

## **"Independent Media vs. Pseudo-Democracy and Authoritarian Regimes: Journalism or Activism, and the Battle Against Censorship"**

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### **My story:**

I was fortunate to begin my career in media during a transformative period in history. It was 1990, and Mikhail Gorbachev had just introduced Perestroika, paving the way for unprecedented changes in the Soviet Union. I started working for the first independent newspaper in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and experienced firsthand the transition from Soviet propaganda to the new and unknown realm of independent journalism—a force that had the power to lead the people and change history.

In 1997, I moved to Moscow and joined NTV, the most influential private news TV channel at the time. It wasn't long before this media company became the first trophy for Vladimir Putin when he came to power in 2000. From that moment, I witnessed the systematic dismantling of independent media in Russia, as Putin's regime slowly but steadily crushed the freedom of the press.

In 2005, just after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, I relocated to Kyiv, where I launched the "Freedom of Speech" political talk show. This show played a pivotal role in transforming the TV landscape in post-revolution Ukraine.

In 2008, I co-founded a new media startup in Moscow: Dozhd TV (TV Rain), an independent news TV station that remains, even today, the only independent television outlet in Russia—now operating in exile in the Netherlands since 2022. The story of TV Rain is one of resilience and innovation, a dramatic battle spanning 14 years between a group of independent reporters and the powerful state censorship machine. Throughout this journey, we have managed to stay one step ahead.

Since 2012, I've also been making current affairs documentaries, all centered on politics. My latest film, "**F@ck This Job**," will serve as an illustration of some of the key themes in this workshop.

### **Synopsis**

The main theme of this workshop is the examination of how autocratic regimes—using Russia as a clear example that can apply to many other contexts—seek to control the media. We will delve into the tools, tricks and tactics

these regimes use, exploring both the technological means and the human factors involved. We'll discuss the different forms of censorship, paying particular attention to two often underestimated types: self-censorship and what I refer to as "party" censorship. Together, we will explore how the relentless battle against state censorship can push journalists to the brink, transforming them from reporters into political activists.

### **Session #1:**

A unique aspect of this session will be exploring the transition from state-controlled propaganda to genuine journalism, drawing directly from my experiences and the turbulent events of the early 1990s in the Soviet Union. I will share the journey of starting a news outlet from scratch in a completely new political environment, navigating the challenges of building a loyal audience—what I call your “bubble” of followers. We'll discuss how to clearly differentiate new media from the undercover influence of propaganda, and how these early lessons can be applied to today's rapidly evolving communication and technological systems. Additionally, we'll delve into an unconventional HR approach I've found invaluable: why, in the battle for truthful reporting, having no professional skills is sometimes better than carrying the baggage of experience in any form of propaganda.

### **Session #2:**

We will explore the systematic regression from independent media back to controlled media, using the first two terms of Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin as our case study. I refer to this period as "pseudo-democracy" (2000-2010), where each step in the erosion of freedom can be seen as a blueprint for any autocracy. We'll delve into the common patterns that autocratic regimes follow to suppress independent media. But there's a twist in this session: we'll also discuss strategies for turning the tables, fighting back, and starting a race against the state to reclaim journalistic freedom. We'll also focus on the creation of a new independent media outlet amid a transition from democracy to autocracy, particularly in a new technological era. I'll share insights from my own experiences, discussing the challenges and strategies involved in establishing a media platform that can withstand the pressures of an increasingly authoritarian environment while leveraging modern technology to reach and engage audiences in innovative ways.

### **Session #3:**

In this session, we will journey "Back to the USSR" as we examine the abrupt end of "pseudo-democracy" and the swift transition from a "permitted" and controlled freedom of speech to full censorship, which occurred in just one week. Using Russia during wartime (2022–2024) as a case study, I'll highlight the tools of state pressure and how they have evolved to achieve complete suppression of free information. We'll also explore the current methods for combating total censorship, drawing parallels from Iran to Russia. In this session, we'll uncover the various tricks and strategies that independent journalists use to continue their work under the most repressive conditions.

#### **Session #4:**

In this session, we will tackle the question: Is it possible to remain a journalist while in a constant battle with a suppressive regime? We'll explore the delicate and often blurred line between journalism and activism, examining how political endorsements and the emotional engagement of journalists can influence their work. We'll also question the existence of truly objective media and reporting in today's world. What is the truth, and what is the deception of independent journalism? Can a journalist ever be truly "independent"? To answer these questions, we'll compare the experiences and practices of journalists in the United States, Russia, and Britain, providing a diverse perspective on the complexities of maintaining journalistic integrity. What are the main drivers behind audiences following unreliable media and conspiracy theories?

#### **Session #5:**

In this session, we'll delve into the art of manipulation in contemporary reporting, drawing lessons from historical propaganda techniques—examining the tools and tricks used to sway public opinion. We'll address the challenge of when emotional impact consistently overshadows factual impact and explore the responsibilities involved in constructing a black-and-white picture of the world. We'll consider the implications for both journalism and propaganda, and discuss how to define professional goals: should journalism aim for objective reporting, or is it a platform to promote personal or corporate beliefs? Finally, we'll confront the existential challenges facing media in an increasingly divided world.

#### **Session #6:**

In this session, we'll explore the art of current affairs documentary filmmaking and distinguish it from traditional reporting, where emotional impact plays a crucial role.

We'll cover essential techniques for crafting compelling documentaries, including: spotting a story ahead of its time, securing access to key subjects, mastering the art of becoming invisible behind the camera, and knowing when to conclude your story. We'll discuss why "the editing killer"—the principle that editing decisions are critical—can often guide you to the right narrative choices. You'll learn how to present the most frightening stories in the most "unfrightening" ways, leveraging a lighter portrayal to enhance emotional impact. The goal is to find universal elements in your story that resonate with all viewers, regardless of their perspectives, because ultimately, a story that captures life's inherent interest is the most powerful.