The Russian media are widely seen to be increasingly controlled by the government. Leaders buy up dissenting television channels and pour money in as fast as it hemorrhages out. As a result, TV news has become narrower in scope and in the range of viewpoints which it reflects: leaders demand assimilation and shut down dissenting stations. Using original and extensive focus group research and new developments in cognitive theory, Ellen Mickiewicz unveils a profound mismatch between the complacent assumption of Russian leaders that the country will absorb their messages, and the viewers on the other side of the screen. This is the first book to reveal what the Russian audience really thinks of its news and the mental strategies they use to process it. The focus on ordinary people, rather than elites, makes a strong contribution to the study of post-communist societies and the individual’s relationship to the media.

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Television, Power, and the Public in Russia

ELLEN MICKIEWICZ
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Preface

As new heads of television were announced and revamped news operations put in place, or when the state moved in and began to prevent stations from projecting any point of view that did not actively support the Kremlin’s, it always seemed to me that there was one element most took for granted: the public. Put the material before them, and they will assimilate it. Or run mass-public opinion surveys and see the “big picture.” But no one much cared about the ordinary, average viewer watching the screen in the provinces. Only Moscow mattered. Yet it was a mistake to assert so confidently what viewers were thinking and talking about as the news came on. This study examines precisely that question: how did ordinary viewers come to their conclusions? More specifically, what were the tools they used to take apart positive stories to meet the standards of the questioning public? This is the final link in the circle of the most powerful medium in Russia: not why people thought certain programs popular or unpopular but, drilling down, how, what did they rely on, what instruments did they use — and, unquestionably, some had many more than others — to process what they saw.

During the course of writing this book, I came to know from transcripts and films these ordinary viewers gathered in focus groups in four Russian cities. They were lively, passionate, angry, funny, and some diffident. They were interesting and most, regardless of the level of education they had attained, quite sophisticated. They had a lot to say and would have surprised and probably troubled the state-controlled television apparatus. This is a study, then, of the methods and strategies the Russian television public engages in, not always consciously, as compared to the working assumptions that the powerful have about them.

I should like to acknowledge here the help of some people whom I was fortunate enough to know for many years. Leila Vasilieva is one of the most skilled and experienced facilitators of focus groups in
Russia. She personally moderated all of the groups; that meant traveling to Rostov-on-the-Don in the south, to Volgograd, to Nizhny Novgorod, and Moscow, and in the course of these trips to conduct four focus groups in each city. She had to do it within a limited time frame, so that the results would be comparable. It is because of her willingness to conduct all the groups that we do not have to worry about the possible effects of differing methods and cues. Olga Oslon, who has worked on audience research, was always wise and imaginative and knew the medium and its public through and through.

It is essential in running such focus groups to avoid many words, even seemingly innocuous ones, that could cue Soviet-style answers. The Soviet ideology disseminated repeated formulations, and if we invoked them accidentally we could be sure that almost unthinking habit would take over and nullify our attempt to get to the layers of greater candor. Peter Hart, one of America’s leading pollsters, provided ideas about pulling participants out of their unthinking or formulaic, automatic responses, and I am grateful for his ideas.

I thank Sarah Oates, Senior Lecturer at University of Glasgow and specialist on Russian media, for many interesting and knowledgeable conversations, and Robert Orttung and Danielle Lussier, specialists on the regions of Russia, whose expertise was very valuable. Without doubt among my academic colleagues, it is Doris Graber whose work has introduced to the field new ways of thinking and new research on political psychology and cognitive science.

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