



# Information and Empire

Mechanisms of Communication in Russia

1600-1850

EDITED BY SIMON FRANKLIN AND KATHERINE BOWERS



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*Edited by Simon Franklin  
and Katherine Bowers*

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## 6. Information and Efficiency: Russian Newspapers, ca.1700–1850

*Alison K. Smith*

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At the end of 1702, while he was engaged in war with Sweden, Peter the Great decreed that a newspaper be established to spread information about “military and every sort of affairs” to “the people of Muscovy and of neighbouring states”. The newspaper (the word used was *kuranty*, a seventeenth-century holdover soon to be replaced by the word *gazeta*) was to be compiled from reports from the state’s various chanceries, all sent to the Monastery Chancery, and printed there in the state printing house.<sup>1</sup> Within a month, the first issue of this state-sponsored *Vedomosti* (*The News*) was published, marking the beginnings of Russia’s history of newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Over the next century, imperial decrees founded other newspapers (and a few independent newspapers appeared, as well), nearly all based in Moscow or St Petersburg institutions. Then, in the 1830s, the number and scope of official newspapers in the empire was expanded significantly when a series of provincial newspapers (*gubernskie vedomosti*) was established, again by official decree.

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1 *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, Series 1 (1649–1825) (hereafter *PSZ 1*), no. 1921.

2 Historians of Russian journalism usually take this event as their starting point, reifying its status as Russia’s first newspaper, though others find its erratic publication a “disqualification” from that status, as in Louise McReynolds, *The News Under Russia’s Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 19.

Newspapers in Imperial Russia have most often been interrogated as part of a world of print culture, as sites where something like a civil or civic society might develop. This practice comes largely out of a focus on the later nineteenth century, when a “mass-circulation” press developed, bringing with it a space for the development of a public sphere.<sup>3</sup> Earlier newspapers, however, are difficult to discuss in these terms. It is in part due to this kind of focus that Peter the Great’s *Vedomosti* has played an awkward role in the history of newspapers. It came first, but, as Lindsey Hughes put it, “controls from above and lack of initiative and expertise from below meant that a Russian free press was still in the distant future”.<sup>4</sup> The general desire to focus on newspapers and their role in developing a civil or civic society may also explain why historians of journalism in Russia have generally skimmed over newspapers in favour of thick journals, where figures like Catherine the Great, Nikolai Novikov, and the first generation of the Russian intelligentsia appear as publishers and regular authors.<sup>5</sup>

Less discussed in histories of the Russian press has been the role of newspapers in Imperial Russian governance. In many ways, however, particularly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, newspapers were perhaps above all intended to play roles in policing information: in spreading it from the imperial state, in collecting it from the population, and in allowing a certain degree of information sharing between lower-ranking administrative bodies and even between individuals. Gary Marker argued that during the eighteenth century in particular, “Russia’s rulers aggressively attempted to use the printing press to convey their own absolutist vision of politics and society to the entire populace”.<sup>6</sup> Although he tempers this claim with a description of the ways that individual authors and publishers had a rather different set of interests in the wider world of print, newspapers viewed narrowly do in many ways fit this vision of print as a tool. In particular,

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3 McReynolds, *The News Under Russia’s Old Regime*, pp. 1–2, pp. 11–13.

4 Lindsey Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 66.

5 P. N. Berkov, *Istoriia russkoi zhurnalistiki XVIII veka* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1952), p. 21; B. I. Esin and I. V. Kuznetsov, *Trista let otechestvennoi zhurnalistiki (1702–2002)* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 2002), pp. 8–25, p. 30.

6 Gary Marker, *Publishing, Printing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700–1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 10

newspapers in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Russia become a kind of information technology, one of “those mechanisms that are used to organise, present, store, and retrieve information”.<sup>7</sup> This could be information about international relations, about domestic reform, about crop and weather conditions, about prices and financial affairs, or about social control. All of these elements are reflected in the laws governing newspapers and their publishing.

From the time Peter the Great established the *Vedomosti* as the first civil newspaper in Imperial Russia through the middle of the nineteenth century, laws set out the parameters under which the Russian Empire’s newspapers operated.<sup>8</sup> The intent behind those many laws focussed on a series of issues, all to do with controlling the distribution of information. They set out rules for who could publish newspapers. They set out rules for the sorts of information about the imperial state the newspapers should disseminate. They set out rules for notices that ought to be published in newspapers. They set out parameters for oversight and censorship. And they set out a financial structure that emphasised certain of these elements as particularly important. In so doing, they traced out a network of information to be sent initially out of Moscow and St Petersburg. This network disseminated information from the imperial state and from local administrations, and eventually allowed information to move back and forth between individuals, as well. In the second third of the nineteenth century this system expanded dramatically with the introduction of provincial newspapers meant to ease the circulation of information to an ever-wider audience. However, all through this period, as newspapers were consistently legislated as methods of information transfer, they were also evolving into rather less controllable sites, where other kinds of information created other visions of the Russian world. The laws imagined a perfectly efficient

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7 David R. Maines, ‘Varieties of Information Technology: An Editorial Introduction’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 21. 3 (1998), 221–24 (p. 221).

8 The discussion below draws primarily on the *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, the “complete” collection of the laws that first, does not always include the discussions that led to individual decrees, and second, is not actually complete. Despite these issues, it still acts as an entry into the desires of the state, although the results of those desires were far more complicated than the decrees themselves envisioned.

information technology; the newspapers themselves were far more unruly.

The first newspaper, Peter's *Vedomosti*, was compiled from information sent to the state printing house, then under the control of the Monastery Chancery and based in Moscow. Gradually, responsibility for the newspaper moved to St Petersburg, a move codified in 1728 when a Senate decree gave responsibility for publishing to the Academy of Sciences. Founded only in 1724, the Academy of Sciences had a printing press and the ability to print "in Latin, German, and Russian dialects" (which meant that it had all three typefaces) and was starting to transmit news gleaned from foreign newspapers within Russia itself. Now the Senate decreed that the Academy of Sciences press ought to publish domestic news, as well.<sup>9</sup> As a result, by the middle of the eighteenth century, Russia had two newspapers, one based in St Petersburg and printed by the Academy of Sciences (usually referred to as the *St Petersburg Vedomosti*), and one in Moscow eventually printed by the new Moscow University (the *Moscow Vedomosti*).<sup>10</sup>

According to official decrees, the clear goal of these official newspapers was to disseminate information from the state to the general public. Practically, this led to *Vedomosti* that were quite short, and which featured a mix of news from abroad and closer to home. One issue reported on military news from Warsaw and England, on the travails of the Genevan ambassador in Constantinople, and on news of ships carrying gold and silver from the Americas sunk in the Atlantic (to the dismay of merchants everywhere). Domestic news was limited to a report on the status of the ice on the river Neva in St Petersburg (it was now traversable on foot).<sup>11</sup> Other editions contained only a single report on a battle of particular importance.<sup>12</sup> Richard Pipes saw Peter the Great's establishment of his *Vedomosti* as marking "a dramatic constitutional innovation", part of Peter's turn from secrecy toward "tak[ing] the people into his confidence".<sup>13</sup> Looking at the way news

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9 PSZ 1, no. 5267.

10 For an overview, L. P. Gromova, ed., *Istoriia russkoi zhurnalistiki XVIII–XIX vekov* (St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 2003), pp. 14–27.

11 *Vedomosti* (St Petersburg), 8 December 1715.

12 *Vedomosti* (St Petersburg), 28 November 1715.

13 Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 129.

was reported during his reign, it seems that, above all, the tsar wanted his people to know more about the world around them—the *Vedomosti* of his era feature foreign news almost to the exclusion of everything else. This is fully in keeping with Peter’s mania for all things foreign; knowledge of the world would make Russian subjects citizens of the world.

In 1725, in the early months of the reign of Catherine I, a decree reiterated that “all important matters other than secret news” should be shared in print with the public by the colleges and chanceries of the state.<sup>14</sup> When news-gathering responsibility was transferred to St Petersburg and the Academy of Sciences, the terms of the 1725 decree stayed in force. All colleges and chanceries were to send important information to the Academy for publication. The laws did not clearly define “all important matters”, but the contents of the newspapers that resulted seem much the same as what had appeared in the reign of Peter. A single issue might contain news of the King of Sweden’s success at the hunt, earthquakes in Italy, military and diplomatic developments in Constantinople, and the report of a celebration at the Russian court.<sup>15</sup> Later laws rarely address this kind of news explicitly, but do occasionally mention it, as when a 1769 Senate decree noted that information about the empire’s successes against the Turks in its current war were being regularly published in the St Petersburg newspapers.<sup>16</sup>

Later in the eighteenth century, laws most often focussed on newspapers as methods of disseminating not news from abroad, but basic information from inside the empire. As laws laid out responsibilities for various new bureaucratic offices, they often also included demands that certain kinds of transactions or activities be published in the newspapers. Catherine the Great’s Provincial Reform of 1775 laid out extensive rules for the administration of her lands. New local institutions were to publish certain kinds of transactions in St Petersburg and Moscow newspapers. Purchases of real estate, in particular, were to be made public in the central newspapers. Anyone who wished to contest such a purchase had two years from the time of publication to make his or her

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14 PSZ 1, no. 4694.

15 *Rossiiskie vedomosti* (St Petersburg), 11 December 1725.

16 PSZ 1, no. 13304.

case.<sup>17</sup> Provincial offices were also to publish all sorts of other news that the state wanted the larger population to know. They were to advertise public auctions, particularly of state lands. They were to give notice of outstanding wages owed to state servitors. They were to place notices of undecided legal affairs. They were to inform the public of bureaucrats appointed to new positions.<sup>18</sup>

Newspapers were also brought to bear on a particular concern of eighteenth-century governance: fugitives and vagrants. From at least the era of Peter the Great, the imperial state had sought to control its population through requiring passports, initially hand-written, and, later on printed forms. The goal was to wipe out fugitives and vagrants and thereby make the entire population productive.<sup>19</sup> The reality was that vagrancy continued to be a real problem, as local police arrested many travellers who were either without documents, or who had expired or otherwise doubtful documents. In 1765, a Senate decree on fugitives and vagrants told local police officials to question such criminals carefully, and then, “so that owners may know of them”, to publish accounts of those they had detained in the newspaper of the Academy of Sciences.<sup>20</sup>

Two decades later, a request from local officials in the Caucasus flipped this responsibility for publishing. By this time, Catherine the Great had instituted a new policy of granting amnesty to fugitives, but officials in the Caucasus found this an additional burden on their resources.<sup>21</sup> There were so many fugitives living in the region, and transportation was so challenging, that returning those fugitives to their proper places was too big a task. As a result, they asked first for more support, and second that serf owners place notices of their fugitive serfs in newspapers for ease of identification (and so that those serf owners could be approached to pay for the return of their serfs, or, instead, to let them transform themselves

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17 *PSZ* 1, no. 14392, st. 205, 487. A few months later, a second decree clarified these instructions: all such notices had to include the price paid for a piece of land. *PSZ* 1, no. 15109.

18 *PSZ* 1, no. 15212; no. 15794; no. 18184; no. 18637.

19 Simon Franklin, ‘Printing and Social Control in Russia 1: Passports’, *Russian History*, 37 (2010), 208–37, esp. pp. 214–24.

20 *PSZ* 1, no. 12506.

21 On the amnesties, see Alison K. Smith, ‘“The Freedom to Choose a Way of Life”: Fugitives, Borders, and Imperial Amnesties in Russia’, *Journal of Modern History*, 83, 2 (2011), 243–71.

into state peasants and receive a credit toward the next military draft in return).<sup>22</sup> The Senate approved this proposal, though the language is unclear—was this a demand, or a voluntary measure for those who wished to have fugitives returned to them? Was it to apply only in this particular case, or to set new precedent?

Already by the 1740s, newspapers were also seen as places to spread more general information about the state of the Russian Empire. In 1744, Empress Elizabeth decreed that the Academy of Sciences' newspaper should publish accounts of new converts to Orthodoxy; the decree was sparked by two members of her court, one Catholic, one Lutheran, who had recently converted and taken new baptismal names.<sup>23</sup> The demand that such conversions be made public served two purposes. The first was practical: people needed to know the new names. The second spoke to Elizabeth's own strong evangelical Orthodox streak, and served to publicise a kind of activity she herself wished to encourage.

Catherine II expanded the kind of information that should be shared by means of newspapers. Early in her reign, a decree demanded both that population statistics be collected, and that certain of them be sent to the Academy of Sciences for printing in its *News*. The decree particularly focussed on mortality statistics in St Petersburg—all priests were to report on deaths in their parishes, with information on age and cause of death.<sup>24</sup> A few years later, another Senate decree ordered that population statistics for Lifland province be published in both Moscow and St Petersburg newspapers "for popular information".<sup>25</sup> Later in her reign, in reaction to inflation in Moscow, Catherine ordered that newspapers publish weekly notices of current prices for grain and other comestibles.<sup>26</sup> The first decrees spoke to an interest in spreading knowledge about the state of the empire. The last spoke to a more practical desire, to let people know current costs for their own well-being (and perhaps also to shame publicly any merchants caught demanding higher than average prices).

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22 PSZ 1, no. 16715.

23 PSZ 1, no. 8945.

24 PSZ 1, no. 12061.

25 PSZ 1, no. 12895.

26 PSZ 1, no. 16143.

In part in order to control these many sources of information, laws also set out parameters for oversight and, eventually, censorship. By granting only a limited number of presses the authority to publish official statements, imperial decrees were already controlling the flow of information. That control quite quickly turned out to be insufficient in the eyes of the imperial state. As a result, already during the reign of Elizabeth, several laws set out additional restrictions on what could be printed. First, in reaction to “many untruths” published in the *Russian News* of the Academy of Sciences, and in particular to its statement that the empress had awarded Mikhail Bestuzhev a particular honour “which Her Imperial Majesty did not do”, a decree gave the Senate oversight over what was printed in the newspaper. All news now needed the approval of the Senate before publishing.<sup>27</sup> A later decree was even more specific: no news about the imperial family could be published without proper approval (in this case, the decree was in response to an article about the empress going out of the capital to hunt).<sup>28</sup>

In 1780, another limit was placed on what newspapers ought to publish. The Senate heard cases on many topics, and the newspapers had been publishing most of them—a Senate decision was a Senate decision, whatever its subject. Now, however, a restriction was imposed: they were to publish only those meant for “general information” or with a specific notation that they were to be published.<sup>29</sup> The rationale behind this law is unclear from its text. It might have been an effort to control information, so that if a decision only affected a few people, or was intended to guide administrative practices rather than set general precedents, it could be sent only to those who needed to know of it. But it may also have been a kindness to the newspapers themselves, seeking to free them from the responsibility to publish pages and pages of information with limited utility.

While this sort of information was limited, in other cases decrees reduced the amount of oversight on publication. In 1781, a Senate decree declared that future advertisement of public auctions of state lands could be sent directly to the Moscow and St Petersburg newspapers,

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27 *PSZ* 1, no. 8529.

28 *PSZ* 1, no. 9903.

29 *PSZ* 1, no. 15001.

bypassing Senate approval.<sup>30</sup> The reason for this was a purely practical one: to get advertisements placed in time for more people to take part in the auction, thereby hopefully increasing the returns on the auctions (and therefore the state's income). Not all such advertisements were made freer, however. Half a year later, another Senate decree affirmed that the Senate itself was to receive notice of land transactions between non-state actors—direct publishing was not acceptable in these cases.<sup>31</sup> Several years later, two additional decrees clarified the variety of land transactions that needed to be sent to the Senate, and also created a form for such notices.<sup>32</sup> This last provision is an important one in the context of viewing newspapers as a type of information technology. It standardised information, giving a list of exactly what needed to be included in notices regarding this kind of transaction. Eighteenth century laws also began to address an important question: who was to pay for putting information into newspapers? In 1766 the press of Moscow University, which had been publishing the *Moscow News*, asked that local government offices that wished to print reports of their actions should bear the cost of publication. The Senate agreed, and sent out decrees to that effect.<sup>33</sup> This was not always a simple matter, however. Later that same year, both the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences press and the Moscow University press asked local bank offices (*bankovaia kontora*) to pay the costs associated with printing information they were required to publish. The costs, however, were large (the Academy of Sciences estimated the paper costs alone as two hundred and seventy rubles) and the bank offices were themselves confined by statute as to their expenses. The Senate decreed that they be allowed to use interest income hitherto kept in reserve to pay the costs of publication.<sup>34</sup>

In these cases, the Senate believed that the dissemination of particular information to wider audiences was worth the cost to

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30 PSZ 1, no. 15212.

31 PSZ 1, no. 15413.

32 PSZ 1, no. 16460, no. 16506. Nor was this the end; more decrees repeating the need to send out this kind of information continued to appear, including PSZ 1, no. 16885.

33 PSZ 1, no. 12767.

34 PSZ 1, no. 12783. Later laws also touched on questions of payment. In 1811 the Academy of Sciences approached the Synod for help in collecting outstanding fees for notices placed by Consistories. The Synod told all its consistories to pay up promptly. PSZ 1, no. 24749.

public administrations. In other cases, however, decrees ordered other methods of payment. A 1765 decree requiring police departments to publish information about arrested fugitives did not lay out responsibility for bearing the costs of such publication. In 1770, another Senate decree clarified the issue: those who placed the notice (i.e. the police departments that arrested fugitives) were to pay for publication. However, if the notice resulted in sending a fugitive serf back to his or her owner, the police department could recover publication costs from that serf owner.<sup>35</sup>

By the time Alexander I came to the throne in 1801, newspapers were well established as a means of circulating information, and decrees from his reign only emphasise that fact. Newspapers already not only transmitted information that the state wanted transmitted but also made the larger legal system work efficiently. Several decrees from the reign of Alexander I reaffirmed the use of newspapers to circulate information about runaways.<sup>36</sup> Other decrees focussed on property disputes. A decree of 1803 stated that Senate decisions on property deemed “worthy of attention” should be published “through the newspapers so that petitioners or heirs or their delegates” should know of them and take proper, prompt action.<sup>37</sup> Over the next several years, a number of Senate decrees also focussed on the Surveying Chancery—the results of its investigations were to be published as of a decree of 1805 (though matters involving court peasants were exempted from the duty to publish in 1810).<sup>38</sup> That process of publication was intended to make decisions about property more efficient. As a result, when the notices placed by the Surveying Chancery turned out to be inexact, and therefore to cause the Senate “difficulties and excessive correspondence about matters”, the Senate sent it a “severe correction” to be more exact and more complete in its notices.<sup>39</sup>

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35 *PSZ 1*, no. 13507. Later, after rules on publishing notices changed, so too did the rules on payments; *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, Series 2 (1825–1881) (hereafter *PSZ 2*), no. 1021.

36 *PSZ 1*, no. 21939; no. 28263.

37 *PSZ 1*, no. 21048.

38 *PSZ 1*, no. 21735; expanded in no. 22029. Matters concerning court peasants were exempted in 1810. *PSZ 1*, no. 24371.

39 *PSZ 1*, no. 26332; no. 26654.

As in the eighteenth century, these demands for publication created a problem of funding. In 1808 the Senate decided a question of who was responsible for paying for the notices of purchases required by law. Now, every provincial administration sending such notices to St Petersburg or Moscow for publication was to include one ruble fifty kopeks to cover the cost of printing the notice three times.<sup>40</sup> The provincial administration could collect the money from those involved in the purchase or other matter requiring official notice.

There was also something very new in the decrees of Alexander's reign: a new kind of language that emphasised a broader vision of information that could bring benefit to the Russian state. Eighteenth-century news encompassed foreign affairs, military matters, and internal governmental decisions. Now, in several early decrees, Alexander began to emphasise the importance of developments in industry and technology to the state, asking the Academy of Sciences to find "useful" information, translate it into Russian, and publish it in its newspaper.<sup>41</sup> In 1809 he went further. In a personal decree sent to the Minister of Internal Affairs, Alexander appointed a new editor within the Ministry to begin publishing a new newspaper, *The Northern Post, or New St Petersburg Gazette*.<sup>42</sup> It was not only "useful that information from [...] the provinces be brought to the attention of the public", but even "all the more necessary because much of this information concerns not only the police, but agriculture, factories, and other elements of the state economy". In other words, the goal was not just that newspapers be brought to bear on a narrow vision of governance, but also that they should communicate information that would support other goals of the state.

That new newspaper was only one of several founded at the turn of the eighteenth century. Alexander's father Paul had granted a Riga printer permission to begin publishing a German-language newspaper that would have the status of a state publication in return for its printing, without charge, all of the Riga provincial government's decrees.<sup>43</sup> Two years later, under Alexander, another decree approved the founding of a *Commercial News* to be published by the recently-created Ministry

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40 PSZ 1, no. 22793; a further clarification appeared in PSZ 1, no. 23266.

41 PSZ 1, no. 20144; no. 20153.

42 PSZ 1, no. 23768.

43 PSZ 1, no. 19496.

of Commerce.<sup>44</sup> Now faced with competition from other options for news, the newspaper of the Academy of Sciences soon asked for and received exclusive rights to publish central state information.<sup>45</sup> Only a few years later, in 1808, the Minister of Justice asked permission to reorganise the Senate press; it had developed haphazardly and was now overburdened and stuck with failing equipment. In addition, he asked that the press be given a monopoly on printing and selling laws. It would, in return, publish a weekly newsletter about current legal matters (to which readers could subscribe for a fee).<sup>46</sup> In other words, it would gain a monopoly on one kind of state information in order to increase its revenue. Quite quickly, however, this limit on other presses was relaxed in the name of information transfer. In July 1809 the Minister of Commerce asked that the *Commercial Gazette* be allowed to publish legal decisions of particular interest to merchants.<sup>47</sup> They needed to know this information, and their *Gazette* was clearly the best option for getting it to them. Alexander agreed. Proper dissemination of information to those who needed it was more important than the financial status of any one institution.

The reign of Nicholas I saw another significant shift in the role that newspapers were to play in the Russian Empire. Nicholas is a difficult figure for historians, who see his reign as both the “apogee of autocracy” and as the time of the flowering of the Russian intelligentsia, a time of public conservatism and private discussions of reform.<sup>48</sup> Both these sides of his personality and his reign are apparent in his attitude towards the use of print. At base, Nicholas’s decrees regulating newspapers went back and forth between an emphasis on control and an emphasis on their utility as an information technology.

First, Nicholas’s reign brought in new regulations limiting what newspapers might print. Certain topics came to require special oversight for security reasons. Any publications about medicines or medical affairs

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44 *PSZ* 1, no. 20565. After the Napoleonic wars, Alexander founded another newspaper, the military paper *Russkii invalid*, to focus on issues of particular interest to veterans and serving forces. *PSZ* 1, no. 27663.

45 *PSZ* 1, no. 20863, §§ 115, 124.

46 *PSZ* 1, no. 23390.

47 *PSZ* 1, no. 23747.

48 A. E. Presniakov, *Apogei samoderzhavii: Nikolai I* (Leningrad: Brokgauz-Efron, 1925).

had to be approved by the medical faculty of whichever university was closest to the place of publication,<sup>49</sup> since inaccurate news about health could have potentially harmful outcomes. No news about the imperial family or events at court was to be published without approval by the Ministry of the Imperial Court.<sup>50</sup> This had less to do with a concern for security than it reflected a growing desire to project the proper image of the imperial family, in order to promote the empire itself.<sup>51</sup>

Nicholas's reign also saw an attempt to create an overarching censorship structure for the empire. Newspapers (and other periodical publications) were singled out in the new censorship regulations released in the first year of Nicholas's reign (and then replaced a few years later by a second set of regulations that unified censorship of Russian and foreign-language materials, until then under the jurisdiction of separate ministries).<sup>52</sup> As the first set of regulations put it, such censorship was absolutely necessary for Russia: "The goal of the establishment of Censorship is so that works of Literature, the Sciences and the Arts, when they are published for the World by means of printing, engraving, and lithography, give useful, or at least not harmful, guidance for the well-being of the State". Censorship allowed for the useful, and avoided the harmful.

Second, Nicholas's reign recognised the many uses of newspapers. Nicholaevan decrees added to earlier decrees that used print as a method of spreading official information, sometimes simplifying, sometimes adding layers of complexity to these existing laws. Therefore, one decree of 1828 continued to demand that property transactions, whether sales between two individuals or auctions to pay off someone's debts, be advertised in newspapers so that any challengers were properly informed.<sup>53</sup> Later laws regulating different kinds of property transactions and documents often included clauses that required

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49 PSZ 2, no. 3994.

50 PSZ 2, nos. 4236 and 4237. At nearly the end of Nicholas's reign, some information about the imperial family—their travels—no longer needed special permission. PSZ 2, no. 24979.

51 Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

52 PSZ 2, no. 403; no. 1979.

53 PSZ 2, no. 2139. PSZ 2, no. 4237 similarly reaffirmed earlier practices involving publishing in newspapers as a method of confirming property transfers.

the advertisement of changes in ownership or lost documents in newspapers.<sup>54</sup> Decrees continued to order that news of vagrants be published in order to find their owners or proper place of registry.<sup>55</sup> Other forms of advertisement were also mandated in law. Schools were to publicise openings for students.<sup>56</sup> Spouses seeking a divorce on the grounds of abandonment were to advertise in newspapers to provide evidence of that abandonment.<sup>57</sup>

The many different kinds of notices that were to appear in newspapers, and the many different decrees that had established that fact, soon required new fee structures. In 1831 the Senate released overarching guidelines for how such notices were to be handled when it came to payments.<sup>58</sup> These included notices from the Senate about appeals; elections to Noble Assemblies; reports of dead bodies, fugitive peasants and townspeople, prisoners, and draftees; of lost and found passports and documents; of missing state stamps; of lost and found property (and also stray livestock); notices seeking inheritors of estates or creditors, and many others. In general, if there was an obvious profit to someone as the result of a notice, such as the return of property (including serfs), that profit paid for the advertisement. If the benefit was to the proper and efficient functioning of some state apparatus, then the notice was to be printed without charge.

There were larger statements made about the role of newspapers, as well. In 1828, the Committee of Ministers heard a project presented by the Minister of Education “to improve the St Petersburg Academy Newspaper”.<sup>59</sup> It spoke of a need to “make it as worthy of attention as possible”, and listed a number of kinds of news it would print in order to meet that goal. Not only would it publish “domestic and foreign news”, but also “notices from the police” as well as “other news, curious for the public”. In return for receiving things like “police notices that up to now have been in part in print, in part in manuscript, distributed by police servitors to houses”, the Academy promised to publish the

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54 *PSZ 2*, no. 3262, §§ 16, 42; no. 3693; no. 4255; *PSZ 2*, no. 5360, § 361; no. 5462, § 99; no. 5463, §§ 21, 48, 110, 127; no. 5464, §§ 167–69; no. 8545.

55 *PSZ 2*, no. 1893, §§ 14–15; no. 8536, §§ 2–5.

56 *PSZ 2*, no. 5470, § 9.

57 *PSZ 2*, no. 5870, § 123.

58 *PSZ 2*, no. 4402.

59 *PSZ 2*, no. 2516.

newspaper faithfully every day, and to include any such notices sent to it at least a few hours before the newspaper was to appear in print. It would also publish news of those entering and exiting St Petersburg, weekly bulletins on prices, and reports on imports, health statistics, and the current population of the capital “by calling and sex, after every Police census”. Furthermore, the proposal gave a rationale for using the newspaper in this matter: it was “the most simple and convenient method for informing the public in a timely fashion of various police actions and orders”.

This was certainly the main goal of many of the decrees about newspapers: making the state, the bureaucracy, and the economy function more efficiently.<sup>60</sup> One Senate decree ordering that the Surveying Chancery give proper attention to the publication of its notices explicitly observed that such publication was an effort to “fend off the endless correspondence” that otherwise resulted.<sup>61</sup> This suggests that newspapers played a role as a form of information technology used by the state. Other decrees, however, blur the line between that interpretation and the idea that newspapers were a space for the development of a civic culture. Several decrees from the reign of Nicholas I focussed on a very different kind of notice—notice giving thanks. In one case, a noble assembly wished to publish a notice in a regional newspaper praising a particularly good bureaucrat for his service. There were, however, no rules that allowed such a notice. The Ministry of Internal Affairs asked the Committee of Ministers, and the Committee decided that such notices should be authorised and did not henceforth need special permission.<sup>62</sup>

On the one hand, this is an example of the desire to have the regulations spelled out clearly. It is hard to imagine why thanking a bureaucrat publicly might be a problem, and yet the local society was not certain it was acceptable. On the other hand, it set out a new way of thinking about the kind of information that should be included in newspapers. Regulations built on the idea that newspapers were places to thank individuals for particular services, be they in the bureaucracy, or

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60 *PSZ 2*, no. 11109, § 109 founded a new St Petersburg police newspaper, in order to make its ordinances better and more easily known.

61 *PSZ 2*, no. 5439.

62 *PSZ 2*, no. 4218.

in philanthropic activities. Regulations regarding a school, for example, included a notice that any particularly large charitable contributions to the school could and should be reported in local newspapers.<sup>63</sup> These sorts of notices could be read as examples of a kind of civil or civic consciousness on the part of individuals or societies. The fact that they were mandated by law emphasises their role in supporting the aims of the imperial state, by rewarding effective bureaucrats and those who supported education.

Nicholas's reign also saw the biggest expansion of newspaper publishing Russia had yet seen via decrees that established a network of *Gubernskie vedomosti*, or *Provincial News*, through much of the empire.<sup>64</sup> This was an attempt to solve a consistent problem that plagued the regulation of newspapers: the problem of the provinces. Many of the decrees envisioned a world in which newspapers were used to transmit information from St Petersburg and Moscow to a wider readership. There was a problem, however. St Petersburg and Moscow were well served, but already by the 1760s, decrees began to mention the question of how to get important information out beyond them. So, for example, a 1765 decree that ordered police to publish reports on arrested fugitives in the St Petersburg newspaper also included a method to disseminate information even further: "send such information to Provincial and Town Chanceries".<sup>65</sup> What those chanceries were to do with the information, however, was unclear.

A more specific response to the problem of the provinces first appeared in a 1769 decree to communicate information about Russia's successes against the Ottoman Empire. As the decree put it, although St Petersburg and Moscow newspapers were publishing reports on such victories, "these newspapers are not received in all towns of the Russian Empire, and so not everywhere has received news of [our] military successes". In this case, the solution was to place responsibility onto the Senate printing press itself. News would be extracted from the St Petersburg newspapers and reprinted by the Senate press for circulation

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63 PSZ 2, no. 6788, § 38.

64 There is a recent extensive Russian-language literature on individual or regional provincial newspapers, summarised in V. V. Shevtsov, *'Tomskie gubernskie vedomosti' (1857–1917 gg.) v sotsiokul'turnom i informatsionnom prostranstve sibiri* (Tomsk: Tomskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2012), pp. 13–16.

65 PSZ 1, no. 12506.

in the wider Russian world.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in the early nineteenth century, a number of decrees focussed on how best to disseminate information about fugitives and the passportless. Local authorities were supposed to “publicise” such information, but through what means? Decrees came to describe “public notices (*vedomosti*)” in provincial towns, but these were themselves undefined and poorly regulated.<sup>67</sup>

Finally in 1830, Nicholas promulgated a charter founding *gubernskie vedomosti*.<sup>68</sup> There had been a few newspapers based in provincial towns before, but none had lasted very long.<sup>69</sup> The first, a shortlived *Tambov News*, had been established in 1788 by the region’s then governor, the poet Gavril Derzhavin. Derzhavin explicitly tied his desire to establish such a publication to the need to simplify government work.<sup>70</sup> According to the decree listed in the *Complete Collection of the Laws*, the proposal to found a wider network of newspapers came from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and was approved by the Committee of Ministers and by Nicholas I. According to Susan Smith-Peter, however, the Minister of Finance, E. F. Kankrin, had actually originated the idea several years before.<sup>71</sup> She furthermore points to continued tension between the two ministries (or the two ministers) about the content of the newspapers, with the Minister of Internal Affairs emphasising their role in governance, and the Minister of Finance more interested in their broader role in developing provincial economies.

The new decree set out an ambitious plan for a great network of newspapers “in every one of the provinces [*guberniia*]” under the authority of provincial governors and their staffs. According to the proposal, “the goal of publishing *gubernskie vedomosti* is to aid Chanceries in their affairs by decreasing paperwork, and in addition to give a means for state offices, and also for private individuals, to get information that pertains to them”. In other words, it was a culmination of the idea that

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66 PSZ 1, no. 13304.

67 PSZ 1, no. 21939; no. 24516; no. 25516; no. 25746.

68 PSZ 2, no. 4036.

69 B. I. Esin, *Russkaia dorevoliutsionnaia gazeta, 1702–1917 gg.* (Moscow: Moskovskogo universiteta, 1971), pp. 17, 20.

70 Susan Smith-Peter, ‘The Russian Provincial Newspaper and Its Public, 1788–1864’, *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East-European Studies*, 1908 (2008), 6–7, <https://carlbeckpapers.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/cbp/article/view/145>

71 Smith-Peter, ‘Russian Provincial Newspaper’, pp. 7–8, also Shevtsov, *Tomskie gubernskie vedomosti*, p. 26.

newspapers had a practical role in circulating information necessary for the proper functioning of the state apparatus and for the proper participation of citizens in society.

This was a general statement of goals; the proposal also included more specific guidance “on the subjects that should be covered in the *gubernskie vedomosti*”. All such newspapers should include four major sections. The first was to include “decrees and regulations”, including imperial manifestos, notices about the imperial family, “about peace, war, taxes”, and decisions by the Senate or Committee of Ministers. These were primarily new legal decisions that might change some aspect of administration or of everyday life. In addition, this section could include news from an individual province’s administration, either from the governor and his staff, or from the provincial treasury. To help decide on “the choice of topics” that ought to appear in the newspapers, the proposal went on to list twenty-two separate kinds of information that might be produced by provincial authorities and were deemed worthy of inclusion. They include news about comings and goings in the provincial bureaucracy, about taxes and tolls, about the draft, about diseases in the province, and about opportunities for charitable contributions.

The second section of the *gubernskie vedomosti* was allocated to notices of matters pertaining to the treasury. In the context of Imperial Russia, where provincial treasury departments (*kazennye palaty*) served both fiscal and census functions, this was a broad category. Here were notices of property transactions of various sorts, and of opportunities for tax farming. Postal matters appeared in this section, as did reports of bankrupts, of fugitives, of vagrants, and of found dead bodies.

The third section was simply labelled “news” and included a whole series of different topics. First, it meant “important events”, like the travels of significant people or the deaths of local notables, whether first-guild merchants or artists and scholars. Second, it meant news about the economy. New factories and inventions, reports on markets, trade, and prices were supposed to appear in this section. So too were “subjects helping to improve agriculture”, ranging from “methods of fertilising fields”, to specific reports on successes in animal husbandry or agriculture in the province. “Various statistical and historical news” meant anything from information about current building projects

in towns, to archaeological finds, to vital statistics. This listing of appropriate sources of news also included a note giving additional information about what this section was intended to promote: “all these news relate to that Province in which the *vedomosti* are printed”. News from neighbouring provinces was allowed, if it was particularly important to residents of the paper’s home province.

Finally, the fourth section gave space to “private advertisements”. In many ways, these advertisements complemented the second section, which included notices of found property, including documents, physical objects or, in its notices about vagrants, runaway serfs, that had been brought to the attention of provincial authorities. Here in the fourth section, private individuals could likewise place notices about their lost property or runaway serfs. They could also advertise property for sale or for rent, or place notices seeking servants. In addition, any other advertisements “that cause no harm to anyone” and which were allowed in the St Petersburg and Moscow newspapers were allowed here, as well. Owners of shops or restaurants could and did place advertisements here.

Only one topic was outright banned from inclusion. The very first point made under the broad topic of subjects to be included in the news was, in fact, the subject to be excluded: “in the *gubernskie vedomosti* the printing of political articles, as they do not correspond to their goals, is not allowed”. If the goal was to streamline administration and transmit useful knowledge, politics would, it seems, only muddle things.

Not only did the proposal legislate the topics appropriate to provincial newspapers, it also legislated, at least in part, their readership. The plan gave instructions for how to subscribe to the newspapers (in provincial capitals, turn to the newspaper offices; in district towns, look to the postal service) and what its cost should be (no more than ten rubles a year). It also noted that all state servitors in the province were required to receive a copy of the newspaper. So too were bureaucrats of the Ministry of Internal Affairs who dealt with issues pertaining to agriculture, of the Main Administration of Transportation who dealt with provincial transportation issues, and of local offices of the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Education. In addition, township-level boards of both court and state peasants were to receive their appropriate provincial newspapers.

Finally, the proposal for the new newspapers emphasised the practical role they would play in streamlining administrative processes in the provinces. The first two sections—"decrees and regulations" and notices from the treasury—were the focus here. The plan was clear: those two sections "have in their own province official strength". That is, they were to serve as official notice from the government of new regulations and laws. No one was to await further instructions once these were placed in the newspapers. Local administration even received explicit guidelines on how to read and use the newspapers: they were to read through them carefully, make a note in their own records of any applicable new decrees, and from that point on, follow them. Local authorities were also to pay attention to all the issues they received, and to make note of their numbers—if any went missing in the post, local authorities were responsible for turning to the post office to replace them. At the end of the year, authorities were to bind all issues, and place them in archives.

There were several immediate refinements to the plan. When the proposal for the new *gubernskie vedomosti* was publicised, it included a preface from the Senate. It announced a scaled down version of this new scheme—*vedomosti* were initially only to be founded in six provinces (in Astrakhan, Kazan, Kiev, Nizhnii Novgorod, Slobodo-Ukrainsk, and Iaroslavl provinces), and if they proved to be a success there, they would gradually be rolled out elsewhere. In addition, the preface gave a number of Nicholas's personal additions to the proposal. The *vedomosti* should be printed "on the best paper possible, with a good typeface and in a proper form". At the same time, Nicholas recognised that "due to the current insufficiency" of printing facilities in the provinces, state aid would be given to their development.

Only in 1837 did Nicholas I's regime follow up on its initial establishment of six provincial newspapers and realise the plan for a wider network of *gubernskie vedomosti*. In a long new set of instructions for provincial administrations (which was itself in the middle of a series of new instructions for provincial governors and other provincial offices) appeared a second, more forceful, and slightly altered statement of the need for *gubernskie vedomosti* in all provinces of the empire. Again, the stated goal of the *vedomosti* was to make the spread of information

more efficient—for “ease” of access, for “a most convenient method of getting news in proper time”.<sup>72</sup>

The plan had shifted somewhat since the initial 1830 decree. Now, *gubernskie vedomosti* were to consist of two major sections: Official and Unofficial. The Official section included all notices and reports pertaining to circulars and decrees from central and provincial authorities; notices of town and noble assembly elections; notices of newly appointed bureaucrats (or of those leaving their posts or receiving awards); notices of lost passports or other documents; notices of found property, and of public auctions; of infectious diseases in the province, or of dangers to crops or livestock. The section was also to include reports of fugitives, of arrested vagrants, and of dead bodies discovered (all with descriptions of their physical characteristics).

For all that most of these subjects were intended to circulate information outward, the list of possible topics also framed a broader network of information transfer. Official sections might include notices of what police departments were doing in one district, “which may serve as guidance in similar situations for the police departments of other districts”.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Official sections were to be shared beyond provincial limits—a copy was to be sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and to other provincial administrations. The reason was similar—they were to republish useful information, including news of infectious diseases and cattle plague and reports of fugitives, vagrants, lost and found objects, and auctions.

There was also a limit, but this time an odd one: “In the provincial newspapers not in any circumstance should decrees, laws, and announcements published in the news printed by the Governing Senate be republished”. The persistent importance of the Senate news was also addressed in terms of circulating knowledge. Any information that provincial governments believed needed to be shared with the entire empire was to be sent to the Senate for publishing in its newspaper (along with the proper fees, of course).

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72 PSZ 2, no. 10304, § 86. In 1838, St Petersburg got its own version for local affairs (the existing St Petersburg *Vedomosti* had an empire-wide focus, leaving St Petersburg as a town and as a province without the same local source of information). PSZ 2, no. 11109, § 109 and no. 11849, §§ 7–31; Moscow followed almost a decade later. PSZ 2, no. 20997.

73 PSZ 2, no. 10304, § 88, no. 3.

The Unofficial section might include all sorts of other subjects. Here was a general “news” section, to include “unusual events in the province”, information about the provincial economy, agriculture, weather, new schools, and local history. The Unofficial section was also the place for private advertisements—buying, selling, and renting property, seeking servants or employees, private notices of runaway servants or serfs, lost documents or objects. Such advertisements were priced “by the line and letter”.

This decree did something quite different from the 1830 plan. Now the two sections were to be printed separately, an act that more fully disentangled the functions of the press. The Official section continued to serve as a mechanism of governance, as a way of regularly publishing important official information. Decrees or instructions that required some specific action from local authorities were to be printed there with space left for notes by those local authorities. The Official section also had an official audience—all provincial, district, town, and township authorities; the Marshals of the Nobility; church leaders, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox. District level marshals of the nobility received three copies of the Official section. One stayed with the marshal, and the other two copies could be circulated around the district, shared with “nobles or estate managers”. The Unofficial section now became something rather different, and presaged a shift towards a more civically engaged press in the later nineteenth century.

At the end of 1838, the Committee of Ministers released a decision that emphasised the specific ways that the *gubernskie vedomosti* were intended to function.<sup>74</sup> A question arose over the cost of a subscription to the *gubernskie vedomosti* after the governors of Olonets and Podolsk had raised local prices. The committee drew on the 1830 and 1837 instructions in their deliberations. According to the Committee, the first instructions had ordered that *gubernskie vedomosti* bear a “moderate price” in order that “people of all *sosloviia* be given the possibility of receiving them”. It therefore found that increasing the cost to private subscribers would oppose this goal. Raising the cost of subscription to official subscribers, who were forced by law to take in the newspaper, was only allowable if the raise was “not burdensome”. As a result, the

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74 PSZ 2, no. 11889.

committee decided to set a maximum cost for a year's subscription to the *gubernskie vedomosti* in any province at 10 rubles for a private subscriber, and 20 rubles for an official one.

Although most *gubernskie vedomosti* did not appear until the very end of the 1830s, decrees began to refer to them much earlier. An 1831 Manifesto gave new rules for elections to noble assemblies. All such elections were to be announced in advance, and to be advertised "throughout the Rural and Town Police, or through the *Gubernskie vedomosti* (where they are published), and in their absence through public notices".<sup>75</sup> As more and more laws included provisions for publishing in newspapers over the next several years, that phrase or a variation kept appearing: "through the *gubernskie vedomosti* where they exist".<sup>76</sup> Not all did—in a few cases, statutes continued to refer only to "the newspapers of both capitals".<sup>77</sup> That was, at the time, the more sensible way to refer to things, for there were few provincial newspapers actually in print.

As more provincial newspapers began to appear, decrees continued to reference them, both to disseminate information and to make clear official positions. A decree instructed all *gubernskie vedomosti* to publish monthly reports of what was going on in their regional administrative offices.<sup>78</sup> In this case, the governor of Tula province had started the practice, and Nicholas, upon reading of this action in a yearly report, wrote next to it "good idea, it wouldn't be bad to order it done everywhere". Another stated that reports on fraud published in the capitals ought also to appear in the provinces.<sup>79</sup> In 1838, a decree laid out rules for how to know that a given published announcement had official weight. The answer was mostly simple: if it came from the Senate, it had official weight. If it came from a ministry, it had official weight. So too did the *gubernskie vedomosti*: they were, in essence, "an extension of Senate publications".<sup>80</sup>

Of course, there was a real problem with using newspapers as a major part of governance, as the laws that treated them as a form of information technology tended to do. It was a problem based in the

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75 PSZ 2, no. 4989.

76 PSZ 2, no. 5360, § 361; no. 5464, § 168.

77 PSZ 2, no. 5463, §§ 21, 48, 110, 127; no. 6588, §§ 20, 26.

78 PSZ 2, no. 16886.

79 PSZ 2, no. 23686.

80 PSZ 2, no. 10978.

difference between the laws regulating newspapers in principle and the actual newspapers as they existed in practice. In law, newspapers were almost imagined as a pure method of transferring the information deemed important by some level of the imperial state. Property, fugitives, official decrees, local decisions—newspapers were a way to keep track of the population and to make sure that population knew how it related to the imperial state. Even more abstract information served a purpose: introducing newly Europeanised Russians to the world; making their empire familiar to them; improving agriculture. Even here, newspapers were to be purely efficient.

But none of the newspapers were ever that pure. Even the very first publications at the beginning of the 1700s were compendiums of foreign news that brought in all sorts of novel ideas. As such, they not only give historians a glimpse of a long-ago Russia but also gave Russians of the time an insight into far-away worlds. How else to understand news reports like the very first one from Madrid in an issue from June 1725: “The prophecy of a nun about which something was written earlier has turned out to be false and baseless”?<sup>81</sup> It might be a warning against anti-modern superstition, but given that it implies the prophecy had been reported as news earlier, that message was blurred at best. As a result, for all that one Soviet historian of newspapers referred to the *Vedomosti* of Peter the Great’s era as having a strong pro-Petrine reformist propaganda role, they are in reality much harder to define so neatly.<sup>82</sup> From a very early period, newspapers aimed to be “not only useful but also entertaining”.<sup>83</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, and after nearly a century of laws that viewed them as methods of transmitting official or semi-official information, *Vedomosti* played roles that were obviously more complicated. The St Petersburg *Vedomosti* included official reports as well as news from St Petersburg and military reports from around Western Europe. Then came advertisements, first “news” of books for sale at the Academy of Sciences bookshop—an example of the publisher of the newspaper advertising its other wares. Then followed private advertisements offering firewood for sale, seeking purchasers of

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81 *Vedomosti* (St Petersburg), 2 June 1725.

82 Esin, *Russkaia dorevoliutsionnaia gazeta*, pp. 10–11.

83 *Istoriia russkoi zhurnalistiki*, p. 25.

property ranging from settled estates to horses and ducks to individual serfs. Shopkeepers invited people to look over their imported goods, like coffee and tea and “cured beef from Hamburg”. Advertisements sought people to do particular jobs, like translating a “not too big notebook” from English into Russian. At the end, an official notice about debt was followed by a table naming all the debtors and enumerating their debts.<sup>84</sup> In another issue, much the same mixture appeared, plus notices of people leaving St Petersburg, and a report on the weather for the past three days.<sup>85</sup>

Already, newspapers in their practice challenged any effort to conceive of them as a pure tool of the state. Pages devoted to advertisements easily outnumbered those devoted to official news. In part this was due to the legislated demands that they publicise certain things, like debts and property transactions. As a result, however, newspapers created an image of an official world that existed largely outside Russia, and then an everyday world that consisted primarily of debts and secondarily of trade in goods and people. This divergence was even more true in Moscow, where Nikolai Novikov, often lauded as a progenitor of the intelligentsia, took over publishing the Moscow *Vedomosti* for a time during the 1780s.<sup>86</sup> It is only because newspapers had taken on this role that they were able to play a major role in Alexander I’s first small steps toward ameliorating the condition of serfdom. Alexander did not ban outright the sale of serfs without land—a practice seen as particularly demeaning to the personhood of the serf—but instead forbade advertising the sale of serfs without land in newspapers.<sup>87</sup> This law only had meaning in a context in which publicity via newspapers made things known and real.

Over the first half of the nineteenth century, newspapers diversified significantly in their content. In part this diversification reflected sheer growth in numbers. Many new newspapers came to be. Those based in particular ministries or administrations had particular focusses, whether

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84 *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*, 2 January 1795.

85 *Sanktpeterburgskie vedomosti*, 5 January 1795.

86 Berkov, *Istoriia russkoi zhurlalistiki*, pp. 112–13.

87 *PSZ* 1, no. 19892. Of course, he had to repeat the law several times, including in *PSZ* 1, nos. 25775 and 29525.

military or agricultural,<sup>88</sup> while those founded in the provinces existed to develop a richer sense of provincial life. All of this, though, had the potential to expand the goals of the state to unrecognisable ends.<sup>89</sup> Publishing news about the provinces, even when “political” news was explicitly excluded, could not but bring to light a vision of society that might not entirely match up with state goals. The experience of a decade of their development apparently led to concern that things were not properly controlled. As a result, at the beginning of 1851, during the most repressive years of Nicholas’s reign, a new decree stated that the Unofficial sections of provincial newspapers henceforth had to undergo a new level of censorship. Either a censorship committee within the provincial government, or a single professor or high-ranking bureaucrat, was to read and approve all materials published.<sup>90</sup>

It is in this context, too, that the provincial newspapers, particularly their Unofficial sections in which local editors published articles of local interest, seem to represent a dramatic shift in the development of something approaching a “free press” (despite being founded by decree). The Soviet historian B. I. Esin described the *gubernskie vedomosti* as “shabby”, and claimed that even figures like Alexander Herzen were “powerless to change them, to enliven them”.<sup>91</sup> More recent historians have been kinder to them, however. Now *gubernskie vedomosti* are more often interpreted as a major part of the provincial print culture of early nineteenth century Russia.<sup>92</sup>

This problem with newspapers in reality, as opposed to newspapers in principle, places the specific case of Russia before 1850 within larger discourses current in the study of information technologies. Studies of modern information technologies have come to focus on both state

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88 *Istoriia russkoi zhurnalistiki*, pp. 201–04. On the *Farming Gazette*, founded to improve agriculture, see Alison K. Smith, *Recipes for Russia: Food and Nationhood under the Tsars* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), pp. 128–31.

89 This is also part of the argument of L. P. Burmistrova, *Provintsial'naia gazeta v epokhu russkikh prosvietitelei (Gubernskie vedomosti Povolzh'ia i Urala 1840–1850 gg.)* (Kazan': Izdatel'stvo Kazanskogo universiteta, 1985).

90 *PSZ* 2, no. 24979; it was soon followed by another decree stating that the unofficial section of the Moscow Police news also needed special censorship: no. 25370.

91 Esin, *Ruskaia dorevoliutsionnaia gazeta*, p. 22.

92 For a discussion of the *Vedomosti* in the contexts of print culture, regionalism, and emerging civil society, see Smith-Peter, ‘The Russian Provincial Newspaper’, Katherine Pickering Antonova, *An Ordinary Marriage: The World of a Gentry Family in Provincial Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

regulation and its efforts to create efficient “information societies” on the one hand, and a much more unruly use of technologies that emphasise publicity and create spaces for civil societies on the other. Periods of growth in those technologies create increased spaces for freer interactions, and are as a result at times followed by periods of increased regulation focussed on eliminating that space for civil society in the name of efficiency.<sup>93</sup> Early newspapers in Russia, then, become emblematic of an information technology conceived as a method of governance and efficiency, transformed by practice into something with the possibility of unsettling, if not actively undermining, the goals of the imperial state.

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93 Byoung Won Min, ‘Biting Back Against Civil Society: Information Technologies and Media Regulations in South Korea’, *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 20. 1 (2013), 111–24.



# Selected Further Reading

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# Information and Empire

Mechanisms of Communication in Russia, 1600-1850

EDITED BY SIMON FRANKLIN AND KATHERINE BOWERS

From the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century Russia was transformed from a moderate-sized, land-locked principality into the largest empire on earth. How did systems of information and communication shape and reflect this extraordinary change?

*Information and Empire* brings together a range of essays to address this complex question. It examines communication networks such as the postal service and the circulation of news, as well as the growth of a bureaucratic apparatus that informed the government about its people. It also considers the inscription of space from the point of view of mapping and the changing public 'graphosphere' of signs and monuments. More than a series of institutional histories, this book is concerned with the way Russia discovered itself, envisioned itself and represented itself to its people.

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