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TALKING WITH THE CONSUMER: CONSUMER ISSUES ON SOVIET TELEVISION

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This article explores how Soviet television engaged in "authoritative discourse" and brought it to the screen. It asks how television helped to shape the Soviet consumer by negotiating consumer issues and generating previously unheard-of publicity. Focusing on Rostov, Leningrad, and Moscow Central Television, it explores how these TV stations were a site of communication between viewers, letter writers, staff, factories, retail services, and party and state institutions responsible for consumer issues. It shows that television played a significant part in normalizing consumer issues by entangling home, consumption, and leisure in a public and private continuum staged on screen. Reproducing the genre of consumer advice and information, it interlaced authoritative discourse with tangible questions of lifestyle and consumer taste, with personal experiences and local events in a more interactive—perhaps even intrusive—way compared to print media and radio. Thus, we observe that the space opened by televisual reproductions of authoritative discourse established emotional bonds between Soviet citizens and Soviet material and media culture.

Keywords: Television; Public Sphere; Consumer Issues; Leisure; Political Communication; Authoritative Discourse

"Obrashchaius' k vam za pomoshch'iu" (I ask for your help) was a very familiar phrase in the letters Soviet citizens addressed to state authorities, government and party officials, and mass media.[1] In the following case from October 1964, TV viewer Valentina G. Saenko from Novoshakhtinsk chose to contact the letters department of the regional Rostov TV station. Saenko was inspired to write after watching a feature on the Rostov domestic services center (Biuro dobrykh uslug). She reported about problems she experienced at her local services center, where she had brought two items of clothing for dyeing and cleaning. Saenko complained that the center had not kept its "ready by" dates. She received back only one piece of clothing, without its hood and belt. She turned to the regional TV program because she thought that it represented the most effective way of pursuing her request:

[1] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 1051, 1964, l. 143.

> It would not be bad, if the employees of the service agencies of our city adopted the experience of the Rostov service people. In fact, we have many shortcomings in this business.... I ask you for help ... remind the domestic services center in the city of Shakhty, which has an intake location in Novoshakhtinsk, that one cannot work this way.[2]

Saenko's complaint was broadcast on the TV program *Pogovorim o vashikh pis'makh* (Let's talk about your letters). The Rostov television's letters department created this twenty-minute program to communicate with the audience about local matters in an involving and engaging way. The head of the department Georgii S. Morozov presented the program, giving a face to the mostly anonymous TV staff behind the camera.

According to the letters department, many letters explicitly thanked the staff of local service facilities, industries, and the retail sector. The letters department aimed to further reinforce this seemingly strong relationship between employees of local companies and local consumers. Therefore, Morozov typically applied the control strategy of criticism and self-criticism. He first praised the importance of the staff and called them a "huge army" that was becoming more and more visible, because the life and standard of living of the Soviet people were steadily improving, making headway towards communism. After presenting two stories that expressed the appreciation and gratitude of some Rostov consumers for the engagement of local employees, Morozov turned to certain aspects that needed improvement. He quoted from letters that "rightly criticized flaws in the area of consumer services." TV viewer Saenko's demands seem to have been successful in that Morozov sternly asked the Shakhty domestic services center to put things right: "We expect the workers of the Shakhty domestic services center to take the most efficient measures."[3] However, the files do not reveal whether the letters really brought about improvements or just remained appeals. At the very least, they generated publicity that was hitherto unheard-of and opened a site of communication between viewers, letter writers, TV staff, factories and retail services, and party and state institutions responsible for consumer issues. The letters promoted and sometimes even launched televised discussions of consumer issues.

The fact that media consumers addressed a mass medium on consumer matters was as such not a new phenomenon. It is remarkable, however, that the Rostov television station evoked viewers' trust in advocating consumers' interests as early as the beginning of the 1960s in a way that seemed to distinguish TV from other media. This raises questions of how Soviet television stepped into the long established discourse on consumer issues on the one hand, and how it related to and engaged in "authoritative discourse" (Yurchak 2005)[4] on the other. Against a background of overwhelm-

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[2] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 1051, 1964, ll. 142–143.

[3] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 1051, 1964, l. 143.

[4] Alexei Yurchak has borrowed the notion of "authoritative discourse" from Mikhail Bakhtin. In this sense ritual acts perpetuated the late Soviet system, but despite their ritual components they did not simply mirror Soviet values and ideological discourses (Yurchak 2005:25–29, 36–76).

ing public rituals and stifling routine procedures, TV was supposed to inform and educate the viewer, but also entertain the audience. Therefore, the authoritative discourse that might work well at meetings, elections, in speeches, or in press releases needed to be staged differently on television. It perhaps needed dramatization and narration, so the audience could be prevented from switching off their sets. These aspects have barely been examined up until now, so that we are able to present an initial hypothesis.

Television was an ambivalent force of privatization, promoting the new home-centered Soviet lifestyle and the nuclear family (Reid 2006b). During the 1960s TV became the most important technical and cultural device that rendered home a place and starting point for negotiations between "ordinary citizens" and the regime about new meanings of everyday life. The medium made home, consumption, and leisure part of a of a continuum between the public and private spheres whose boundaries overlapped, yet were also permeable and shifting. But in what way did TV transform these negotiations on the new Soviet way of life within the shifting continuum of private and public life? To what extent did TV allow for more ambiguities and ambivalences in the authoritative discourse that framed and interlaced this continuum?

This article is an inquiry into the communication between Soviet television and its audience about consumer issues. It refers to the local TV stations of Rostov and Leningrad, as well as Moscow Central Television.[5] I highlight the communicative strategies TV stations employed to address viewer-consumers. How did Soviet TV aim to involve the audience? How did TV offer viewer-consumers information on consumption issues? How did viewer-consumers take up this discourse, and to what extent did they claim their rights on consumption via letters to television stations? To answer these questions, this article mainly explores unpublished and published sources from local and central television boards. These materials cover programming, audience research, and reports about incoming audience letters.

The next section gives a rough idea of the relation between material consumption, politics, and media coverage in the Soviet Union after Joseph Stalin's death. This conjuncture constituted the space of communication into which television stepped, taking up the discourse on consumption with its own program features. The second section explores how TV programs like Rostov Television's *Pogovorim o vashikh pis'makh* and Central Television's *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* (More good products) visualized consumer issues, how viewers reacted to them, and how television interlaced concrete cases with broader debates on consumption.

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[5] I chose Rostov because it is located about one thousand kilometers from Moscow and does not belong to its coverage area. Furthermore, Rostov's regional TV station was on air as early as 1958. Rostov has traditionally been a prosperous city and an economic, cultural, and educational center of European Russia's southwest. Leningrad's TV station was the most important local one and had potentially more liberties than smaller TV stations.

CONSUMPTION, POLITICS, AND MEDIA COVERAGE

Consumer policies during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras were part of a variety of political strategies that aimed to provide the Soviet system with new sources of legitimacy. The Communist Party tied the legitimacy of the socialist system even stronger than before to the idea of material abundance for all (Reid 2002:217, 221). Recent research has demonstrated that consumer rights were a central topic of political communication in socialist societies. Promising to catch up with the United States, Nikita Khrushchev introduced the claim of a rising living standard for all Soviet people into the public discourse. The downside of this was that the regime not only promised more goods, better services, comfortable apartments, and improved household technology, but also expected "ordinary" people to become "proper" Soviet consumers equipped with the "right" socialist tastes, wishes, and consumer practices (Reid 2002; Bönker 2013; Chernyshova 2013; Tikhomirova 2010; Zakharova 2011). Consumption and choice, with all the related aspects of housekeeping, furnishing, dressing, styling, or watching TV, became matters of ordinary people's interest. In the 1970s Soviet consumers learned to be selective, paying more attention to design, technical aspects, and brands (Chernyshova 2013:203).

At the same time, consumer interests were mostly ignored. Among other things, the quality of many consumer durables hardly improved, which remained a problem until the fall of the Soviet Union. Thus, the consumer interest media also had the pragmatic dimension of instructing citizens how to claim warranty in cases of defective commodities or bad consumer services. The Soviet government developed a voluminous legal framework to regulate consumer protection.[6] This, however, functioned as a fig leaf, but reflecting the growing societal claims for consumer protection and for more and better goods. Consistently, newspapers and journals began to cover consumer problems more emphatically and fight for consumer rights (Bogdanova 2002; Bogdanova 2003:170–171).

Print media coverage of consumption dates back to the campaigns of the 1920s and the early 1930s (Kelly and Volkov 1998). However, it gained quantitative and qualitative strength throughout the 1960s and became more and more diversified through new media genres. Both the formal enforcement of consumer rights and increasing media coverage made this period fundamentally different from Stalinist times.

Media representations also corresponded with the invigorated genre of advice literature, popular science periodicals, housekeeping books, and commodity dictionaries during the Khrushchev period. These publications aimed to educate "new" socialist consumers (Attwood 1999; Kelly 2001:312–367; Smoliak 2011). They covered many fields of daily life such as hygiene, health, cooking and nutrition, childrearing, public etiquette, and furnishing. The advice publications instructed the consumer how to use commodities and organize their life around them (Baiar and Blashkevich

[6] Western observers regarded these laws as insufficient to fulfill consumers' needs (see, for example, Darby 1977:182–184).

1962; Vorob'eva et al. 1964; Efremov 1965). While trying to engage the reader, they consolidated the illusion of an attainable perfect consumer world and visualized material abundance.[7]

After Stalin's death, newspapers and journals like *Rabotnitsa, Krest'ianka, Zdorov'e*, or *Ogonek* presented visual representations of consumer issues. In the mid-1950s *Ogonek* had several illustrated editorials with pictorial motifs that concentrated on the theme of the paternalistic welfare state providing good vacation, cultural, and educational facilities. From the late 1950s on, the journal increasingly depicted happy people pursuing leisure activities and accentuated the rising mass production of consumer goods. *Ogonek* also highlighted the "cultured" way of shopping with respectful saleswomen and no queues (De Keghel 2011:82–85). In contrast to their East German colleagues, *Ogonek's* journalists refrained from visually criticizing conditions for the consumer. Although they described certain grievances in written form, they only rarely used photographs or illustrations to criticize shortages. And if they did, they contrasted any negative examples with cases of excellent sales and service practices (86–87). These observations should suffice to indicate the political implications of the long-standing media discourse on consumption into which television entered.

EMBEDDING THE VIEWER: TELEVISING CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMER INTERESTS

Exploring Moscow Central Television's schedules, one discovers several programs that sought to advise viewers on problems of everyday life and raise consumer issues. The first of these programs was launched in the early 1960s.[8] Television took up the established traditions of print media. It adopted the advice genre and stepped into the discourse on consumption and everyday life by presenting viewer-consumers' letters on-screen. These programs covered a variety of topics; consumer letters, however, became an integral part of their schedules.[9] *Nasha pochta* (Our post), *Po vashim pis'mam* (Following up on your letters), *Na voprosy telezritelei otvechaet ministr…* (Minister… responds to viewers' questions), *Stranitsy vashikh pisem* (The pages of your letters), *Otvety na pis'ma zritelei* (Answers to viewers' letters), or *Govorim po vashim pis'mam* (Let's talk about your letters) were just a few programs broadcast by Central Television. It would, however, be inaccurate to suppose that Central Television was unique in developing the letter genre and presentation of consumer issues. The above-mentioned ex-

[7] This strategy would have been familiar to consumers from publications of Stalinist times (Goscilo 2009; Oushakine 2014:212–221).

[8] *Pravda* started to publish the daily television schedule on its back page in April 1959; *Izvestiia* in November 1959. From January 1960 all national newspapers printed the television schedule. From 1965 on, *Pravda* printed weekly schedules every Saturday.

[9] Viewers' letters were also prominent in entertainment features, especially in quiz and music shows, which are not further considered here. In these cases viewers could, respectively, vote for contestants and request music tracks.

ample of the Rostov feature *Govorim po vashim pis'mam* demonstrates that regional TV stations also televised consumer issues by presenting letters focusing on these topics.

Besides these local and central letter programs, program planners developed advice programs that also addressed the consumer. As early as the mid-1950s Central Television and local Leningrad Television launched the program *Dlia vas, zhenshchiny* (For you, ladies), which covered questions TV editors assumed to be of interest to women: fashion, raising children, and housekeeping (Iurovskii 1983:85). Further, *Dlia doma, dlia sem'i* (For the home, for the family) was one of Central Television's first advice programs (Reid 2005:297). A serious problem facing all these programs was that until the early 1970s they were broadcast only sporadically and infrequently (Iurovskii 1983:85–87). *Dlia doma, dlia sem'i* was apparently aired only twice on Saturday evenings in early 1963. Subsequently, the program planners gradually consolidated the program to reach a more stable audience (*Pravda*, February 2, 1963, p. 4; *Pravda*, May 1, 1963, p. 4; *Pravda*, September 5, 1964, p. 4; *Pravda*, November 27, 1971, p. 6). *Dlia doma, dlia sem'i* offered advice on how to arrange a new flat, how to choose the right materials, colors, furniture, and home appliances (Reid 2009:475–477). Leningrad Television's advice program *Sovety molodym materiam* (Advice for young mothers), broadcast as early as 1962, also demonstrated that women constituted an important target audience from TV's earliest days. The program was presented by a professor of medicine who responded to questions about childrearing, hygiene, and the body that viewers addressed to him.[10]

Early audience research found that these topics sparked the interest of certain segments of the TV audience. Although audience research could not claim representativeness at that stage of its development, it constitutes an important source for exploring viewers' tastes and demands. As early as 1962 an overview of more than 2,500 questionnaires completed by employees of factories located in Moscow, Moscow Oblast, and in some nearby cities like Tula, Kaluga, or Ryazan' disclosed that at least some respondents requested more programs on housekeeping, fashion, and domestic topics. Karpova, a saleswoman from Novomoskovsk was, however, perhaps one of only a few viewers who wanted more reports on "new trade organizations."[11] Central Television's 1966 internal report on letters confirmed viewers' growing interest in these topics. The report recorded increasing requests to "resume special programs for women with advice on household and family questions, cosmetics, fashion, cookery, and so on; realize a series on cultured behavior."[12]

This report unfortunately did not specify the actual number of these requests. But the interesting point is that the editors mentioned them, because they obviously considered such requests to have strategic importance for future program planning. Viewer preferences were of special interest, as the TV station's incoming mail was still rather sparse compared with radio stations or some national newspa-

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[10] TsGALI SPb, f. 293, op. 3, d. 132, 1963, l. 14.

[11] GARF, f. 6903, op. 3, d. 184, 1962, ll. 10–11.

[12] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 70, 1966, l. 8.

pers.[13] On the one hand, the idea to establish new advice programs gives us an indication that Central Television was yet to find its place in the media landscape. It was still struggling to adapt existing radio and print formats to its own possibilities and to stand out with its own profile. One strategy was to find out the best way to satisfy the audience's existing demand for features on consumer issues. Moreover, growing popularity among media consumers would have provided further arguments for television to claim its political impact and demand more financial support from the state. On the other hand, viewer requests show that consumer issues were a suitable topic with which to involve the audience, because viewers obviously believed that television promoted the "right" consumer practices and represented a kind of emancipatory claim in advocating for consumer interests.

The modern consumer advice genre was a very interesting media form that developed throughout postwar Europe on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In the 1950s and 1960s it existed in the context of universal visions of social engineering and aimed to shape a modern society of mass consumers (Etzemüller 2009:36). Thus, it was not only a socialist sociopolitical strategy or media genre and would benefit from closer examination in a comparative perspective, though such a comparison is beyond the scope of this article.[14]

Communicating with the audience via letters became a central strategy of Soviet TV because letters could be used not only in advice programs but also in other genres. As early as the beginning of the 1960s, local Leningrad Television broadcast eight programs per month based on viewers' letters.[15]

The practice of using letters was based on theoretical assumptions that were promoted by Soviet media experts and program planners, who attached importance to audience reaction because they perceived it as a way to tailor TV's communication strategies. From their perspective, letters seemed to be "the most perfect channel of communication" with which to analyze viewers' demands (Shonin 1977:87–88). Viewer mail emphasized direct involvement with the audience and conveyed the idea of immediate communication with the viewers. Contemporary media producers, media scholars, media commentators, and even party officials were fascinated by the

[13] The letter office of Central Radio received ten times as many letters as Central Television in 1963. The radio received 675,000 letters compared to 67,990 letters to the television. In 1966 television received about 210,000 letters, radio almost 600,000. National newspapers like *Pravda*, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, or *Trud* got between 300,000 and 700,000 letters a year, although they reached a much smaller audience than did television (GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 34, 1963, l. 1).

[14] The television advice genre was developed in the United States during the 1950s. The West German ARD introduced the first health advice feature in 1953 and added several programs addressing women and housewives. The programs covered house and garden, raising children, fashion, dance courses, and cooking tips. They were based on the claim that TV should be educational, which was supported by contemporary television producers, politicians, and social scientists. The programs envisioned modern lifestyles and tried to craft social behavior. West German television complemented the genre with a series of consumer advice programs covering a wide variety of different topics after the early 1960s. These programs covered consumer issues, money, and everyday life (see Hickethier 1998:163–164, 227–229; Habscheid 2001:173).

[15] TsGALI SPb, f. 293, op. 3, d. 132, 1963, l. 41.

capacity of this new medium to bridge time and distance. They shared the view that television gave "the possibility to speak to the broadest audience. The heads of a city now get into hundreds of homes, into thousands of families at once" (*Pravda*, August 10, 1972, p. 2). *Pravda* published this statement by a provincial Gorkom (City Party committee) secretary in 1972 in a section called "Party Life: The Committee's Working Style." It documents that by the early 1970s party officials had discovered the communicative potential of television. Politics should now be visualized on the screen, and politicians were supposed to perform on TV programs in order to communicate with the audience. In the case presented by *Pravda*, regional politicians regularly discussed and answered viewers' letters on the local Krasnodar Television program *We inform, comment, explain*.

This new strategy was based on the idea that television generated immediacy, that it established viewer participation via letters and thus promoted a dialogue with the audience about the topics it brought up in the letters. Television was also an important tool for political propaganda: "We are convinced: The meetings on TV are a very efficient form of informing the populace. It allows the people to be kept informed about all events going on in the city, the region, the country, to timely react to them" (*Pravda*, August 10, 1972, p. 2).

The television concept of talking to the audience via letters should represent close relations to the party and the government. To consider the often cited "voice of the working people," the "signals from below," to hear people's recommendations, reports, problems, and requests still constituted the guiding principle of late socialist politics, albeit one that was given little more than lip service. Nevertheless television, like any other public institution, was explicitly expected to meet this credo (*Pravda*, May 7, 1972, p. 1). Television was, for example, supposed to teach "socialist competition" in its broadest sense. It should cover efforts to raise labor productivity; the conservation of raw materials, electric energy, fuel, and so on; the quick implementation of achievements in science and production technologies; and the improvements in the quality of consumer goods. The editorial departments—including those of youth and news and documentary programs—were supposed to report on these topics.[16]

Central Television realized the content-related demands in connection with the theoretical approach of viewer involvement, participation, and authenticity by presenting letters in a wide variety of features. Most of them were assigned to the editorial department of propaganda that was required to set consumer issues as one of the central sections of the letters programs and focused on the efforts to improve the quality of consumer goods.[17] Central Television's letters department characterized viewer mail as "serv[ing] as a source of content for new programs."[18]

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[16] GARF, f. 6903, op. 48 ch. 1, d. 175, 1973, ll. 1–3.

[17] *Pravda*, March 12, 1966, p. 4; GARF, f. 6903, op. 36, d. 1, 1971, l. 462. *Otvety na pis'ma zritelei* was broadcast on Central Television's Channel 1 on Saturday early evening (*Pravda*, October, 10, 1964, p. 4).

[18] GARF, f. 6903, op. 48 ch. 1, d. 175, 1973, l. 4.

Thus, the creation of new TV genres was closely related to the swelling mailbag, which in turn challenged TV staff to design new programs to engage with the audience response. During the 1970s advice programs regarding lifestyle, bodily care, and material consumption gained further ground. *Zdorov'e* (Health), *Chelovek i zakon* (Person and law), *Spravochnoe biuro* (Information office), *Dlia vas, roditeli* (For you, parents), and *Nash sad* (Our garden) responded to viewers' request for "practical advice" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1975 god*, pp. 58, 60–61).[19] Some of them were extremely popular. The letters department perceived the "interesting, important topics" of these "necessary programs" to "provoke the activity of the audience." From the point of view of the TV staff the advice programs contributed to viewers' "organization of instructive leisure" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1971 god*, p. 10).

As letters became the all-purpose weapon of Soviet television to convey viewer participation in the 1970s, Central Television's department of propaganda designed new programs that used letters to publicize consumer requests. Let us first turn to the more classic letter programs that, among other topics, established a dialogue about consumer issues with the audience.

POGOVORIM O VASHIKH PIS'MAKH (LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR LETTERS)

Presenting viewers' letters on screen was not just an exercise in reading them out in the manner of a radio presenter. Judging by Central Television's internal reports on viewers' letters from the 1960s, the letter genres faced certain problems and had to be carefully developed. At this time, the internal reports did not refrain from criticism. The editors of Central TV's letter department repeatedly criticized their colleagues in the editorial propaganda department who supervised the editorial subdivision of culture, and way of life. The subdivision received a considerable amount of consumer complaints, but the colleagues did "not show any concern about strengthening the connection to the viewers. They respond to the letters with great delay.... Such a way of working with the letters has become traditional in the department."[20]

Improvement in the processing and presentation of letters took a while to satisfy Central TV's letter department. The department was established in 1957 to register and answer incoming mail that did not directly refer to the program. It also became the main channel of communication between Central TV and its audience, because it monitored the work with the letters and drafted summaries of incoming mail. The delay the letter department criticized referred to the law that letters normally had to be answered by TV staff or should be forwarded to the responsible party or government institution within four weeks.[21] Still, in 1968 some sections of

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[19] The department for popular scientific and educational programming, for instance, received 1,760 letters in 1970, 4,470 letters in 1971, and more than 15,000 in 1974. Almost 20,000 letters were sent in 1975 to *Zdorov'e* alone. *Nash sad* received around 3,500 letters in 1974 and 3,100 in 1975.

[20] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 58, 1964, l. 111.

[21] The letters department was transferred to the newly founded Central Television's main editorial office in 1960. In addition, it was an independent unit within Central Television from 1962 to 1970.

the propaganda department were criticized for their careless handling of viewers' mail.[22] The criticism referred not only to the editors' work with letters behind the scenes, since more than a few viewers repeatedly demanded a better presentation of letters on screen. A locksmith from Volgograd Oblast, for example, pointed out that:

> you read out only three–four comments. You did not talk about the category of your listeners precisely enough. Who responds more often to your broadcasts—younger or older people? Which topics and problems do viewers worry about? … You know, we television viewers would not only like to see the pile of letters on your copy desk but to hear more about their concrete contents. (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1971 god*, p. 33)

It was only by 1971 that the letters report admitted that editorial work with letters on television had generally improved during the previous six months, because it had been performed "more extensively and seriously."[23] Along with new programs created on the basis of viewers' letters, this signaled the increased importance of audience feedback (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1971 god*, p. 33). Obviously, the TV editors learnt to cope with the challenges and demands of the audience, as well as with the guidelines of Central Television's management during the early 1970s. Part of this new strategy of more actively employing letters was that television—like other mass media—tried to capture people's opinions on social, cultural, and political topics. Generally, TV presenters and anchors encouraged viewers to report their grievances and address the corresponding program departments.[24]

As early as the beginning of the 1960s, many viewers welcomed television's efforts to incorporate consumer issues into programming. Although people were still occupied with rather pressing problems concerning housing, pensions, health care, or the search for relatives and friends lost during the war, TV viewers started to write about consumer demands, report product flaws, and raise questions about material consumption that exceeded basic needs.[25] This led to a noticeable increase in incoming mail during the 1960s. Central Television's propaganda department that supervised the consumer complaints programs recorded a swelling mailbag until 1981. This was not least due to new formats like *Po vashim pis'mam*, *Na voprosy telezritelei otvechaet ministr…*, or *Chelovek i zakon,* all launched in 1971. These programs obviously made social, political, and economic issues the subject of discussions that were central to the official ideology and aimed to legitimize the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, they quickly became popular because they related the issues to the television viewers' daily life, repeatedly broached consumer issues, and thus involved the audience (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1971 god*,

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[22] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 79, 1968, l. 9.

[23] GARF, f. 6903, op. 36, d. 1, 1971, l. 462.

[24] Thus, viewers' letters often referred to domestic and foreign political events or local politics. They also contained general reflections on Soviet society, societal values, cultural practices, or consumer problems.

[25] For a typical proportional distribution of letter topics sent to the much more addressed radio in the early 1960s, see GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 34, 1963, l. 8.

pp. 20–21, 31–33).[26] The letters department asserted that *Chelovek i zakon* was initiated by viewers' demands to propagate knowledge of Soviet law. The episode that got the most responses (367 letters) during its first year of airing was the broadcast of December 1971. This led to a press conference by the attorney general who discussed the legal struggle for the better quality of contents (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1971 god*, p. 31). Central Television systematically covered the topic of raising the quality of consumer goods over this initial period. The editors of *Na voprosy telezritelei otvechaet ministr…* invited the deputy attorney general to answer viewers' questions about the measures his agency had taken to control product quality. Like *Chelovek i zakon,* this series received by far the most letters (571) during the first year it was aired. In one of the first broadcasts the editors of *Na voprosy telezritelei otvechaet ministr…* also invited Nikolai V. Timofeev, Minister for the Timber and Wood-Processing Industry. Directly responding to questions viewers had raised in their letters, he explained how his ministry tried to meet increasing consumer demand for furniture (*Obzor pisem telezritelei, ianvar' 1972 god*, p. 17). This appearance inspired 51 viewers to address the editorial office, whereas the following series that presented the minister for consumer services received only four letters (*Obzor pisem telezritelei, fevral' 1972 god*, p. 22). The internal report on television viewers' letters did not explain these fluctuations. The higher number of incoming letters to advice programs like *Zdorov'e* or *Chelovek i zakon* could be due to the fact that these programs could engage more easily in communication with viewers. This is because they offered more reliability with regard to the presenters, the televised topics, and airtime. Health and law were topics broad enough to attract a variety of questions. Viewers could address editorial offices whenever they wished and were not bound to a particular episode to raise their question. Thus, these programs established a continuous flow that, in the case of *Chelovek i zakon,* regularly included consumer issues. TV staff had further learned during the 1960s that viewers much more readily accepted programs when they were regularly presented by the same hosts at a regular time (Iurovskii 1983:85–87). Recognition value thus became the key to higher audience response and was perhaps the missing element in a format like *Na voprosy telezritelei otvechaet ministr…* that constantly changed its topics and panelists. The lower number of incoming letters did not, however, necessarily mean that viewers did not watch this program.

In 1973, the editors of the propaganda department were proud of the highest gain in viewer mail of all editorial offices.[27] This was reflected by a rising number of letters presented on screen: The editorial department of propaganda presented 11.8 percent of its mail in its programs in 1968, only 9.0 percent in 1972, but 20.8 percent in 1973.[28] The new letters policy corresponded with the general tendency

[26] *Chelovek i zakon* was launched in June, *Po vashim pis'mam* in September, and *Na voprosy otvechaet ministr…* in October 1971. Each program was broadcast once a month. Measured on the basis of the mailbag, *Chelovek i zakon* became one of the most successful programs of Soviet television: it received 4,841 letters in 1972, its first full year of broadcast. The number of letters received quickly grew to 160,161 in 1979 and 172,790 letters in 1980.

[27] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 79, l. 3; *Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1973 god*, pp. 6–7.

[28] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 79, l. 3; *Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1973 god*, p. 9.

that most of Central Television's editorial departments brought more letters to the screen.

In this way, editors tried to materialize the idea of immediacy and viewer participation. Letters were not only thought to denounce all kind of problems, but were supposed to establish a real-time dialogue between viewers and the medium in front of a regional or—depending on the program—even national audience.[29] This assessment still prevails among media scholars. They argue that television as the agent of bridging time and space conveys the "immediacy" of connection and communication (Williams 1981:111). British cultural sociologist John Tomlinson reminds us that television actually hides its practice of mediation and artifice of its presenting modes (2007:98–100). The practice of mediation would provoke a dramaturgical effect of a pristine and immediate communication between television and audience via viewers' letters. And indeed, exploring the way Soviet TV programs televised letters, one could agree with Tomlinson's idea that television promoted the illusion of an "untouched" communication (99). The impression of close bonding between viewers and the medium derived in no small part from Soviet TV's practice of presenting letters to the camera. That these letters at first sight often covered individual consumer's interests allowed the communication to appear even more authentic. Televised authenticity reached a much broader audience than any newspaper and was the main asset on which television based its strategy to relate individual and societal interests.

As in the case of TV viewer Saenko from Novoshakhtinsk mentioned at the beginning of this article, editors normally aimed to embed individual cases into a societal context and identify them with broader political and economic problems. The presenter of Rostov Television's *Pogovorim o vashikh pis'makh* placed the complaint in the politically delicate context of the general improvement of the Soviet standard of living on the way towards communism:

> The Soviet government invested more and more money during the last years to expand and develop the cultural and consumer services in the city, as well as in the countryside. And the people have the right to demand that this enormous amount of money causes maximal effect and is for their benefit.[30]

Similarly, this local TV program used other grievances about local consumer services, food industries, or retail trade to make official discourse visible and tangible to "ordinary" consumers.[31] Letters addressed to television thus nourished and inter-

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[29] In 1963, GDR television launched the very popular program *Prisma*. Based on letters, *Prisma* covered grievances in the fields of local politics, the economy, and not least of consumption and consumer services. *Prisma* aimed to compete with West German political features. The editors always tried to seek out those who were to blame (see Merkel and Mühlberg 2000:30–32; for Czechoslovakia, see Lehr 2012, forthcoming).

[30] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 1051, 1964, l. 142.

[31] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 1051, 1964, l. 144–146; GARO, f. R-4237, op. 2 (prod.), d. 754, 1969, l. 4.

acted with politics, because the immediacy of television also provoked an impression that the letters would lead to action.

Rostov Television was not the only local station that aired its own feedback program connecting local consumer matters to the official discourse on consumer issues. Letters programs like *Otvechaem na voprosy Moskvichei* (Responding to the questions of Muscovites), aired by Central Television's editorial department for the Moscow region starting in 1973, or Leningrad Television's *Televizionnyi ezh* (Television hedgehog) from the early 1960s also framed dialogues with local color. *Televizionnyi ezh* was based on letters and often used satire, parody, and caricatures in covering consumer issues. The program's host during the 1970s and 1980s was popular writer and columnist Aleksandr Matiushkin-Gerke. In 1971, Leningrad Television's *Televizionnyi ezh* received the second highest number of letters among all local broadcasts and 5.1 percent of all viewers' mail. Leningrad Television's letters programs enjoyed the privilege of being occasionally broadcast on Central Television's first and second channels.[32]

This widespread airing of consumers' letters impacted inspired dynamics between different segments of the public—the complainants, the indirectly involved television audience, the accused actors in trade, industry, or consumer services, and the various state and party authorities responsible. TV was the only medium that gave authoritative discourse voices, faces, and perspectives simultaneously. TV confronted the rather static, immutable, and predictable language of written and spoken authoritative discourse with its specific immediacy and authenticity. The effect of TV was to visualize the communication between viewer-consumers and the regime. Television allowed it to appear immediate and authentic, as well as to give it an interactive quality. This was the case when a group of citizens of Rostov-on-Don first addressed the local city council and then turned to the local TV station after waiting for a response to their request for half a year. The anchorman of *Pogovorim o vashikh pis'makh* presented their letter and concluded that "we [he and the audience] hope, that the city council will nevertheless answer their request."[33]

The host demonstrated television's typical strategy of creating an interpretive community of television viewers, letter writers, and television staff who stand up for consumers' interests. During programs *Pogovorim o vashikh pis'makh* and *Sprashivali—otvechaem* (You ask, we respond), the presenter confidentially addressed the audience as "Rostovchane," "tovarishchi" (comrades), and "druz'ia" (friends). He also mentioned the names of the letter writers and occasionally even read out their addresses. The TV announcers also tried to consolidate the bonds between the audience and the local TV station by ending the program with the invitation to send complaints, to write about their troubles and problems: "Pishite nam, tovarishchi, zhdem vashikh novykh pisem" (Write to us, comrades, we wait for your new letters).[34]

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[32] TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 145, d. 20, ll. 1–3.

[33] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 1051, 1964, l. 146.

[34] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 1051, 1964, l. 147.The program also publicized the mailing address of the letters department (GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 [prod.], d. 876, 1963, l. 120; GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 [prod.], d. 877, 1963, l. 99).

Whereas *Pogovorim o vashikh pis'makh* emphasized dialogue with the audience, Rostov Television's letters department also broadcast *Sprashivali—otvechaem* that, as early as 1963, followed a more active and interactive script. This 15-minute program aimed to suggest that the audience was the judging authority that could voice its requests on TV. However, we can observe a certain development of the concept over the 1960s. The episode *Dlia vashego stola, khoziaiki* (For your table, hostesses) in September 1963 covered the problem of vegetable supply in the Don region. The broadcast was introduced by an invisible announcer whose colorful narration about the upcoming harvest framed the picture of autumnal Rostov. The camera moved on to farmlands in the Don region, showing workers harvesting their crops. According to the script, the images should convey that "joyful, enthusiastic work is to be felt everywhere." Then the TV camera showed a line of cars, tracing the route of fruits and vegetables to the consumers. Back in Rostov at the "Proletarian market," the audience watched how busy the vegetable trade was. The consumers appeared satisfied with the large selection of fruits and vegetables. In the background the announcer quoted Nikita Khrushchev who asserted that vegetables were a must for every fine table. The anonymous announcer went on praising the party and government for further improvements in the food supply. He also applauded the hardworking staff of retail outlets who were busy processing the harvests. Meanwhile the viewers saw a large Rostov warehouse where all the fruits and vegetables were stored and then delivered to the shops. Then the script inserted a cut and the program's host, the above-mentioned head of the letter department Georgii S. Morozov, took over. He asserted that retail employees did a lot; the television viewers' letters, however, demonstrated that there was still much to improve. As the viewers had requested, he invited the heads and managers of local retail outlets to directly respond to questions certain viewers raised in their letters and to generally explain which measures would be taken to improve the situation for Rostov consumers. *Sprashivali—otvechaem* further emphasized the involvement of the audience, critical investigation, and the claim to link separate segments of the public by presenting a roundtable with the director of a local vegetables distribution center, the deputy head of the regional trade department, a local journalist, and a member of the Rostov Television viewers' council. The camera focused alternately on individual participants when they rose to speak but also took a long shot of all speakers to stage a dynamic discussion. Criticism was brought up by letters, the journalist who presented his observations, and the council member who had visited several local shops in order to talk to the salespeople and consumers about their experiences.[35] The viewers heard a lot of information on production data and the measures party and government authorities were about to take. As always, the ideological practices of critique and self-criticism were prominent, but ultimately praise of achievements prevailed, painting a hopeful, optimistic picture of the future of food consumption.

We will now take a brief look at a later episode of *Sprashivali—otvechaem*. In 1969, the editors produced the episode "Vegetables in the shops," claiming that they

[35] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 1 (prod.), d. 876, 1963, ll. 113–120. This became an established strategy, as other programs also invited managers supposed to be accountable for local grievances (see GARO, f. R-4237, op. 2 (prod.), d. 754, 1969, ll. 4–5).

would not "show the piles of envelopes and to say that we can't read out all the letters." Instead, they gave the screen over to the viewers themselves. To stage a more engaging discussion, the editors interviewed consumers in front of grocery stores, asking "whether residents of Rostov satisfied with the supply of vegetables in the city this summer."[36] This was no live event, although the report offered much more immediacy and authenticity than print-media version could: the audience heard selected audio dialogues with consumers, while still photographs depicted the interviewees who were identified by names and workplaces. They were asked what they had just bought, if they regularly shopped in this store, and if they were satisfied with the supply. Afterwards the editors submitted the comments of interviewees and letters received to the head of the local trade administration, Vsevolod Kirillovich. The program's host let him answer 11 questions that had been prepared in advance. The head of the trade administration used many typical linguistic markers of progress like "increase of capacities and choice," "fulfillment of schedules," "extension of the trade network," and "the speed of delivery increases from day-to-day."[37]

This conversation was a perfect staging of authoritative discourse. Its literal content was rather predictable, boring, and formulaic. The production data could well have been printed in the local party newspaper and would probably have been ignored. That they were presented on screen by a local official, however, created the possibility for new meanings. The presentation of a local official was itself new and interacted with the innovative way of presenting local consumer voices. Thus, TV personalized, localized, and more strongly disseminated the authoritative discourse. Television also moved the discourse much closer to the everyday life of local viewers. The statements of consumers could be critical as well as enthusiastic, but they only seldom reproduced such explicitly ideological markers. Thus, the utterances in the interviews and letters mirrored the increased spaces that, in this case, the local TV opened for voluntary and subjective input into the discourse.

BOL'SHE KHOROSHIKH TOVAROV (MORE GOOD PRODUCTS)

From the early days of Soviet television, viewers steadily complained about the insufficient or boring visual content of news, informational, and documentary programs. An overview of viewers' letters from 1968 assured that "the viewers, who understand well the specificities of television, ask as much as possible for illustrations of the information."[38] By the end of the 1960s, the rise in these complaints referring to the character of the medium convinced TV editors that they could further increase viewers' enthusiasm by better exploiting the technical possibilities of television. Viewers were especially critical of the fact that programs often simply repeated newspaper materials. In turn, several viewers commended those editors, journalists, and commentators who "prepared their own original performances, interviews, and reports."[39]

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[36] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 2 (prod.), d. 759, 1969, l. 8.

[37] GARO, f. R-4237, op. 2 (prod.), d. 759, 1969, ll. 8–19.

[38] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 79, l. 7ob.

[39] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 79, l. 7ob.

This criticism had an impact on the development of new genres. Television of the 1970s was generally characterized by the professionalization of documentary and news programs, as well as by diversification of the schedule. Although consumer issues were not central to program planning as such, they became an integral part of the programming sector that covered advice, information, and education. The diversified screening of consumer topics also reflected the new self-representation of television as a journalistic authority: henceforth, television deliberately presented more critical materials and disclosed all kinds of flaws, shortcomings, mismanagement, or bad organization of the production on screen. This new strategy also included advocating consumer interests and addressing product flaws.

Diversification of programming was not only determined by technical developments, party policies, and initiatives of TV staff, but also resulted from the interplay of these factors with audience responses and expectations. Thus, new programs that included consumer issues reflected attempts at reshaping television to meet audience demands. The rising interest in consumer issues was illustrated by the fact that in 1968 viewers sent more than 3,000 packages containing poor quality household goods to the "satire" section of the propaganda department. A viewer from Lugansk Oblast highly praised this section in his correspondence: "Television does a great thing; it struggles with bunglers and other problems."[40]

To better meet these kinds of expectations the editors of *Po vashim pis'mam* created the series *Tovary—narodu* (Consumer goods for the people) that first aired in January 1972. It was one of the first broadcasts that focused completely on consumer issues and paved the way for the even more sophisticated program *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov,* launched not long after in February 1972. Both were intended as political propaganda and were produced by the propaganda department. The first episode of *Tovary—narodu* presented how the resolutions of the XXIV Party Congress were being realized to meet people's demands for mass consumer goods. The self-promotion of the series' editors was not surprising: they asserted that the program would cover "important, current problems" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1972 god*, p. 13) and urged viewers to engage in discussions about the quality and selection of goods and services.

Although the program was based on letters, the audience response of only 15 letters to the first two airings of *Tovary—narodu* in 1972 was disappointing. However, the numbers consistently grew over the first year. The editors received 422 letters over the course of 1972. Viewers who addressed the editorial office welcomed the program: "It is right that television airs those sorts of important questions such as the rising production of consumer goods and quality improvements," wrote a viewer from Naro-Fominsk near Moscow. Other viewers who lived in villages in the Urals and in Crimea had more practical concerns, asking where they could buy all the commodities that were presented on screen (*Obzor pisem telezritelei, ianvar' 1972 god*, p. 16; *Obzor pisem telezritelei, fevral' 1972 god*, p. 23).

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[40] GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, d. 79, l. 10ob.

Tovary—narodu experimented with new formats. In the beginning it combined answers to viewers' letters with elements of advice, as well as investigations into viewers' complaints about bad product quality. The editors took their camera and went on location to interview the heads of the accused factory or service office. The program well represented the new practice of critically addressing sociopolitical and economic problems. The Soviet journalist and television scholar Aleksandr Iurovskii proposed that the ideological aim of this practice was to "affect the audience" and engage viewers in the struggle against flaws and mismanagement (1983:209).

Viewers especially welcomed this new active strategy of confronting the responsible persons with criticism and thus advocating for consumer interests. A woman from Omsk commended that "your programs inspire confidence that, although rejected goods are still produced, one could strive for positive results in this question and that only high-quality products will get on the shop counters" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1972 god*, p. 25).

Interestingly enough, some viewers admonished the editors for forgetting to report on the quality goods that were out there. Others suggested that the program should further broaden its scope. They proposed that the editors should report on new products and attempt to educate viewers' tastes (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1972 god*, p. 25). A black-and-white clip on YouTube called *Tovary—narodu* gives us a notion of how television took viewers' requests and presented new commodities to the audience. We see a gray-haired host wearing a dark suit in the midst of a variety of consumer goods produced by Khar'kov factories in 1980. He hardly moves and only occasionally takes an umbrella, feather duster, or thermos flask in his hands, presenting them to the camera and praising their qualities. It is only the camera that moves by panning between the shelves on which TV sets, radios, cameras, a slide projector, a music system, a fan, a lamp, remote-controlled space vehicles, or chessboards with historical figures for pieces are placed.

The TV viewer might have received the impression of choice but could barely see any details of the presented goods in the long shot. The host names certain goods and the camera zooms in. The presentation lacks dynamism, as the host does not explain how to handle the electric devices. Instead, he assiduously praises the latest achievements of Khar'kov industry. From today's perspective one imagines a more colorful and vivid presentation demonstrating how to use the commodities, with commentary on how they would improve consumers' everyday lives. At the end of the clip, the host turns to the explicit political significance of his presentation. He embeds the promotion of the local products in the current party campaign that promises to raise Soviet living standards in the run-up to the 11th Five-Year Plan and the XXVI Party Congress in February 1981.[41]

This kind of performance was rather typical for the Soviet discourse on consumption that aimed to combine quantity and quality, although consumers steadily complained about limited access to and poor quality of products. In all likelihood,

[41] The clip is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tZ_dD5SEWw. Unfortunately, Central Television's internal reports on letters give no information about the fate of *Tovary—narodu* after 1972. Thus, we cannot be sure that this clip actually represents the original program.

this presentation did not exploit the technical possibilities of the medium and thus did not cause real excitement among the audience, as it appeared like a televised product nomenclature. Yet, a TV program was easier to access and at least offered a quick overview.

Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov was also supervised propaganda department and was from the very beginning connected to political campaigns to raise Soviet living standards and product quality. The following anecdote illustrates this relationship to authoritative discourse even better: renowned Soviet TV critic and film scholar Vasilii G. Kisun'ko is quoted as saying that Leonid Brezhnev himself proposed the title of the program to Sergei Lapin, the head of Gosteleradio (the State Committee for Radio and Television) (Razzakov 2009:85).

The rising importance of consumer issues for the editorial work of Soviet television was further mirrored by a reorganization of this office in 1973. From this time programs like *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov, Po vashim pis'mam,* and *Na voprosy telezritelei otvechaet…* were assigned to the editorial department covering issues of the Soviet industry (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1973 god*, p. 20).

Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov was a 30-minute program broadcast twice a month on Saturdays at 11 o'clock in the morning on Channel 1. It adopted the sections that *Tovary—narodu* had already introduced, but benefited more from the technical possibilities of dynamic visualizations. Involving the audience and referring to topics raised in the viewers' letters, the editors aimed to create immediacy and authenticity. Therefore, they regularly took TV cameras to production plants and factories, filmed the production process, and interviewed employees, directors, and managers. The audience response obviously welcomed this strategy. *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* seemed to prove that the swelling mailbags documented an improved, diverse program. The editors of Central Television's letters department affirmed that the editorial offices paid greater attention to viewers' letters and tested "different forms to work with them on the screen" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1973 god*, p. 14). Thus, in 1973 Central Television's propaganda department traced its threefold letter increase back to the longer programs, as well as new programs like *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* that emphasized letters in order to create an "embedded viewer."

The viewer correspondence sent to *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* in 1973 grew five times in comparison to 1972 but accounted only for 1.6 percent of the whole propaganda department's mail, placing it in the fourth place. The two other extremely popular programs—Sergei S. Smirnov's *Poisk* (The search) and the earlier-mentioned advice program *Chelovek i zakon*—were unrivaled and together received 85.3 percent of the entire department's mail (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1973 god*, pp. 14–15, 23, 29–30).[42] Central Television's internal reports on letters from 1973 explained the rising success of *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* with regard to its "very broad use of viewer letters" that:

[42] Writer Sergei S. Smirnov was one of the most popular Soviet TV hosts and invited interesting people of all professional fields to talking about their "creative search" in life. His program *Poisk* alone received almost 62,000 letters in 1973.

> impart massiveness, significance, fighting spirit. It was exactly with the help of the public [*obshchestvennost'*] using audience letters that the department succeeded in contributing to the solution of economic tasks concerning the increase in production and the improvement in quality of mass consumer goods. (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1973 god*, pp. 23–24)

One could conclude from this kind of statement that the internal reports on letters were attempts by editors of letter departments to promote their own interests within the authoritative discourse. They aimed to solidify their own position within television with its different interest groups—artistic, technical, financial, staff working behind or in front of the camera, and so on—as preservers of the dialogue between television and its audience. However, many viewers engaged in the dialogue via their letters and took the opportunity to participate in the field of communication TV opened. Internal reports certainly represent only a small proportion of any program's mail. We cannot prove that they constituted representative samples or demonstrate how audience response related to the "silent" viewers who did not send letters to the editorial office. Nevertheless, I suggest that the amount of incoming mail also hints at the number of "silent" viewers.

The upward curve of incoming mail reflects the audience's strong and rising interest up to the mid-1970s. Compared to *Tovary—narodu, Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* quickly multiplied the audience response. It received 825 letters in January 1975 alone and more than 10,000 in 1979.[43] Judging from its mailbag, *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* was one of the most popular programs on Central Television. There were certainly programs that received much more mail, but there were also many broadcasts that received minimal viewer response.[44] The audience response to *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* remained constant until 1980 and then began to decline until the beginning of perestroika.

Table 1. **Viewers' letters to *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov***

1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
412	2,024	5,875	10,808	11,072	9,502	10,571	8,645	7,762	5,661	6,609

That viewers felt welcome to report their ideas and complaints seemed related to the efforts of TV editors to improve the program according to their perceptions of the audience requests. For this purpose they asked viewers, for example, to respond to a questionnaire and organized a collective viewing with factory workers in Klin, not far from Moscow (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1975 god*, p. 20). In 1976, viewers proposed that a regular segment should be included about repair services. This, at least in the editors' own portrayal, was the reason that motivated the editors to launch recurring segment "Aktual'nye problemy kachestva" (Current quality problems) (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1976 g.*, p. 28).

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[43] GARF, f. 6903, op. 36, d. 40, 1975, ll. 6–7; *Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1979 god*, p. 27.

[44] The quantity of letters sent to Central Television multiplied tenfold, up to 400,000 from 1960 to 1970. Television's incoming mail continued to rise until it stagnated at a level of 1.3–1.8 million letters in the late 1970s, when nearly all Soviet households were equipped with TV sets (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1977 g.*, p. 3).

During the first two or three years after launching the program, the editors gradually refined the script. Up to 1975 they created segments such as "Otvechaem na vashi pis'ma" (We respond to your letters), "Telezriteli rasskazyvaiut" (Viewers tell), "Iarmarka brakodelov" (Trade fair of bunglers), "Televisionnyi fel'eton" (Televised feuilleton), and "Gosudarstvennyi znak kachestva prisuzhden" (State quality mark awarded) that were solely based on viewers' letters. In 1974, the editors added a segment to "Iarmarka brakodelov" that was called "Braku—zaslon" (Backstop against defective goods). It was presented by a member of the State Committee on Standards (Gosstandart SSSR) and was another example of how TV brought authoritative discourse to the screen. It was not simply a lecture on future improvements, but the presenter referred to specific complaints—a strategy that viewers welcomed and responded to by talking about their own experiences (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za iiul' 1974 goda [i 1 polugodie]*, pp. 6–7).

Later the editors also included the segment "Komandirovka po vashim pis'mam" (Assignment to investigate your letters). It aimed to suggest that viewers were not only participants but also initiators of activity, as the editors took letters as an opportunity to visit accused factories and retail shops. The rubric "Posle nashei kritiki" (After our criticism) presented feedback and reactions of the blamed organizations on the screen. As many viewers asked to learn about concrete improvements and follow-up measures taken after criticism, the program introduced "Mery priniaty" (Measures taken) in 1975. "Mery priniaty" staged viewers' complaints and suggestions alongside the ensuing confrontation with the accused factories and the results. This was done by screening the reply of a state committee member in response to a critical letter sent in to Central Television. The staging, however, was not very attractive, because the camera just focused on the letter and the voice-over read it out monotonously. Nevertheless, the message was obvious: the program claimed to protect consumer interests on the basis of audience participation.[45]

Internal reports on the letters reveal that the topics the viewers were concerned about and the expectations they had hardly changed until perestroika. The audience of *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* demanded critical journalism that made clear the gap between promises and reality and reflected the viewers' own experiences. The presentation of critical materials became the benchmark with which the audience judged the program. A viewer from former Kuibyshev in 1975 wrote: "The program *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* is topical, necessary, and very important. However, its criticism has lessened recently."[46]

The program complemented the broadcasts that covered consumer issues not only because of its critical attitude, but also because of its own specific claim to find solutions to the indicated consumer problems, to help viewers, and to reveal the persons responsible. The incoming letters demonstrate that the viewers who addressed the program readily accepted TV's self-representation as a critical authority throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. In this sense, a viewer from Baku reminded the editors in 1975: "I think that your program is not conceived as advertising for good commodities (for this, there is the magazine *New goods*), but to reveal the reasons for

[45] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yspv1m44l5A [26:55] (Retrieved September 1, 2014).

[46] GARF, f. 6903, op. 36, d. 40, 1975, ll. 10–11.

substandard products."[47] A viewer from Krasnodar Krai made the claim even clearer: "I wish, I strongly wish that public opinion from the side of the television turns out to be stronger than any administrative barriers in the struggle for product quality" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za fevral' 1977 g*., p. 11).

The program's audience maintained these high expectations until perestroika. Even in 1985, a viewer from Tomsk encouraged the TV editors by saying that he considered the program to be "extremely necessary as it covers severe problems of our daily life" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za fevral' 1985 g*., p. 18). Statements like this suggest that viewers still reproduced authoritative discourse. These statements, however, were also slightly ambiguous, as they reminded the regime of its own claim to improve the supply of consumer items and product quality. Nothing would have been more destructive to the Soviet system than breaking off this communication channel between audience and TV.

Likewise, the viewers were consistent—also until perestroika—with restpect to the topics about which they wrote to the program. They focused on complaints about unsatisfactory consumer services, the badly functioning retail trade, inferior product quality, or insufficient supply of goods (cf., e.g., *Obzor pisem telezritelei za oktiabr' 1975 g*., p. 9; *Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1980 g*., p. 22). The editors of the internal reports probably had little scope to alter authoritative discourse, as they were themselves constitutive parts of it. However, slight ambiguities appeared even in the course of the formulaic reproduction of the authoritative discourse. The editors did not try to find any reasons when mail coming to the program started to decline in 1981. Also, they did not propose any new strategies to win back the interest of the audience. Nevertheless, with declining audience response the internal reports on letters addressed to *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* also lost their dynamism and empathy. They became processed more briefly, simply, and automatically. Whereas the editors portrayed all their serious efforts as causing positive audience response, after 1981 they typically started with a loveless routine sentence like this: "As usual, complaints dominate the mail to the program *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov*." Thus 1981, and the generally deteriorating economic situation in the Soviet Union, might have been a watershed with regard to the immutability of authoritative discourse on consumer issues.

Until then, the way viewers were quoted on the program suggests that these kinds of broadcasts were relatively successful in conveying the impression that television defended consumers' interests or at least contributed to the improvement of consumer issues. The editors blew their own trumpet and referred to letters that expressed gratitude in cases when television had offered practical help. These letters of thanks often sounded like this one sent by a couple from Karatau in Kazakhstan who successfully complained and then enjoyed their new TV set very much:

> Dear employees of the program *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov*! After we asked you for help, our rejected TV set Gorizont was replaced by a new television Izumrud in the stationary shop within half a month. This time the TV set is good, with excellent sound and picture. Many thanks for your help. (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za fevral' 1977 g*., p. 11; *Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1977 g*., p. 20)

[47] GARF, f. 6903, op. 36, d. 40, 1975, ll. 10–11.

These words of gratitude suggest not only that a certain number of viewers regarded TV as an advocate of consumer interests. The overviews of letters also painted a normalized picture of Soviet material culture that embraced its flaws and deficiencies. The televisual coverage further emphasized the significance of consumer items for Soviet everyday life. Programs like *Tovary—narodu* and *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* propagated a variety of images of consumption, consumers, commodities, and constituted at the same time a space in which consumers communicated positive as well as negative emotional bonds towards consumer goods. The viewers did this in different ways. Whereas the couple from Karatau endowed with emotion their TV set, others drafted an almost affectionate relationship toward a long-serving household item and converted its reliability to praise for the factory staff. Viewers repeatedly charged the individual significance of a consumer item in their private life with societal relevance. Letters like that of a woman from the Georgian city of Tkvarcheli show that viewers supposed their emotional bonding to Soviet lifestyle to be so common that TV seemed to be the obvious medium to convey their affirmative attitude to the audience:

> Twenty years ago, the refrigerator of the brand Saratov-II appeared in our family. It worked without any need for repair for all these years, on weekends, without any leave. We value this refrigerator very much, as we received it as a gift on our son's birthday. Our son turns 21, and the refrigerator works faultlessly. One needs to tell about such workforce collectives on TV, to give the floor to the management of the factory, to leading workers, that is to those who need to be thanked for honest work, for profound respect for the people. I ask the program's editorial office to report on the work of the Saratov Refrigerator Plant, about its employees, about their life and honest work, about how they succeed in putting out such a durable product that brings joy to every house. (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za fevral' 1977 g.*, p. 11)

The choice of these quotes in the internal reports on letters followed the traditional Soviet rationale of criticism and praising of achievements. The editors gave viewers not only a chance to demand that successful factory staff be reported on but also to request a ceiling on food prices. The explicit mention that viewers reproached the program for "publicizing consumer items that are not available for retail sale (e.g., sewing machines)" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1980 g.*, p. 23) seemed to consciously reveal television's balancing act between two contradictory constraints: television had to satisfy viewers by advocating consumer issues and illuminating consumption flaws, but it also had to avoid systematic criticism of the sociopolitical system. This was a delicate task, as viewers themselves embedded the consumer issues of the program in the political context of the general improvement of the Soviet standard of living on the way towards communism: "Our life improves from year to year; the consumer demand for nice furniture, good coats, durable shoes increases. And it is very pleasant that our factories try to satisfy the growing needs of the population." In a similar way to this viewer from Chelyabinsk, a woman from Krasnoyarsk asserted that one could be "very happy to see how our welfare grows, how the product quality improves. Here in Krasnoyarsk we have not had for a long time

now any particular difficulties buying a television set, a washing machine, or a refrigerator" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za oktiabr' 1975 g*., p. 9).

If we take these statements as viewers' voluntary input to the discussion of consumer issues, we see how some viewers reproduced the linguistic markers of progress, better consumer goods, and an improving standard of living that characterized authoritative discourse. They also interlaced them with personal experiences, with local events and observations. The audience response to *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* demonstrated that the program made consumer issues an anchor point of communication. It enabled viewers to interact with authoritative discourse, to embed parts of it into their own perception, to reproduce it, but also to benefit from it. In this sense a viewer from Vladivostok applauded the segment "Aktual'nye problemy kachestva" that was said to have been inspired by viewers' ideas: "I did not know until your broadcast that factories plan warranty repair. You were right to say that the factories should be economically accountable to the consumer.... We have to find ways that make factories take a real economic responsibility towards the consumer" (*Obzor pisem telezritelei za 1976 g*., p. 28).

We could conclude from this kind of statement that the relationship between audience and television was quite interactive, although it began to decline in this program genre during the early 1980s. Until then, television had shaped the demands of consumers by visualizing consumer issues and by engaging in consumer politics.[48] TV programs like *Bol'she khoroshikh tovarov* suggested that television became an advocate of consumers' interests and created interpretative communities in front of the screen.

CONCLUSION

Television played an important part in normalizing consumer issues by interlacing home, consumption, and leisure in a public–private continuum presented on screen. Reproducing the genre of consumer advice and information, it interlaced authoritative discourse with tangible questions of lifestyle and consumer taste, with personal experiences and local events in a more interactive, perhaps even intrusive way compared with print media and radio. Television needed to stage authoritative discourse much more at the viewers' requests and to embed it into viewers' everyday life. It therefore aimed to involve the audience by inviting viewer-consumers to communicate with the editors about their experiences, ideas, and suggestions. In the 1960s, television adopted the strategy that newspapers and radio had already established by printing and reading out letters. Television thus did not revolutionize communication with the audience as such, but it gradually refined the advice genre and complemented the discourse on consumer issues throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

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[48] Susan E. Reid established that consumers' criticism of consumption flaws, negotiations on aesthetics, form, or durability gained strength in and through the official media discourse during the 1960s. She argues that these practices document the communicative interaction between mass media shaping demanding consumers who then took up and reflected on this discourse (Reid 2006a:252; for newspapers see Bogdanova 2002, 2003:171).

The televising of letters and the involvement of the audience quickly became an important strategy of Soviet television that was welcomed by many viewers. Television complemented the ritual practice of letter writing that allowed for criticizing local flaws with its potential dynamic of sound and images. Soviet television pushed the normalization of consumer issues by augmenting the practice of letter writing with elements of interaction and participation. The audience got used to watching how a popular TV program's presenter took a viewer's complaint about defective products and interviewed, for example, the deputy minister for light and food industries about measures to improve the situation of Soviet consumers. Viewers took part when journalists asked a local head of the administration of consumer services about problems of public housing, when they visited shoemakers and garment workers as representatives of local consumer services, or asked the collective of a shoe factory about product improvements.

Soviet television's specific benefit was that its new forms of audience participation further disseminated authoritative discourse about consumer issues, because it was embedded in viewers' everyday life. This strategy was not without risk. As an unintended consequence it could have reinforced the perception of difference between the personal experiences of everyday consumer life and official claims. Indeed, we cannot be sure how viewers actually assessed the value of the information, how they interpreted it and applied it to their everyday life, as we rely solely on the internal letter reports.

We could suppose that TV at first accelerated the normalization of authoritative discourse, as it easily disseminated ideological language to a broad audience. However, the inherent dynamic of television was not very suitable for the circular model of language the late Soviet system entailed. Whereas, as Alexei Yurchak argues, *Pravda* was easily able to publish anonymous, hyperindividual editorials without identifiable authors or voices of eyewitnesses, TV could not. It essentially needed voices, faces, and perspectives. Yurchak demonstrates that the narrative structures of authoritative texts referred to the past and future but not to the present (2005:62). Television, however, bridged time and space by presenting voices, faces, and perspectives. It was a very current medium and subsisted on promptness and speed, on immediacy and authenticity. The creation of knowledge and meaning was much more insecure due to viewers' uses of the medium compared to the reading of newspapers. Formulaic speech on television quite quickly risked losing any literal meaning, which could have caused rejection and a feeling of absurdity.[49] All this challenged television to interlace authoritative discourse with the viewers' everyday life, to involve them and benefit from their input. Thus, television involved their audience much more directly than other media.

The fact that viewers "voluntarily" maintained their communication with television about consumer topics demonstrates that TV supported the normalization of the late Soviet lifestyle. The audience welcomed these new strategies.

[49] Many former Soviet television viewers recall this response on watching Brezhnev's speeches on TV (Yurchak 2005:97).

Internal reports on letters document that topics and expectations with which the viewers addressed Soviet television up to 1985 generally remained the same, although we can observe a certain change in the letters presented in the early 1980s. With the decline of audience response to the programs, the reproduction of authoritative discourse became more frozen and shallow. Up until this point, we observe the space the televisual reproduction of authoritative discourse opened for establishing emotional bonds to Soviet material and medial culture. We therefore should assume that television probably created lasting bonds for a certain number of viewers.

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РАЗГОВОР С ПОКУПАТЕЛЕМ: ОБСУЖДЕНИЕ ПРОБЛЕМ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЯ НА СОВЕТСКОМ ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИИ

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В настоящей статье рассматривается вопрос о том, каким образом советское телевидение было ангажировано «авторитарным дискурсом» и как воплощало его на телеэкране. Как удавалось телевидению, обсуждая потребительские проблемы, оказывать на публику беспрецедентное рекламное воздействие и способствовать формированию советского потребителя? Базой для исследования стали архивные материалы регионального (ростовского, ленинградского) и Центрального телевидения. Автор рассматривает, как региональные телевизионные станции стали посредниками между зрителями, авторами писем в студию, сотрудниками телевидения, фабрик, предприятий розничной торговли и партийными и государственными учреждениями, отвечающими за вопросы потребления. В статье показано, что телевидение в полной мере участвовало в нормализации потребительских проблем, объединяя в инсценированном на экране публично-приватном континууме и домашнюю жизнь, и потребление, и свободное времяпрепровождение. Воспроизводя жанр советов потребителям, телевидение совмещало авторитарный дискурс с обсуждением насущных вопросов стиля жизни и потребительского вкуса, личного опыта и событий местного значения, тем самым увеличивая его интерактивность (если не сказать – навязчивость) по сравнению с печатными средствами массовой информации и радио. Это делает очевидным, какой простор для установления эмоциональных связей граждан с советской материальной и медийной культурой открывался благодаря телевизионному воспроизведению авторитарного дискурса.

Ключевые слова: телевидение; публичная сфера; вопросы потребления; досуг; политическая коммуникация; авторитарный дискурс