

## 25th ISOJ Galina Timchenko Keynote

### Mission Impossible: Meduza's 10 years of experience beating Kremlin censorship

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- Keynote speaker: **Galina Timchenko**, co-founder, CEO & publisher, **Meduza** (independent Russian media outlet operating from Latvia)
  - Chair: **Kathleen McElroy**, professor, **School of Journalism and Media, UT Austin**
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Kathleen McElroy [00:00:05] Thank you. As she's walking up the stage, let's really welcome Galina Timchenko. She is awesome and so is the website Meduza and I recommend you all look at it. She is the co-founder. She is the CEO and she is the publisher of this amazing website and you can read it in English. So I'm going to sit down and let her take it away.

Galina Timchenko [00:00:44] Hi, I am so happy to be here. I'm here for the second time and I may spend just 30 seconds. When I first visited Austin I was so happy because Russian media managers and Russian journalists are not used to sharing their experience and to share their problems and challenges and finding solutions. Russians are very good at speaking about their successes and achievements and when I first visited Austin, I said, God, I'm in hell. And everybody's talking about challenges and solutions. So now I am here and I want to share with you our problems, our challenges, and maybe, maybe some solutions. So I'll take a look at my notes. Yes. And they said everything is clear. Yes. It's about how we manage to fight Kremlin censorship for ten years? So I'd like to talk about how Meduza was established and how Russia became very advanced in censorship. And why are we still alive? Our history started in 2014. I'll try to be as rapid as possible. 2014 started with the annexation of Crimea and with the first stage of war, and the Kremlin and Russian government decided to take control of the media. And I was one of the first victims. Previously I was editor in chief of the most influential and number one Russian news outlet, and I was fired in a minute, and I was replaced with a pro-Kremlin guy and guy and, you know, now he's working for Kremlin administration as a deputy head of inner policy. So he replaced me, and almost all my staff resigned. All my journalists resigned in protest. But, I realized that the Kremlin never, ever allowed me to start from scratch. So we left Russia, me and 14 people. We left Russia, and we started from scratch in Riga, Latvia. We want to prove that we could do the media of our dream without any control and not inside Moscow. Russia is very centralized, but we want to prove that we could build the popular media outside Russia, outside Moscow and, actually, we succeed. So we were technically driven. We were silly and brave, and we laughed at Kremlin because in 2014 we were technically driven, but Kremlin censorship and Kremlin guys looked like this. They were stupid. They were bad educated. They were so, so, bad. But ten years after, Russia advanced, you know, these are numbers, comparing 2021 to 2020, when we are three blocks of a website. Almost a million web site was blocked in 2023. So they started to develop very fastly. Now what we are seeing, VPN is not allowed, promoting is VPN is a crime. Dora is not allowed. Other and social media are blocked or labeled as extremist organizations, for example Meta and the main extremist is Mark Zuckerberg for sure. So all the ways of circumventing bypassing blocking are not allowed inside Russia. And they try to control the media space. My favorite word, just a moment, my glasses are not so good. And I tried to look at my notes, you know, they took total

control. Russian search engines like Yandex and all recommendation system like them. They launched their own accounts and vote forums to follow all the opposition opinions and all the opposition groups. Then they kill, virality or they kill, killing the chance to share the content. For example, it is not allowed to share some content in social media systems. And they started what I called zombie media system because when they took over media control, they just changed editors or journalists, and you have the same logo, you have the same design, but media dead from inside. Even those business media, like, Gazeta. It's a very popular Russian newspaper. They are zombie media because logo in it are the same, but they're dead from inside. So. And how did they manage to do this? You know, it's very simple. We have a new generation, I call them Putinoids. It's their younger generation of developers or technically driven youngsters. They have the only chance of social elevator to work for the government, and they do not know any other system than Putin's regime and Putin's regime provides them with a huge amount of money, with the huge possibilities, huge opportunities in their lives. So they started to develop very, very fast and, here we go. In 2021, Meduza was labeled as a foreign agent. What does it mean for an agent? It's not the same as in the United States. In Russia, if you are labeled as a foreign agent, it means that you work under control and in the interests of hostile governments and, you know, we were labeled as a foreign, as an enemy of state. And, it was a financial collapse because in one week we lost all advertising revenue. We were profitable in 2021. It was not so big numbers. 300,000 of pure profit. Euros. I mean, but we lost advertisers in one week, and we lost 12 members of our team. We had 60 people in Meduza, but we lost 12 of them because everybody was scared that it's the start of the repressions and they were right. But we returned from the other side. We cut costs. We started a nationwide campaign of solidarity with Meduza, because when we came to the team and said, guys, it's the end, we will close this media. Our team said, guys, maybe you call yourself media managers, so go and decide, go and do something and we came away. We decided, what do we have? We have an audience and we go and said openly, guys, we have nothing but you. Please help us save Meduza. And our crowdfunding campaign was the biggest crowdfunding campaign in Russia. 177,000 people supported us financially. Young designers made in merch to make revenue share with us. So in half a year we totally replaced all our advertising revenue. We received more than 3 million in donations through a crowdfunding campaign, so we survived. But February 2022, to the 24th of February, the war started. I want to be very precise. I knew that the war started ten years ago and for me, for myself as well, but this full scale invasion started and, it was very scary. One of the scariest nights of my life. Because me and my co-founder, we call each other 24 hours. And, after December 2021, we started to call and say, hi, please do not be scared. It's not a war. I just call you to share with you some numbers. I just called to check in and at the night of 24th of February, Yvonne called me and said, wake up, it's a war and, we lost our home for real because we evacuated more than 30 journalists from Russia under threat of the imprisonment because, military censorship was imposed, even the word war was forbidden inside Russia. So we evacuated people from the other side, and we knew that financial sanctions would be imposed. So we stopped payments from Russia. We cleared all our accounts and we started from scratch. So, we survived and we are still the biggest independent Russian news site. Here are some numbers. You see, I do not want to talk, but we lost some audience. But when the war started in a week, we were blocked twice. And I say we are heroes of Russia twice blocked inside the country. So, we were blocked, our website was blocked, and

we were named an Undesirable Organization. What does it mean, undesirable organization? Every direct connection with us is a crime. I am a criminal. Plenty of options from two years in prison for fake so-called fake news to high treason for 20 years in prison and the head of an undesirable organization. So, according to the Russian state, I am a criminal. So we were blocked and, we will try to survive one more time. How did we manage to survive? Thanks to our technical department. Because I do not know. How is it in, United States. But inside Russia, tech department is a supportive department. But from the very beginning, we put technical department as a heart and brain of Meduza. So they started their game, and, we collaborated with foreign I.T. companies, our eternal gratitude for companies. And it will take another ten minutes to name all of them and our main power is a negative thinking. We are huge fan of book of American astronaut Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield's book How to survive on Earth, it's guide to astronaut and his main thought is negative thinking is a power you have to predict what next could kill you in five minutes, five days, five weeks. And we started to do you know, this? You can see our disaster scenarios. Every three months, we develop disaster scenarios. What next could kill us. So. And, we started to make an action plan. Unfortunately, the worst scenarios became true many times. So when we were blocked in Russia, that's how our audience graph looked like. But we were very well prepared. We knew for sure that audiences are in Russia, that there are millions of readers who desperately need some news, but we have to show them the way we started negotiations with IT companies. They provided us free of charge VPN services for our readers, then our Silver Bullet mobile up app. It has five built-in mechanism of by person blogging and works perfectly well in Russia. There is no way that you could not open our mobile application inside Russia. So and we rotate mirrors, every time when we feel that, Russian authorities could block our mirrors from where we take the content. And we developed what we called magic link. If you click on this magic link under any of our article, it creates the unique URL. You could resend it to all your friends or to your group in your and any messenger and, Russian regulators could not ban them or block them. And we returned to all this, but all this PDF, you know, a PDF, ugly, but we developed a special design for PDF and started campaign. Please use a printer, print it and give it to your seniors, to your mothers, to grandfathers to read them. Our articles and more than 200,000 users in a month downloaded these PDF versions to spread it to their relatives. And we never stopped looking for any other paths. For example, now we are developing the light version of Meduza and we are promoting a campaign for so called SOS communication. If Russia will isolate internet totally, emails will come through this iron curtain. So we are gathering our readers emails for us, communication with them and the main part. I did not forget about journalism. We do impossible reporting from the ground because Russia is closed. And as you remember, we evacuated our staff reporters from Russia. But now we have more than 140 freelancers who work for us on an anonymous base basis. And, we developed what we called proxy reporting. Our reporter pick up and choose topic, and then we send some desk one journalist, one desk one make photos, one ask, one call, and so on, so forth. So. And then we gather it like a mosaic to report from the ground and we publish more than 90 articles from the ground every month. So, speaking about journalism itself, you know, what we do: we do explanatory pieces and we are trying to introduce them and to ask people to share these explanatory pieces, for example, about mobilization news and explanatory pieces for real save lives. And, we developed so-called proxy media because, as you know, we're an undesirable organization and newsmakers, experts are afraid to talk with us

because it's a crime. So we made a proxy media. I could not name it and they give interviews or their opinions to this media and Meduza republishes this too, cut off the direct connection between Meduza and the newsmakers and more than 7070 days we are doing online live coverage of the war. And what should I say? What should I mention? You know, you see, if you open Meduza in English, you will see a report from the war field. Please remember, we see these war through female eyes. Because Ukraine banned male Russian journalists from entering the country. Only female journalists could enter Ukraine and they reported from the battlefield. All we could read about the Ukrainian war, were written by women, and we see these through women eyes. And all the investigations about raping in butcher in that being, were made by young female journalists. So, maybe I miss this next slide about distribution channels. What I want to say that the Russian government, they are cutting off audience from us. Audience? Just afraid to use Meduza, for example, because there were some reports, so-called citizen reports about reading inappropriate content. So we even changed the icon of our mobile application. When you downloaded our mobile application, you could choose the icon. For example, only the flower was something neutral and not to allow other people to see that you are reading Meduza. So I am close to the finish. So what's the score? You know, unfortunately, it's a war of destruction and we are under constant attack 24/7. Russian authorities are attacking us. Did the US attacks 200,000? Bigger than our usual traffic. Our mirrors are blocked every ten minutes. We are rotating mirror mirrors, on the servers, every ten minutes. Then, Russian authorities have endless amount of money, and they're using it properly. For example, I became the first Russian journalist whose iPhone was infected with the Pegasus guys. They spent quarter of a million dollars. For what purpose? To see into my iPhone. What? What did they see? Nude photos, I do not have them. Only for, for only my very proud, plum pie I baked under the recipe of New York Times. So what? What did they see in my phone? They spent quarter a million to infect my iPhone? It's constant attacks with the cadres. They tried to donate us from the stolen cars, and. It's. It's a war of destruction, and I mean it. And what's ahead? Oh, a negative prognosis. Unfortunately, inside Russia, all global services will be replaced with, native ones. Bypassing blockings will be available only for youngsters or for technically driven readers, and they are searching and finding the, and appropriate content, as fast as possible. So we are near what we call Cheburnet. You know, Russia is the Russian third beast, in some kind of, special Russian toy and we call this isolated internet Russian Cheburnet. But. We're going to survive again, and we have some tricks, so let's try.

Kathleen McElroy [00:23:32] That was an amazing presentation. I mean, so worthy of an elevating ISOJ because I love what you said, that the technology is the heart and brains of what you do now. So that is, it's inspiring and I think it fits right in with all these other. We've been talking about outlet making, using more technology. You exist through technology, so that is awesome. Now you all can start sending in questions, and we will get to them near the end of this and we're going to try to keep everything on time. So if you see me look at my watch, it's not like it's an Apple Watch. I'm not, you know, getting social media posts. So there's so much to unpack here. But one of the things I think is really interesting is as brave and courageous everything that you do, you and your staff like to focus on it's about journalism. It's about the mundane business of journalism. Could you talk a little bit about?

Galina Timchenko [00:24:46] Yeah. You know, it's I hate all this heroic mode on, because it's just a job to be done. So some years ago, we decided to do a job, and we just have to do it properly, that's all. And, you know, I never, ever in my life could convince any Russian colleague that technology matters. That you have to find the path to decide, you know? In 2017, we experienced the first, I call it death. We started to receive messages from our readers that we could not reach Meduza inside Russia. We could not meet. And I recall that I stood on my balcony, fidgeting and texting to my technical director every five minutes. Then he called me and said, okay, you consider it like a problem. I consider it like a challenge or task. Please give me some time to decide it and since that time, every attack on us I recall this phrase do not consider it as a problem. It's a challenge. It's a task. And we have the obligation before our readers to, find the solution.

Kathleen McElroy [00:26:20] You know, when I was hearing some of these stories, when I was talking to your staff earlier, it reminded me of the movie The Martian and all space movies, essentially like, here is an impossible situation. You break it down to these individual tasks and you sit there is like an expression like that in Russian.

Galina Timchenko [00:26:42] Yeah, yeah. But you know, I, I'd like to say that, when Russian authorities start to attack us very often and, I used to say that we are playing checkmates, three dimension checkmates in a speedy level. So we should be smarter than than than the, more fast. And, we have to find the way, because and no, I am serious. There are millions of Russians who desperately need independent information. Because every month, me and my co-founder write letter to our readers and our email base counts more than 100,000 email addresses and we received 75 pages of answers for our last letter and almost all of them. Guys, please, just go on. We do need you. And, I have just one example that every time when I speak, I started to cry. I start to cry. Please forgive me. We received letters from Ukraine and messages from Ukraine because, you know, there were many Russian speakers inside Ukraine. And they write, guys, please go on. We are reading you from the bomb shelter. You know, Russian bombs are falling on their heads and they reading Meduza and I start to cry every time I think about that. My country is an aggressor country and Russian bombs are on their houses and they continue to read Meduza. And it breaks my heart.

Kathleen McElroy [00:28:49] What could we and we meaning people in journalism, people and technology. What can we do to help?

Galina Timchenko [00:29:01] You know, Russia is a very good expert. You know it. It's all about gas and oil. And now Russia is exporting repressions and restrictions of freedom of speech, of freedom of internet. We know for sure that they are in a very close collaboration with Iran, with Azerbaijan, with North Korea. And they are experts on repressions and restrictions of freedom of speech and freedom on the internet. Please beware. And you know, it's for sure they need not only the Russian army should be stopped, but Russian internet aggression and repressions against freedom of speech. Because now they are collaborating with the worst guys on earth.

Kathleen McElroy [00:30:08] That's very chilling. So the little bit that we experienced in 2016. I think we're all fearing what's coming up with this election.

Galina Timchenko [00:30:21] It was a rehearsal. Right? It was a rehearsal. You know, they blocked our mirrors, before the elections and before Alexei Navalny murder. They blocked us once or twice a day. Now they are blocking us every ten minutes, so they are learning very fast. And what happened in 2016? It was just a rehearsal. Please, help us find technical solutions. Please, share with us your bright ideas. For example, jigsaw from Google. They helped us to develop one more mechanism of bypassing blockings. So, the a very useful Internet Archive or any other IT companies from the Valley, from Silicon Valley. They helped us. But it's our personal approach to them and we want more systematic solutions and decisions and a technical approach to all these situation.

Kathleen McElroy [00:31:38] And you're right. I mean, you're making a global warning, which we all know. And those of us who teach disinformation know that all this, the stuff that we feel, which is nothing compared to what you've experienced. But we all know that started decades earlier too. So yeah.

Galina Timchenko [00:31:59] Yeah. And unfortunately, Putin and his regime will not stop, please be sure of this, because they started with the restrictions of freedom of speech and internet, and now they are killing people. They killed Alexei Navalny and they poisoned many activists and journalists. And one of my journalists was poisoned in Germany, and my Iphone wasn't infected while I was in Germany. It was a transborder repression. So they are very dangerous. Guys, please believe me.

Kathleen McElroy [00:32:40] I do want to ask a question about the website itself, especially the English website. What struck me is that it's not a Google translation. The headlines are clever, and they do all the puns that you often see in English headline writing. There's one, on the site right now that says Forest Gumption.

Galina Timchenko [00:33:05] You know, previously, we considered our English version more like a business card or some reliable information for specialists or politicians or students or scientists, something like this. But since the war started, we saw six time growth of audience and we started to develop English version. And thanks to our editor of English version, Kevin Roethke. He lives in Boston and, and we have brilliant English team. Previously we have definitely two and a half person, and now we have six person or seven in our English version. So we're trying to widen the audience of the English version because, you know, our monetization model was crushed twice, first by Russian government, second by financial sanctions. And our, foreign colleagues, American colleagues, German colleagues, they helped us to shape our crowdfunding campaign to Western readers, to readers of English version, because we said, guys, we have thousands of people who supported us, but they have no chance to support us anymore because of the war. Please stand by them if you help us or if you support Meduza. Millions of Russians could read independent information and people answer. Now we have more than 16,000 of supporters all around the world.

Kathleen McElroy [00:34:51] That is that is wonderful. And we will add to that list.

Galina Timchenko [00:34:54] Thank you so much.

Kathleen McElroy [00:34:55] Now, here's some questions. One question via Slack. How do you assess Meduza's ability to reach pro-Kremlin audiences in Russia? How prepared are they to listen to independent media?

Galina Timchenko [00:35:12] You know, when, usually, thank you for the question because it's very common, opinion that we could influence to the people on the Kremlin propaganda. No, no, it's like, followers of religious cult. Nobody could convince them, but we have our explanatory rubric, and we saw it on IP addresses. Even the state prosecutor office read this rubric. They do not want to read our reporting. They do not want to read our analytics, but they want to read explanatory and fact check pieces. So more or less, we could influence them. Not ideologically, but at least they read us and sometimes argue with us. But the most important, this very calm tone of voice. This fact check based journalism, data journalism. They could not oppose these explanatory pieces.

Kathleen McElroy [00:36:38] Here's a question that goes to the Wayback Machine via Slack. Back in 2007, the independent bloggers were using LiveJournal to evade censorship. What, how have those techniques and tools or the ones that came up back then, have any of them still proven valuable?

Galina Timchenko [00:37:00] No. The the only, unfortunately, we see that, social media platforms from Facebook or Instagram, they could not help us to deliver information because, for example, in December, Meta conducted a special meeting in Berlin, Germany, and they openly announced that they are positive social platform and they should downgrade our violent and disturbing content, so they are not useful. The only way, we could provide, our, it's very, very sarcastic and very ironic that now I talk about the slogan of North Korea reader, we could rely on our own platform and playgrounds, for example, emails, websites, mobile application and telegram messenger. The only one Russian authorities could not slow down and still works perfectly well. But in the very beginning we brought were broadcasting from ten plus platforms. Now we have only five of them.

Kathleen McElroy [00:38:22] And I guess, you know, we'll end on this one. How can Meduza's experience help journalists or outlets that face censorship? I'm also curious about that because I did a panel last year on exile journalists. So what can you share about your experience to help others who might be in the same situation?

Galina Timchenko [00:38:42] The most vital problem is to state adequately and reliably inside Russia. So inside the country, from. From where, are you? So, from the very beginning, we started summer school of journalism two weeks in the summer and we specially chose journalists from rural Russia regions. And, we spent some time together and they became our ambassadors, and now they are the core of our reporters from the ground. But unfortunately, we have to agree that the usual standards of journalism, unfortunately, does not work for us because we have to rely on readers' trust. We do not want to mention and to put at risk our

news newsmakers, our experts. We could not name our journalists. They are working on the special security protocols on an anonymous basis. So we have to play catch me if you can game.

Kathleen McElroy [00:40:00] Well, thank you so much. Thank you for speaking to us. And, maybe our goal is to put exile journalism, make it obsolete.

Galina Timchenko [00:40:09] Thank you.