizations should "promote active citizenship, education, and social integration" through their messages (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001, p. 37).

On the applicational level or the level of policy making, the market model approach to media would ensure the market operates without regulations in order to serve the public interest. Any regulation will interfere with the natural interaction of supply and demand.

As the market is oriented to make profits, and profits are associated with volumes of products (except very expensive products to satisfy desires of just few individuals), mass media may serve wants of the majority. “Public interest is defined in majoritarian way” (McQuail, 1992, p. 22). This is seen as one of the imperfections of the market: media firms makes profits but the public’s demand is not fully satisfied.

In addition to the imperfection, in the market model mass media fail to serve needs of some people due to double product – content for people and attention of these people to advertisers. As the main source of revenue for several types of mass media is advertising placement, mass media are “under pressures for maximizing profits” (Bagdikian, 1997, p. 199). Bogart (1995) indicates that “media formulate their content to maximize advertising income” (p. 108). This reinforces the emphasis on addressing the needs of majority.

Studies show that competition on the media market does not always lead to diversity. Moreover, high level of competition may result in decreasing of diversity (Hollifield, 2006, Park, 2005).

In the public sphere model audiences are seen as citizens who are encouraged by media messages to learn about their world. The public interest is served through the presence of “diverse, substantive, and innovative content, even if not always popular” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001, p.37). As the market economy cannot ensure that the public interest is served, regulations are needed to protect the public interest.

Diversity refers to different levels. On the level of the media market it refers to the presence of different media channels, on the level of channel it refers to the presence of different types of programs, and on the level of content it refers to the presence of different points of view

on issues. All types of diversity are important to serve the public interest. They ensure that the interests of different audiences are addressed.

Media in public sphere model, according to Croteau & Hoynes (2001), should be characterized by diversity, innovation, substance and independence. Innovation means creative and fresh content rather than the presence of new technologies. Substantial media messages are those that address significant issues, educate audiences, and promote participation in social life. To meet the fourth criterion, content should be independent from corporate and governmental interests. Government and other organizations should not limit the range of presented perspectives on issues.

According to McCullagh (2002) mass media organizations should meet the following criteria to serve the public: 1) mass media messages should be available to all members of society: there should be no limitations of access to mass media messages based on race, age, education, wealth, and other characteristics of individuals; 2) mass media messages should address different interests of audiences; 3) mass media messages should provide the public with education; 4) mass media messages should contribute to building a sense of community.

On Simone's level of policy, the public sphere model would ensure that the media market is regulated in order to address the different interests of different people, form social (cultural and national) identity and protect audiences from harmful content.

In the second model the public interest is determined not according to the will of the public, but according to some (absolute) standards and values. On the operational and the application levels this will lead to a problem of identifying these standards. Usually they are identified in accordance to a dominant ideology.

In this study the author will use the public sphere model to examine the effects of ownership on the ability of Russian mass media organizations to serve the public interest. This choice is determined by the author's background and the traditions in the sphere of media policy in Russia.

Factors that affect content of mass media messages

Both models refer to the public interest to address an issue of content in mass media messages. Mass media content is a product of the interaction between different interests within mass media, different roles of mass media, different sources of information, and different interests of groups outside mass media organization (McCullagh, 2002; Shoemaker, 1991; Press Freedom, 1997; Koltsova, 2001).

Shoemaker (1991) builds the hierarchical model of sources that influence content of mass media. Within organization content is being affected on three levels: individual level, media routines level, and organizational level. On individual level content of media messages is affected by communicators' personal backgrounds, experiences, attitudes, values, and beliefs and by communicators professional backgrounds, roles, ethics, and power within the organization.

“Organizations must routinize work in order to control it” (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 97). These routines affect individual communicators and their way of working.

On the organizational level content is affected by the economic goals of a media organization, its structure, internal policies, internal control, and organizational roles. “Individual workers and their routines must be subordinated to the larger organization and its goals” (Shoemaker, 1991, p.116). the Goals of an organization are determined by the owners of the organization.

There are also effects on content of mass media messages from non-organizational levels: extramedia level and ideological level. On the extramedia level content is affected by sources of information, revenue sources, other social institutions, economic environment, and technology. Ideology addresses issues of accepted and non-accepted behavior, determines spheres of consensus and deviance. Policies in the sphere of media are introduced on the ideological level.

Effects of ownership on content

Within an organization, factors on the organizational level are the key to understanding the presence of a certain type of content. Decisions about the target audiences and type of content are made on this level.

Ownership structure, as one of the factors on the organizational level, also affects the content of mass media messages. Research usually indicates three basic types of mass media ownership: government owned (or government party owned), privately owned, and own both by government and private organizations or individuals (Press Freedom, 1997). Government-owned media outlets usually seen by social scientists as pursuing goal of social welfare and harmony, while privately owned media are seen as pursuing interests that are determined by desire to make profit, although it is not always the case. The fact that media are (partly) owned by government does not mean that channels and content are totally controlled by government. Usually, if not subsidized, these channels have to make profit, which means independence to certain extent from government ideological interests.

Effects of ownership on serving the public interest are part of a bigger theme of effects of mass media ownership on content. There are number of studies that were able to determine

effects of ownership on content, although there are some that present the opposite view. These studies looked at different effects in different areas.

One of the areas of research that examined media ownership effects on content deals with consolidation of media, which occurred in order to pursue economic and organizational advantages. Chain ownership in the newspaper industry received a lot of attention.

Studies found that the editorials of the big chain-owned newspapers were more likely to express positions on some issues and less likely to vary in positions taken than editorials of non-chain-owned newspapers (Akhavan-Majid, Rife & Gopinath, 1991). Another study found that editorial's endorsement patterns changed when newspapers were purchased by chains (Rystrom, K., 1987). Thrift (1977) found that the editorials of the chain-owned papers tended to have less argumentative editorials on local controversial issues. The location of newspaper's headquarters (out of state place of headquarters is the case for chain newspapers) was also found to affect the way local conflicts were presented in papers (Donohue, Olien & Tichenor, 1985).

News reporting patterns were found to be connected to the type of ownership. Independently owned daily newspaper had more stories that require more reportorial efforts and used more enterprises news sources than chain-owned (Fradgley & Niebauer, 1995). A study by Olien, Tichenor, and Donohue (1988) found a strong correlation between the type of ownership and coverage (frequency and proportion) of non-local business. Another study found that the more characteristics of the corporate form of organization newspaper had, the more emphasis was placed on quality of news coverage (Demers, 1996).

As a source of political information, mass media may affect public behavior on elections. Scholars examined the effects of newspaper's consolidation on endorsement of political candidates. In a study by Wackman, Gillmor, Giano, and Dennis (1975) they found that chain-

owned newspapers in comparison to independent newspapers were more likely to endorse candidates for president, support the favored candidate of the press, and be homogeneous in endorsing candidates during observed election periods. The authors concluded that “chain ownership of newspapers discourages editorial independence in endorsing presidential candidates” (p 420). Another study concluded that newspaper ownership was an important factor in endorsement, although chain newspapers were found to be homogeneous to lesser extent (Gaziano, 1989). A study by Busterna and Hansen (1990) found no significant differences in endorsing the press-favored candidates. Chain-owned newspapers demonstrated even more autonomy that has been found in other research. This difference in results can be consequence of different methods as concluded by authors.

A study of the effects of foreign ownership on content by Hollifield (1999) found significant differences between domestically-owned and internationally-owned newspapers in the coverage of local stories. Control for circulation size and size of newspapers did not diminished these differences.

There were also studies that reported no effects of ownership on content of newspapers. For example, Akhavan-Majid and Boudreau (1995) compared the editorial role perception of chain-owned and independent newspapers. With control for the size of newspapers there was no difference in editorial role perceptions. Perception changed due to size of newspapers, not due to ownership.

Some studies addressed questions about effects of ownership and the size of newspapers on space and allocation of different kinds of content. Lacy (1991) found that ownership did not have an effect on how news were allocated. Yet group-owned newspapers, when compared to

independently owned ones, had shorter stories and devoted more space and stories to editorial and op-ed material.

Although results of studies on effects of ownership on contents are contradictory, this area of study still attracts scientists and is among the most highly debated. Some studies did in fact show that mass media ownership has impact on the diversity of its messages on two levels: 1) presenting different points of view or different perspectives on some issue (for example, while endorsing, news paper either endorse one favorable candidate, or presents several); 2) presenting a variety of issues in general.

Mass media organizations in Russia

Russian mass media organizations gained their independence from the government in the early 1990s. Reforms that, for the first time, stated possibility of private ownership of media appeared in June 1990 (Krug, 1996). Before that time mass media organizations were owned and controlled by the government. Right now there are still organizations that are partly or fully owned by government.

During the last 15-18 years Russian mass media companies have been in “transition from [an] administrative-bureaucratic model to the market and democratization – the Fourth Power model” (Zassoursky, 1997, p. 221). With the end of the total government ownership of mass media, these organizations for the first time found themselves in need of making profit. Before that time organizations were subsidized by the government. In addition to the traditional role of transmitting information, mass media has had to learn how to play by rules of the market. Nevertheless, the government as an owner of mass media organizations is still seen as an agent interested not in profit, but in content and ability to affect opinion of publics (Zassoursky, 1997).

Private organizations and individuals who own mass media make sure that mass media have enough profit to survive.

The situation in Russia is not unique. Mass media companies in the post Soviet Union countries are now going through the same transition. Private owners of mass media also appeared there around 1990.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, a new union, The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), appeared. The primary goals of this union deal with economics, defense, and foreign policy. In this union countries share their experience in other spheres and adopt “working” models of behavior. The mass media market regulations represent one of the spheres where sharing of experience is taking place. As Russian mass media are still present in the post Soviet Union countries, interests of those countries (or vision of these interests by Russian politicians) are represented in decisions about policy. More over, policy is formed in harmony with policies in some countries within CIS (for example, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus and others).

Research questions and hypotheses

The previous studies and theoretical conceptions lead to the main research question of this study:

What effects does the structure of mass media ownership have on a company's ability to serve the public interest?

Ability to serve the public interest (aspects and characteristics of serving the public interest) is dependent variable in this study, while the structure of mass media ownership is independent variable.

The structure of the mass media ownership will be determined by the presence of private owners and governmental entities.

A company's ability to serve the public interest will be determined by the presence of educational programs and also by the diversity of programs devoted to different audiences. Diversity will be looked through presence of range of program types. Choice of these parameters to judge about ability of mass media to serve the public interest was determined by time constraints of study and by data available.

To answer the main research question, the following questions should be addressed:

RQ1: Is there connection, if any, between structure of mass media ownership and presence of educational programs?

RQ2: Is there connection, if any, between structure of mass media ownership and diversity of programs?

The hypotheses are:

H1: Mass media companies with different ownership structures devote different amounts of time to educational programs.

H2: Mass media companies with different ownership structures differ in addressing interests of different groups.

The author expects to find more educational programs and a greater diversity in program types in content of mass media that is fully or partly owned by the government. This expectation is based on 1) the interest of the government in social harmony and social welfare of its citizens and 2) the absence of content regulations concerning presence of diversity and educational programs.

Method

To understand the content of TV channels:

1) The content analysis of the programs' schedules of different television stations was used. This provides the author with information on type of programs and time of these programs. TV programs for the period of one week were analyzed. So both weekend and non-weekend days were represented. Also, as many programs are shown on a weekly basis, one week will allow the author to include them in analysis.

2) To determine the type of a program, the author used information provided on the sites of the television stations and also descriptions from TV program newspapers and advertising agencies that work with these channels.

3) To understand what interests are addresses in different programs and at different times, the author used the descriptions of programs.

Data description

The following channels were selected for the analysis:

ОРТ (Общественное Российское Телевидение / Public Russian Television), Россия, НТВ¹.

All three channels have a status of the federal channel and their signal is transmitted all over the country and the former USSR countries (These are the only channels that have the status of the federal channels).

All three channels are not subsidized by the government and make profit.

Typical programs for all three channels are news, analytical programs, and entertainment programs. All available types of programs are action movies, documentary films, sport events,

¹ In this paper I will refer to these channels as ORT (ОРТ), RTV (Россия), and NTV (НТВ).

talk-shows, news, journalists' investigations, tele-journals, cartoons and other programs for children, entertainments shows (games, lotteries, musical and other types of concerts, etc.), analytical programs. All three channels have these types of programs.

All three channels operate continuously: 24 hour per day, seven days a week. So, total amount of broadcasting time during one week is the same for all three channels. But these channels have different starting points: ORT's day starts at 4 a.m., RTV's day starts at 6 a.m., while NTV's day starts at 5 a.m. When analyzing all days started at 6 a.m., so the author had to manipulate some data to make sure that every channel has the same starting and ending points.

As the territory of broadcasting of these channels includes several time zones, all the TV programs' schedules were selected for one time zone to make sure that morning (day, evening) time on one channel corresponds with morning (day, evening) time on other channels.

The presence of similar programs together with the federal status of channels allow for fair comparison between these channels.

Also, these three channels represent all possible kinds of the ownership structure. RTV channel is owned by the government. NTV is privately owned channel – the only private channel that has the status of the federal channel. ORT is owned by both the government and private organizations and individuals. 40% of the channel belongs to the government, while 60% of the channel belongs to several private organizations and individuals (Venediktov, 2002).

For the analysis time period (one week) starting from November 27th to December 3rd was chosen. This choice was determined by the time of conducting research and available information.

Although the selection of this particular week is not random, programs on all three channels are representative of the programs presented on each day of any week during the year.

The program schedules (the schedule of the programs of a certain type) are very stable and predictable. There are at least three reasons for that: 1) There are not very many channels, and people have formed habits of watching the particular types of program at particular times. The channels do all possible to meet the expectations of people. 2) As there are a law about the maximum advertising time on the TV channels during one hour (12 minutes) and high demand for advertising, the schedule of the certain types of the programs should be known in order to sell advertising time (and in order to buy advertising time in advance). The main advertising agencies that sell time to these channels provide you upon request with the time schedule for the period of up to 1.5 years. This schedule for a long time period provides nothing but the types of the programs. The schedules for the shorter periods of time contain, in addition to the type of the programs, titles of particular movies, documentary films, etc. 3) Programs on TV have their cycles. They are usually presented at a certain time of a certain day of a week. For example, evening news program on ORT channel always starts at 8 p.m. during regular² days.

So any week that does not include any national holidays is like any other week on these three channels. This sample is empirically (but not scientifically) representative of the average week during the year. That enables the author to generalize to a certain extent while analyzing content of these channels. Also it enables the author to perform certain tests on gathered data.

While coding, there was consensus between coders, so inter-coder reliability was almost absolute. This high agreement on categories can be explained by the data available. Sites of each of the three channels³ (and also sites of advertising agencies) provide information on every program in terms of the types of the program.

² The author will use the word “regular” to talk about Monday through Friday days and non-holiday days. Saturday and Sundays are weekend days.

³ <http://www.1tv.ru/> for ORT, <http://www.rutv.ru/> for RTV, and <http://www.ntv.ru/> for NTV.

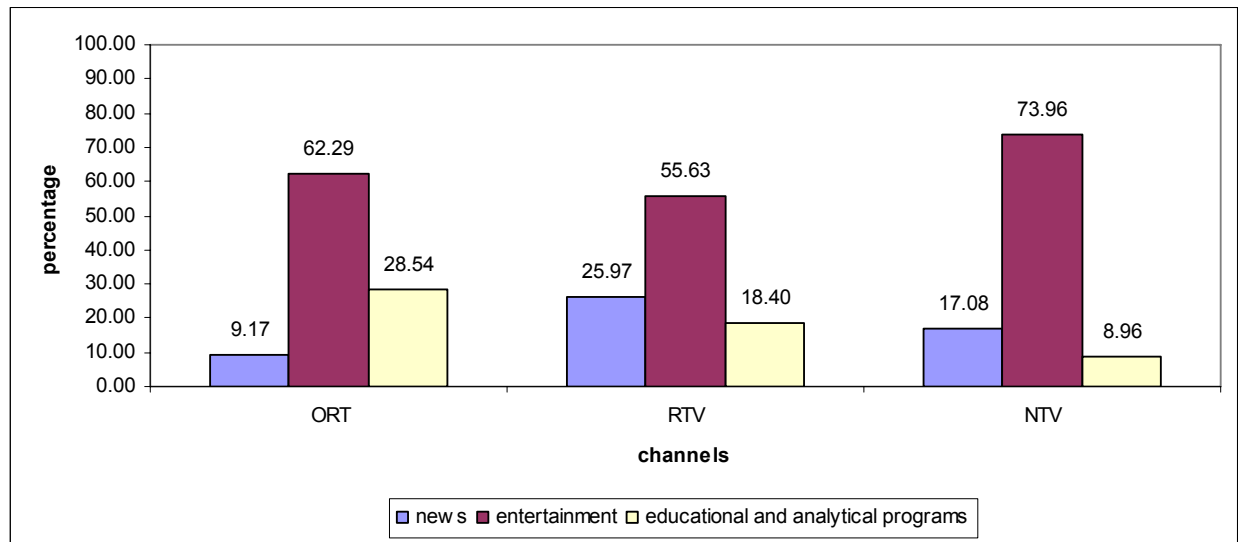
Results

Types of programs presented

All the types of programs were sorted into three groups: 1) news, 2) entertainment and 3) educational and analytical programs. The “news” group included all the news programs. The “entertainment” group included all the action films and the shows that were marked as an entertainment on the sites of the channels⁴. The documentary films, educational programs, analytical programs, and journalists’ investigations were included in the last group. These three groups represented 100% of all the programs.

The distribution of time on the average during the regular days between these three groups of programs is the following:

Figure 1. The average time devoted to the three types of programs during the regular days

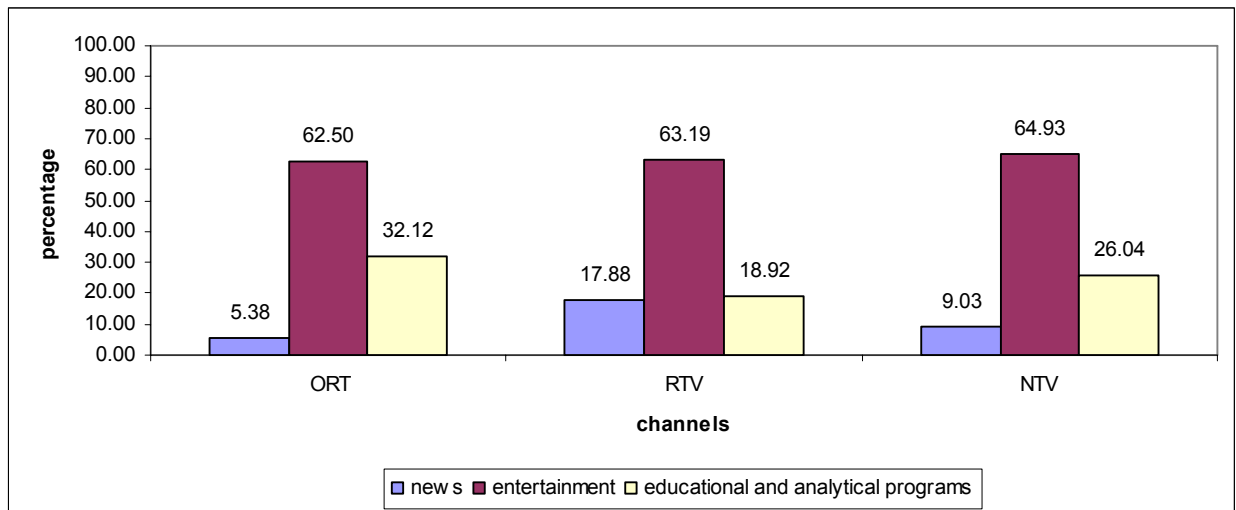


⁴ Although the sites of the channels and the sites of the advertising companies provide information on the types of the programs, the author, in addition, checked every program from the research period of time herself to make sure that it was “marked” correctly.

The entertainment programs are the main type of programs for all three channels. RTV has the emphasis on news, although a lot of those news are during the night time, when they, for example, show “Euronews” with translation into Russian. ORT has a lot of the documentary films (up to three each day), analytical programs, and educational-informational programs. It is interesting to note, that the private channel (NTV) has the highest percentage devoted to the entertainment, while the government-owned channel has the lowest. The author suggested that there will some difference in percentage of time devoted to the educational programs, the difference was found, but the connection between the type of the ownership and the amount of time devoted to the third group of programs is not “linear.”⁵ All the differences are significant according to the different proportions test ($Z > 1.96$, $p = 0.05$).

The same analysis was performed for the weekend days’ programs. The following distribution of time was found:

Figure 2. The average time devoted to the different programs during the weekend days

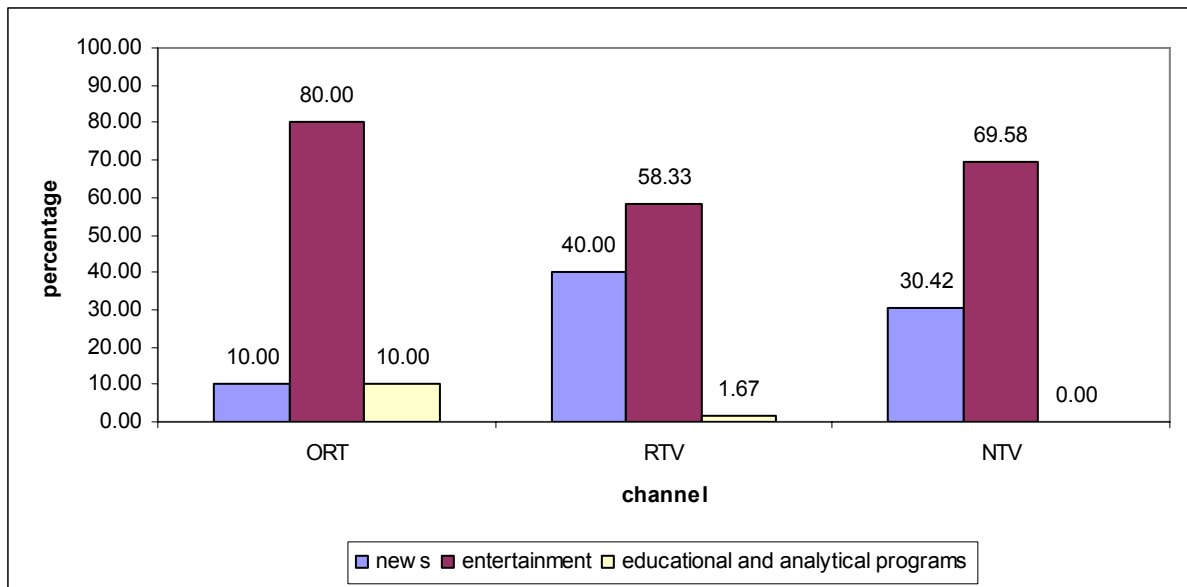


⁵ If both variables were not discrete the author could call connection “linear” under certain circumstances. In this case, by calling it “linear” the author meant that there would be either positive or negative joint changes in both variables, but not mixed.

The entertainment programs are still the most often shown programs. Time devoted to the third group of the programs is higher for all three channels for Saturday and Sunday. Closer look at the schedule of the programs revealed that this increase was due to the presence of more analytical programs on all the channels. During the weekend, all channels have several programs devoted to explanations or comments on what had happened during the week in political, social, and economic spheres of society.

Interesting is the distribution of time between these three groups programs for evening hours (6-11 p.m.) for the regular days. Time from 6 to 11 was chosen according to the level prices on the advertisement placement. During these hours the most number of people devote their time to TV and the prices are the highest, especially for time from 7 to 10.

Figure 3. The average time devoted to the different types of the programs during the regular days from 6 to 11 p.m.



All the observed differences of 8% or more are statistically significant in the proportions test ($p \leq 0.05$).

The private channel does not have any programs during the day-time on the regular days which can be classified as belonging to the third group. This type of programs is present on the channel, but mostly during the night hours.

When only programs that are marked as educational-informational or educational are included in analysis, the distribution of the time devoted to educational programs is the following:

Table 1. Percentage of time devoted to the educational programs

	Monday-Friday	Saturday, Sunday
ORT	4.44	13.54
RTV	6.81	2.60
NTV	0.00	3.82

The differences of 1.6% and greater are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$) for the regular days. The differences of 2.6% and greater are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$) for Saturday and Sunday. The difference proportions test suggests that the observed difference in amount of time devoted to education programs on weekends between NTV and RTV is not statistically significant and can result from fluctuations. Due to the stability of the presented types of programs, more data is needed to ensure that this difference can be attributed (or not attributed) to the fluctuations.

Nevertheless, this table and figures show that there are differences between channels with the different ownership structure in the amounts of time devoted to the educational programs.

Addressing the different interests

The purpose of this section is not to present percentages of time devoted to programs addressing the interests of different groups of people, but to see if the interests of some groups are addressed/not addressed at all.

The findings are very descriptive and the author does not present these findings as (statistically) significant. At this point it is very important to see if some interests are not addressed at all. The author indicated only those programs that were not part of “main-stream,” where “main-stream” is seen as types of the programs presented on all three channels on the regular basis.

The only channel that has programs with subtitles or gesture doubling for deaf people is ORT, the channel with mixed ownership. Only one news program a day has this option.

All the channels have programs for children. Although only RTV, the government-owned channel, has this type of programs during the regular days on the regular basis (every evening), Saturday and Sunday morning schedules on all the channels have programs for children.

Only ORT and RTV, channel with mixed ownership and government-owned channel respectively, have programs devoted to people with different religion views. ORT has a program devoted to Christians, while RTV has a program devoted to Muslims (people who share Islamic beliefs are almost one third of the total population of Russia). The ORT program runs on Saturday morning around 7 a.m. The program on RTV runs on late Friday morning, around 11 a.m.

Only RTV and ORT channels have programs devoted mainly to the old people, especially those who have participated in the Second World War and the generation that was directly affected by that war. These programs run during mornings.

Only RTV and ORT have programs devoted to those who live in the rural areas. These programs devoted to cultural life of people in these areas. Also it gives some advices on growing plants during the summer time.

All three channels have programs devoted to those who are in the army at the moment. All these programs run on weekend's late mornings. Time is determined by the schedule in the army. Soldiers on required service have days off or days with free choice of time spending on weekends. As many military bases are far from the cities, the only "entertainment" for soldiers is TV. These programs serve a role of a "connector" between the soldiers and their families. All these programs devote some time to read the letters from soldiers and soldiers' families.

In general, there are differences in addressing the different interests of the different groups of population. ORT and RTV, channels that have government as one of the owners of the only owner, demonstrate more diversity in addressing the interests of the different groups of people.

Discussion

Although this study found differences in presenting the education programs and addressing the different interests of different groups of people in content of channels with different ownership structure, further research is needed to fully understand effects of the media ownership on serving the public interest.

As social integration and socialization represent possible effects of mass media on society, question about the ability of mass media with the different ownership structures to form strong national identities should be examined. Results of such study, if combined with results of

this study, will allow for more complete picture on effects of mass media ownership on the ability to serve the public interest.

Also history of channels should be studied in details, as there is a possibility that certain types of programs are present on certain channels due to a tradition. Channels included in analysis have different histories, for example NTV channel did not exist as a channel on the federal level before 1993, while ORT has a long history and some programs shown nowadays are from the past, although with the different titles.

If the government needs to make sure that individuals get the certain types of information and knowledge in mass media messages, different content policies should be introduces. As now content is a function of situation and demand on the market of content (not a function of the dominant ideology as it was before the fall of the USSR), policies are needed to make sure that imperfections of the market are being addressed and corrected.

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