

PART I

INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND THE RISE OF DEMOCRACY

We Don't Have Sex in the Soviet Union

As I walked along the polished floors and empty hallways of the Kremlin, I felt like a tightrope walker, out too far and too high. It was 1987, the apex of the Cold War, and I was deep inside the bowels of the enemy, carrying a letter that could potentially alter the course of history. I was acting as a citizen diplomat without portfolio, without anything official, except that piece of paper. I tapped my suit jacket to make sure it was still there, nestled in my inside pocket. This was a quixotic, some would say preposterous, initiative.

Seven years prior, in 1980, my partners Kim Spencer and Evelyn Messinger had produced the first live television broadcast using communications satellites in an experimental interactive program for PBS. Called *America at Thanksgiving*, the show was a technological feat back then, connecting six groups of Americans celebrating Thanksgiving across the country. It was an electrifying moment when two of the participants—a motorcycle gang member in Cambridge, Massachusetts and a cadet at a mess hall in Nellis Air Force base in Las Vegas—bypassed the moderator and began talking directly to one another. Evelyn turned to Kim and exclaimed, “Holy shit! Why can’t we do this with the Russians?” Two years later Internews began producing a series of experimental “spacebridges,” or *telemosts*, as they were called in Russian, linking astronauts and cosmonauts, scientists, veterans of World

War II, and others. The exchanges gradually caught the attention of policy makers on both sides.

In February 1986, Soviet citizens eagerly awaited the coming Twenty-seventh Party Congress. There, the young and seemingly modern new general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, would present his plans for *perestroika*—the restructuring and reform of the sclerotic Soviet economic and political system. The dynamic young leader presented a stark contrast to the decrepitude of the three general secretaries who preceded him.

A few days before the Congress convened, the Politburo debated for two hours whether or not to broadcast “A Citizens’ Summit,” a spacebridge moderated by Phil Donahue in Seattle and Vladimir Pozner, a popular Russian television host, in Leningrad. Taped live and unedited, the interactive audience-to-audience format allowed Russian and American citizens to freely discuss topics that had been strictly taboo on Soviet television—everything from the gulags and the samizdat writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn to sexual norms and the Beatles. This would be the first spacebridge to be broadcast widely in the United States; for the Soviets, such a dialogue would signal a dramatic break from the past. But the Soviet leadership was unable to arrive at a consensus.

The chairman of Soviet State Television and Radio, Alexander Aksyonov, later told me he made the decision to go ahead with the program on his own, and then went home that night and drank himself into a stupor, not sure whether he would have a job, or even his freedom, after the show aired. The next day, two hundred million Soviet citizens heard Phil Donahue and his American audience question their Russian interlocutors about the lack of basic freedoms in the USSR. In one memorable moment a young woman in Leningrad answered Donahue’s probing question about romantic relationships

with Russian irony. “We don’t have sex in the Soviet Union,” she exclaimed. The program was so popular that Soviet State Television rebroadcast it three evenings in a row in prime time during the all-important Soviet Party Congress. This uncensored dialogue on television led ordinary Russians to believe that important social and political changes were in the making.

As the spacebridges attracted increasing attention in the US, Congressman George E. Brown Jr. from Riverside, California, agreed to introduce me to Tip O’Neill, the legendary speaker of the US House of Representatives. O’Neill was concerned about the growing threat of nuclear war and was eager to hear any ideas that might lessen the tension. When Congressman Brown and I sat down across a mahogany desk from the speaker, I laid out our proposal—to use satellite television to broadcast a live debate between the leaders of the US Congress and the Supreme Soviet. It would not be a negotiation; that was the province of the executive branch, not the parliament. Nor would it be anything official, although it would have the trappings of a diplomatic summit. Formally, it would only be a television show where individual legislators would express their personal opinions, not necessarily those of their governments. But it would look like the real thing, broadcast live from Capitol Hill and from the Kremlin, and it might just lead to a thaw in our frozen relationship.

With the prospect of such a high-visibility television dialogue, O’Neill saw an opportunity for Congress to insert itself into the most important and intractable foreign policy issue of the time. Soviet and American nuclear missiles were on hair-trigger alert. Arms control negotiations were going nowhere. Virtually all educational and scientific exchanges had been frozen. An enormous peace movement that rivaled the civil rights movement of the 1960s

had elevated Soviet-American relations into the defining issue of the 1980s, putting pressure on policymakers to act. Still, we remained locked in our ritualized demonization, characterizing each other as the “evil empire” and “imperialist lackeys.” It was time to break the ice and put a human face on the enemy. “What can I do to help?” O’Neill asked. I suggested he write a letter to his equivalent, the speaker of the Supreme Soviet. “Please draft it for me,” he said.

It was thirty degrees below zero with a wind chill factor of minus-sixty when I arrived at Moscow’s Hotel Rossiya just behind Red Square. Everyone in the city seemed to be surviving it in a fur hat but me. The hotel was an endless maze of totalitarian drabness punctuated with decorations of pure kitsch. After dialing an operator at the Kremlin and leaving a message that I was carrying a letter from Speaker O’Neill for Lev Tolkunov, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, I waited several hours before the phone rang; an operator said a car would be there in ten minutes. Soon a black ZiL limousine appeared, and two minutes later we drove through the Spassky Gate into the Kremlin, where few Americans had ever ventured. Officers in heavy gray coats saluted. I happened to be in the middle of writing, in my spare time, a mystery novel that took place largely inside the Kremlin walls. I immediately realized that everything I had imagined was completely wrong. Where I had pictured tension, a sense of urgency, and the disorder of constant crises, there was in reality an almost antiseptic order amid the calm of bureaucratic paperwork. This did not feel like the command center of the evil empire; instead, it felt like ordinary people getting through their workday.

I entered the antechamber of Chairman Tolkunov’s office, a cavernous room with twenty-foot-tall ceilings. On the far side was a map covering an entire wall, a bright red Soviet Union at its center.

Gazing at it, with his back to me, hands clasped behind him in a Napoleonic pose, was the chairman's chief of staff. On the desk next to him were perhaps thirty separate phones, a measure of one's rank in the Soviet hierarchy. I took a seat and after a moment he turned and walked toward me. Although it was fairly dark inside, he was actually wearing sunglasses. I suppressed a laugh, but when he sat down, I reached into my jacket and put on a pair of my own, deliberately mimicking him. An awkward silence ensued and then we both broke up laughing. We would work closely together in the months ahead with an informality that was forged in this initial encounter.

He led me into the chairman's office. Huge picture windows framed the famed onion domes of Saint Basil's Cathedral. The chairman greeted me warmly and I explained to him what we had in mind, handing him Speaker O'Neill's letter. The necessity of strict parity was critical if we were to develop this potentially game-changing project together. The Russians, it seemed to me, had an inferiority complex with regard to the West. It was, therefore, vitally important they be accorded equal status and respect from the beginning. Americans had always scoffed at the illegitimacy of the Soviet parliament; but by engaging with it on an equal basis, would we not, paradoxically, increase its power and independence?

Our proposal presumed that the speaker of the Soviet parliament would jump at a chance to demonstrate symbolic parity with the American Congress. And, indeed, after Speaker Tikhonov read the translation, he smiled and said he was completely in favor of it. "Please draft a response," he said. Back at the hotel, I had to shake my head at the surreal absurdity of writing letters on behalf of the leaders of both the Soviet and American parliaments to each other.

A hundred fifty million people, the bulk of them in the USSR, watched each of the seven live broadcasts in the *Capital to Capital*

series, as they were called, and the programs won several Emmy Awards. Peter Jennings, the longtime ABC News anchor, moderated each from the ornate House Ways and Means Committee Room on Capitol Hill in Washington. Leonid Zolotarevsky, a Russian newscaster, hosted from the Soviet parliament in the Kremlin. The symbolism was transformational. Instead of the usual acrimony that citizens in both countries were used to watching on television, they saw political leaders talking to each other thoughtfully and with respect. Subjects ranged from arms control and regional conflicts to human rights, the environment, and the fate of Jewish refuseniks.

No treaties were signed as a result, but the superpower conflict had changed from the scary—almost a half-century of an ever-escalating arms race—to something more human and subject to rational debate. Soviet viewers who were conditioned to perceive all American politicians as warmongers were stunned when an emotional Claude Pepper, the eighty-seven-year-old congressman from Florida, stood among his House colleagues, pounded his fist, and thundered, “I think the time has come for both of us to come under the scrutiny of common sense and get down to business about stopping the nuclear arms race and getting back to a sensible, friendly relationship. Is that possible?”

Satellite television literally breached the two countries’ ideological and geographic borders, allowing viewers to eavesdrop on conversations between their political leaders. Throughout the 1980s, thanks to a dozen other live televised spacebridges, American and Russian citizens were able to meet each other, putting a human face on the “enemy” they had been taught to fear. As the *Capital to Capital* series came to a close in 1989, US-Soviet relations had changed in ways that were unimaginable at the start, with substantial arms

reduction treaties signed and hundreds of thousands of citizen-to-citizen exchanges.

When the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War came to an end, it was the power of information and the longing for freedom that won out. There were many factors that contributed to this, but among the most powerful and least understood were the media. “Why did the West win the Cold War?” asked Michael Nelson, a leading commentator at the time with the Reuters news agency. “Not by use of arms. Weapons did not breach the Iron Curtain. It was media that proved to be *mightier than the sword.*”

In the Soviet Union, media opened a window to the West with its wealth and its freedoms, gave a voice to those silenced by censorship, and galvanized the people to act. It was media that breached the Iron Curtain with images of life in the West, which led the people living under Communism to realize they were falling behind the Free World. And it was media that spread news and information of protests and revolts from one corner of the empire to another and gave people a voice. Whatever pressures pushed Gorbachev to initiate political and economic reforms, it was through the media that the Soviet people experienced change.

Communication technologies have evolved dramatically in the following three decades, but media continues to be the most powerful force for social change the world has ever known. The Arab Spring that ignited in Tunisia in 2011 focused the world's attention on the techno-savvy cyber activists who deployed new digital media technologies to rally the masses against long-established dictatorships. These citizen journalists in the Middle East and elsewhere share a lineage with the citizen diplomats who helped bring an end to the Cold War. In both cases, technological innovation in the media—interactive satellite television in the 1980s and the Internet

and social media today—produced a “psychotectonic shift” that vastly increased the power of social change activists. Both combined new technologies with “old” media in ways that dramatically shifted the existing political framework. *Capital to Capital* would not have been possible without establishment television—ABC News and Gosteleradio—just as YouTube citizen journalists now depend on Al Jazeera and CNN to amplify and enlarge their own audiences.

It is easy to make a fetish of technology, however; in the end, it is people who make the difference, individual innovators and activists who realize the colossal power of electronic media to bring about social change.