Glasnost 2.0

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Abstract: Although Soviet era glasnost did not generate authentic media freedom, it did allow for pluralism. The internet is creating similar conditions in Russia today. The anti-electoral fraud rallies that took place at the end of 2011 demonstrate that the internet can mobilize large protest movements. Accordingly, in order to prevent future protests, the Putin administration has two choices: accommodate greater engagement of the public in decision-making or seek to control the internet, including through the use of nationalist appeals and diversionary warfare.

Does the Soviet experience with glasnost teach us that even if Russians don't have media freedom, media dissonance can lead to social upheaval? The diversification of media voices via the rise of the internet in Russia may not be media "freedom" as we know it in the West, but it can still signal change as it amplifies divisions in society. Western analysts, scholars, and arguably even the Soviets themselves missed the significance of that dissonance in accelerating political change almost three decades ago during the glasnost period. Today, there is evidence that Russia stands on the threshold of political upheaval again, with the online sphere broadening and amplifying a type of "Glasnost 2.0" effect. Not only is there a diversification of media voices and evidence of fracture within the central message as there was in the late 1980s, but now there is the augmentation of this dissonance via online social networks. This has the potential to broaden, deepen and, perhaps most significantly, accelerate change in Russia.

Currently, analysts look more toward other countries rather than to the Soviet past to consider the possibility for change in Russia. Do the events of the Arab Spring signal a step-change in the ability of online communication to challenge authoritarian regimes, particularly in the way that social action linked to digital communication can travel across country lines? This is a question that has galvanized the attention of post-Soviet analysts, citizens, and leaders alike as Russia experienced

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wide-scale street demonstrations less than a year after the collapse of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt. What is significant and useful about the Arab Spring vis-à-vis the Russian case is understanding how media dissonance functions in non-free states. In particular, a closer reading of the elements of glasnost in the late Soviet period can help us to understand how changes within a communication ecosystem, even if they are not intended as freedom of the press, can mimic media freedom to the point that it has the same effect. Is the type of information shift that accelerated the end of the Soviet regime already under way in contemporary Russia? Are we failing to perceive it in the same way that virtually everyone was surprised by the abrupt collapse of the authority of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union?

This article argues that a careful consideration of changes in media *diversity*, as opposed to the introduction of media *freedom*, is key. This reframing of the argument will create a far more useful and nuanced understanding of information and political trajectories in present-day Russia than attempts to weld "liberation technology" arguments onto the Russian case. At the same time, this highlights the need to place the effect of communication technology within historic and national contexts instead of searching heedlessly for a type of globalized internet "effect."

Analyzing the relationship between media diversity and political protest in Russia takes a new interest and urgency in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis in early 2014. What social and political forces are unleashed by the internet in non-democratic regimes? This article argues that the inability to identify centralized points of permanent protest does not mean that people are not learning and changing their tolerance of authoritarianism through the rising diversity of information and interaction fostered by the digital sphere. In addition, this article is being completed as Russian intervention in Crimea widens on a daily basis, highlighting that emergent networks of media freedom are easily overwhelmed by waves of patriotism during armed conflict.

The Democratizing Features of the Internet

The internet has several features that transform the media landscape, which forces us to ask the question of whether the internet represents mere media evolution or complete media revolution. Specifically, the internet converts the transmission of news from almost exclusively one-to-many to a many-to-many model. Traditional forms of mass media remain influential in media systems as they are key creators of content; however, these legacy media outlets have lost their monopoly on information creation and dissemination. The same distributive and economic forces of the online sphere that undermine traditional forms of mass media have created a

vibrant infosphere that includes social networking, blogging, alternative news sites, direct information from sources via websites, Email campaigns, and more. This creation and sharing of content takes place largely outside of government regulation (in most countries). It is both instantaneous and inexpensive in most places. The rise of smartphones and the burgeoning of wearable communication technology (such as Google Glass) make information even more immediate, portable, and integrated with the individual.[1] The nature of the internet also collapses barriers among economic, social, and political activities, such as enabling discussions about citizen rights in parenting forums in Russia.[2]

Key factors of the online sphere, such as immediacy, lack of controls, speed, many-to-many communication, as well as the affordance of political discussions outside traditional politicized channels, suggest that digital technology can subvert the censorship found in authoritarian states. This finding has led to the idea of "liberation technology," i.e. that the internet can play a key role in overthrowing dictatorship.[3] This concept has gained particular currency in the United States, where the phrase has been used by the State Department as a key policy in terms of supporting citizens in foreign countries who wish to challenge regimes considered repressive by the United States. Such positive associations are countered by fears that naïve use of the internet by dissidents – or even just curious citizens – in non-free states could lead to identification and backlash by these governments. These concerns are voiced to a mild degree by Diamond, but to a far greater extent by Evgeni Morozov.[4] Both hopes and fears about liberation technology should be bounded by the fact that although online communication has universal features, those elements will be significantly shaped by national systems. For example, almost all nations have state broadcasting systems. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom with its British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the national broadcasting system strives to provide an informative balance for citizens. In Russia, the main state-run broadcaster (First Channel or *Pervyi Kanal*) deliberately attempts to frame or distort information to keep the Kremlin elite in power. Thus, no one would call television in and of itself a "liberation technology," although it could function as one in the right situation (and indeed it did in 1991 in Russia, as discussed below).

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[1] For an overview on current thinking about the individual, society, and the internet, see a report by a European Commission expert group: Onlife Initiative. 2012. *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*. Brussels: European Commission. Available online at https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/sites/digital-agenda/files/Manifesto.pdf.

[2] Sarah Oates. 2013. *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[3] Larry Diamond. 2010. Liberation Technology. *Journal of Democracy* 21: 3, pp. 69-83.

[4] Diamond, Liberation Technology; Evgeni Morozov. 2011. *Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. New York: Public Affairs.

A reasonable argument would be that television can be controlled relatively easily by the state, whereas the internet cannot be so easily subverted. Television can be kept in check either directly via firings and purges or less directly (and more effectively over the long term) by setting norms and self-censorship in service to the regime, as is the case of the First Channel and journalists in general in Russia.[5] Meanwhile, the internet is built on the concept of networks, constantly changing and controlled by no one central authority. While the online sphere has choke points, such as the ability to shut down specific internet service providers or arrest dissident bloggers, the internet can fairly readily be "re-wired" for new platforms or bloggers to take up the dissenting role. Yet, what both of these arguments leave out is the audience. In order for television to dominate the information heights, it must resonate with its audience. In order for the online sphere to serve as both an effective communication system and a possible foil to state-dominated media interests in a repressive regime, it also must have an engaged audience. Thus, the audience – often neglected and overlooked in communication studies – is a key factor in terms of the efficacy of media outlets.

Features of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Media Environment

Even before the wide adoption of the internet, the contemporary Russian media landscape appeared significantly different from that of the Soviet media. The Soviet media was staid, controlled, and dominated by frames and language that reflected Communist messages.[6] The Soviet media worked in the service of the Communist Party with its mission to indoctrinate the population in the tenets of communism and maintain a constant campaign of pro-Party propaganda. This "Soviet Communist" model is described in Siebert et al.[7] and contrasted with the role of the media in other political systems (including democracies and even authoritarian regimes that linked control to individuals rather than communist philosophy). The Soviet Communist model is not only a useful description of media throughout much of the Soviet regime (a description that grows ever more important as we educate students who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union), but also describes the entire typology of a media

[5] Svetlana Pasti. 2005. Two Generations of Contemporary Russian Journalists. *European Journal of Communication* 20(1): 89-115; Voltmer, Katrin. 2000. Constructing Political Reality in Russia: Izvestiya – Between Old and New Journalistic Practices. *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 15(4): 469–500.
[6] Ellen Propper Mickiewicz. 1980. *Media and the Russian Public*. New York: Praeger; Thomas F. Remington. 1988. *The Truth of Authority: Ideology and Communication in the Soviet Union.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
[7] Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm. 1963, reprinted 1994. *Four Theories of the Press*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

system. The question here is whether the underlying nature of the system in which the media serve political masters rather than the public interest has continued to this day in the Russian media. The contemporary Russian media both remake beloved Soviet formats with modern twists as well as adopt Western formats, such as crime-enforcement reality shows and gritty dramas with Russian themes. Yet, for all the diversity in entertainment, there remain quite significant controls on mainstream news content.[8]

A key question in this is whether one perceives glasnost, the policy of greater media transparency introduced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s that led to widespread media diversity by 1991, as a change in nature of the Soviet media or merely an amplification of the media as lapdogs for powerful political factions. Glasnost was widely hailed as a significant shift in the role of the media from mere voices of propaganda to fitting far more closely to the Western role of the journalist to inform and enlighten the public. What is interesting is that there was indeed a switch in the nature of the media, as Soviet media outlets quickly adapted to this new policy of "transparency" (the best translation of the word *glasnost*). At first relatively limited – one of the first sensational stories was a *Pravda* newspaper report revealing how better goods were reserved for elite Communist Party stores – the reporting quickly spread to reveal and discuss forbidden topics, such as the shocking misuse of psychiatric hospitals to control dissidents and unreported Soviet army massacres during World War II. There is no question that the late 1980s and early 1990s fostered one of the most unfettered periods in journalism, not just in Russia but indeed anywhere.

However, the idea that glasnost represented a fundamental, permanent shift in the media's role in Russia from state lapdog to champion of the public interest would be a mistake. Media outlets were encouraged to push the boundaries of media frames and agenda – indeed re-invent them with great rapidity – due to two fundamental factors. First, media outlets were able to reflect the political divisions that developed among different elements of Soviet society during the CPSU's ill-fated perestroika campaign: between hard-liners and reformers, between Soviet supporters and nationalists, between various individual politicians themselves such as Gorbachev and future Russian president Boris Yeltsin. Thus, the Russian (and somewhat universal) expression "he who pays for the music calls the tune" was appropriate, as divergent media outlets had political patrons who could give them authority and support. At the same time, this fragmentation

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[8] Sarah Oates. 2006. *Television, Elections and Democracy in Russia*. London: Routledge; Sarah Oates and Tetyana Lokot. 2013. *Twilight of the Gods?: How the Internet Challenged Russian Television News Frames in the Winter Protests of 2011-12*. Paper presented at the International Association for Media and Communication Research Annual Conference, Dublin, Ireland; Oates. *Revolution Stalled*.

of the political elites – never seen to this level before or after this period since the October Revolution – created an environment not only free from state control, but unfettered by dominant norms or frames. Unlike the "War on Terror" frame after 9/11 in the United States[9] or the Russian nationalist frame under Putin today,[10] the Soviet media in the late glasnost period were free not only of the constraints of the Soviet system, but of the normative frames of any system at all. While once the Soviet media had reflected the central ideology of the CPSU, by 1991 it reflected a very fragmented social and political landscape. A majority view that emerged in Russia was that of Russian nationalism and support for Yeltsin in lieu of Gorbachev.

Thus, glasnost was not a policy that supported "freedom" of the press, but diversity of the press emerged due to lack of controls. While the Soviet journalists were not trained as watchdog journalists, the splintering of central control, the rise of a range of political viewpoints, as well as the coverage of this new diversity across the media spectrum created many different voices. As a result, Soviet citizens were presented with perhaps one of the most diverse media environments in modern times during the late glasnost era. While media scholars might point to such an outpouring of different perspectives as a good thing, Soviet citizens themselves were less impressed.[11] Studies have shown that Soviet citizens viewed this media landscape as a cacophony of voices that encouraged a dangerous division of power. Indeed, in one survey they judged the media during the glasnost period as the worst era for the media in either Soviet or Russian times: In a survey of 2,000 Russians in 2001, respondents showed little enthusiasm for the glasnost style of news: they preferred either the media under Putin (43 percent) or even in Soviet times (17 percent) rather than during the Yeltsin era or during glasnost.[12] In a series of 24 focus groups in Russia in 2000, Russians expressed dismay at the chaotic nature of information and society during the glasnost period and in the first years of the young Russian state.[13] Thus, while the media went through profound changes during glasnost, Russians did not necessarily appreciate these changes. The Russian audience expressed support for order and authority over a diversity of opinions on the pages of newspapers or via their television screens. The open question is whether there is still the preference for order over information in the internet age in Russia.

Ultimately, neither journalistic philosophy nor audience reaction was the key factor in the (unintended) ability of glasnost to transform Soviet

[9] Robert M. Entman. 2003. Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame after 9/11. *Political Communication* 20: 415-432.

[10] Oates and Lokot, *Twilight of the Gods*.

[11] Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy*.

[12] Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy, p. 155*.

[13] Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy*.

society in ways counter to Gorbachev's intentions. What glasnost did was ruin the façade of an effective state. All states are flawed, but citizens usually accept some measure of incompetence or corruption if the broader image of the state is that of control and competence. Western analysts assumed that Russians were enraged by the way in which media transparency (or media cacophony) under glasnost revealed a non-democratic state. Public opinion surveys from this period and soon after, however, showed that there was little permanent support for democracy as defined by Western experience.[14] Thus, the Soviet audience was more profoundly disturbed by the lack of competence and authority in their state, which was amply demonstrated during glasnost. This reached a head in August 1991, when a CPSU reactionary coup failed within days and the full inability of the Party to continue to lead the country was revealed, not least by the shaking hands of the leaders in a wooden press conference on state television. Nor did the newly acquired habits and skills of Soviet journalists help the coup makers hold on to power for the CPSU, as the prime state television channel defied armed guards to send cameras onto the streets and record not only the broad civic unrest, but even more significantly, the failure of the military to support the coup. In this moment, the actions of the Soviet media under glasnost and any free media anywhere converged. The Soviet media in August 1991 had huge latitude because there literally was no longer a central government to control them, not because the idea of control was gone from the minds of the journalists or the citizens. At the time, however, many mistakenly saw this as the dawning of a Western-style journalistic freedom in Russia. They were wrong; the dearth of control came from the non-existence of a functional state, not from a shift in journalistic norms or audience expectations. Meanwhile, citizens suffered in this new era of "freedom" in the young Russian state, when jobs, pensions, savings, and security disappeared virtually overnight for tens of millions of Russians

Glasnost Then and Russia Now

How does the glasnost period compare with the current media landscape in Russia? Even prior to the advent of the internet, the Russian media sector was notably more diverse than the Soviet media. In particular, a vibrant commercial sector has developed, including the national NTV television network and many other outlets (online and offline). However, this did not mean it developed into a system that included media and journalism as a watchdog of the state or as a champion of the public. In particular, it is significant what is *not* reported on the mainstream media (especially

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[14] Stephen White. 2011. *Understanding Russian Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

television). Issues such as widespread corruption, the collapse of social services, the problems of rural life, endemic unemployment in some areas, and particularly ongoing violence in Chechnya are not reported in any meaningful way in the Russian mainstream media.

Can the internet, then, bring further and useful glasnost or transparency to Russia? Raising such a question is not even asking if the internet can bring freedom of the media, given that the lesson of the glasnost era is that transparency alone can bring about profound change. There are some significant parallels between the glasnost period and the new digital age for Russia, not least in the noteworthy increase in diverse reporting and opinions. After the foundation of the Russian state, media freedom as measured by Western standards steadily declined in Russia. Indeed, Russia has slipped far down the list of free countries compiled by Freedom House, now ranked 176th out of 197 countries, between Sudan and Azerbaijan.[15] Although there is a relatively lively commercial broadcast sphere in Russia, Putin signaled a lack of tolerance for political challenge by commercial media through a forced financial takeover of the main commercial broadcaster (NTV) in 2001.[16] The performance of the Russian media at elections has highlighted many flaws in the system, particularly in the bias and slanted reporting of the central state-run television on Channel 1 (currently known as the First Channel). Despite electoral laws that guarantee equal coverage to candidates and parties, there is a marked bias toward pro-Putin candidates and the United Russia party.[17] Political opponents, from the communists to liberals, are mostly ignored and occasionally vilified in the main state-run media. Commercial television does produce news that is slightly more challenging to the dominant state narrative, but it does not call into serious question any aspect of the state (particularly widespread corruption or the long-running conflict in Chechnya).

While information sources have diversified and become technically more professional, the idea of the media as "objective" or "balanced" has never been widely accepted. All segments of Russian society, from politicians to the public to the journalists themselves, perceive the mass media as political actors themselves rather than watchdogs that can provide a check on political power.[18] Thus, while there is no overt system of top-down

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[15] See the report by Freedom House, a U.S.-based non-governmental organization, at http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press

[16] Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy*.

[17] See reports from the European Institute for the Media on media performance in Russian elections from 1993 to 2000, archived at http://www.media-politics.com/eimreports.htm as well as reports on Russian elections from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) at http://www.osce.org/odihr-elections/. Also see Stephen White, Richard Rose and Ian McAllister. 1996. *How Russia Votes*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

[18] Pasta, 2005; Voltmer, 2000.

state censorship in Russia today, the media are not free to contribute to the democratic process. This limit results from an intertwined set of societal factors. These elements include a lack of professional acceptance of the concept of journalistic balance or objectivity; the use of the media as political pawns by leaders; and the public's acceptance of the media as a voice of authority rather than the purveyor of information.

The Internet in the Post-Soviet Information Ecosystem: Stability or Change?

Until late 2011, there was little evidence that the democratizing potential of the internet was bringing any fundamental change to citizens in Russia, even as growth in internet use exploded in the country. Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of people online in Russia grew 1,826 percent.[19] Figures from World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database show that 43 percent of the Russian population was online by March 31, 2011, with almost 60 million users out of a population of just under 140 million. The percent of the population online has since expanded to about 47 percent, according to World Internet Stats.[20] Although Russia now has the most people online of any European nation, it came late to the digital revolution. Moving from a relatively low uptake for its level of economic development,[21] Russia's internet use grew more quickly than any other significant European nation over the same time period.[22] Russia's experience parallels the online population in Egypt, where use accelerated sharply in the period just before the Arab Spring. The two countries' experience suggests that considering not only the percent of a population online, but the pace of the growth of the outline audience, is important to understanding the relationship between the internet and political protests. In both the case of Egypt and Russia, significant public protests occurred as the adoption of the internet hastened.

At the same time that both the online audience and online content continued to grow at a rapid rate, the Russian state failed to extend its traditional system of mass media control to the online sphere. Such slow reactions are not unusual, in that there is significant variation in state control of the internet across all types of regimes. However, it is important to note that Russia pursued a relatively laissez-faire approach

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[19] World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database, see http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=ITU&f=ind1Code%3aI99H#ITU

[20] http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe

[21] Julian Cooper. 2008. *The Internet in Russia – Development, Trends and Research Possibilities*. Presentation at the CEELBAS Post-Soviet Media Research Methodology Workshop, March 28, 2008, University of Birmingham.

[22] World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database.

to monitoring the online sphere up to the end of 2011.[23] The hands-off approach was in direct contrast to the way in which Russia uses a range of controls, from media law that asymmetrically gives power to the state and the inculcation of journalistic self-censorship, to controlling the traditional mass media. That being said, Russia has developed a range of laws over the past decade that technically allow for mass surveillance and control of the internet, most notably its SORM legislation.[24] The interesting question is why the Russian authorities, for the most part, allowed the internet to exist outside of the regime of repressive law and self-censorship. Allowing such freedom to flourish could be due to a lack of understanding of the internet as a mass medium or the conviction that there was little dissent to fear within the society (or some combination of both these factors). The internet might have been viewed as a useful "safety valve" or showpiece for freedom of speech, much in the same way that the opposition news-paper *Novaya Gazeta* (*The New Newspaper*) continues to publish reports highly critical of the Putin regime. Any views of the internet as a benign or relatively powerless institution on the part of the government were significantly challenged by mass protests triggered by anger over electoral manipulation in late 2011 and early 2012.

The 2011-12 Russian Protests: The Winter of Discontent

Until the end of 2011, there were relatively few street protests in Russia and virtually no meaningful coverage of these demonstrations in the mainstream media. While an examination of the traditional media would show minimal citizen opposition to the regime (aside from some token coverage of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation), there was evidence that people were aggregating interests online and even taking action locally or on targeted issues, such as health care or treatment for children with genetic disabilities.[25] Such activism was apparent not only in the ways that Russians responded to widespread forest fires in 2010 by setting up a crowd-sourced map of areas needing help or through online protests about the development of forest lands near Moscow, but also via smaller-scale protests to gain access to social benefits taking place in various parts of Russia.[26] Some social action spread on the internet, such as the "blue buckets" campaign that saw motorists affixing blue buckets to the roofs of their cars across Russia to mock the overuse of blue police lights on official cars. Such innovation showcased the Russian flair for graphic humor and mockery as social protest. Alexei Navalny and other

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[23] Oates, *Revolution Stalled*.

[24] For details, see Oates, *Revolution Stalled*.

[25] Oates, *Revolution Stalled*.

[26] Oates, *Revolution Stalled*.

social-activist bloggers had gained significant followings online by the end of 2011, particularly with Navalny's anti-corruption campaigns that had broad resonance in a population frustrated by the high levels of fraud in Russia. However, it would have been difficult to identify any widespread, populist Russian political movement or street demonstrations linked to the internet prior to late 2011.

The first major evidence of change in the scale and scope of protests in Russia occurred when relatively small protests about the December 2011 parliamentary elections quickly escalated in Moscow and further afield. The protests were triggered by election rigging for the 450-seat Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament and the only federal legislative chamber that is directly elected). Election fraud is nothing new in Russia and arguably was not worse in 2011 than in previous elections. Problems have included suspected falsification of returns (particularly in Chechnya), unfair treatment at the ballot box, vote buying, as well as highly biased coverage of candidates and parties by national media, especially on state-run television. Elections have been heavily manipulated by the Kremlin, not only via the state-dominated media, but also through an electoral law increasingly aimed at consolidating state-backed parties at the expense of grass-roots opposition.[27]

The Kremlin-backed United Russia won 53 percent of the vote in December 2011, which was not far off the predicted result, but anomalies in the vote as well as reports of electoral irregularities were widespread. The first protests appeared in Moscow just after the December 4 election day. The largest number of arrests (estimated at hundreds) occurred during the early protests and included the detention of Navalny along with other opposition figures. A larger protest was quickly organized for December 10 in Moscow under the banner of "For Fair Elections," managing to gain permission for the event and a sanctioned area on which to protest. The crowd was estimated at about 50,000 by the BBC. Other protests were planned for around the country, aided significantly by communication online. The protest numbers peaked on December 24, with the largest demonstration held on Sakharov Avenue in Moscow and attracting an esti-mated crowd of 80,000. There were additional rallies across the country. Although the movement called for new Duma elections, the removal of the chair of the Central Electoral Commission, as well as an investigation into falsification in the Duma results, none of these demands were met by the end of the 2011-12 protests. Another set of protest meetings were organized for February 4, again at Bolotnaya Square in Moscow and

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[27] Regina Smyth. September 2013. Beyond United Russia: The Kremlin's Efforts to En-gineer Ruling Majorities. PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 302. The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. http://www. ponarseurasia.org/memo/beyond-united-russia-kremlin's-efforts-engineer-ruling-majorities

around the country. Pro-Putin demonstrations started to appear as well, with the largest in Moscow also on February 4, with a reported 130,000 participants.[28]

The nature and scale of the protests caught many observers and analysts completely off guard. Russians were certainly aware of electoral manipulation, but arguably the internet made them conscious of the scope of the problem for the first time in 2011. Although the first protests followed the usual script of state repression and arrests, the subsequent demonstrations were marked by few arrests and the participation of a broad range of the population as opposed to a narrow circle of committed dissidents. The size of the anti-regime protests is evidence that the online sphere can be a game-changer in terms of the ability to spark street protests in non-free states. Similar elections and high levels of corruption had been occurring for years, with no organized street demonstrations or virtually any protest at all. However, it is not the mere existence of the online sphere or even the electoral fraud. Rather, it is possible to identify a set of factors all linked to the online sphere that combined to produce an extraordinary level of dissent for Russian citizens. These factors are the particularly flagrant electoral manipulation made visible via the internet; online alternative news sources; room for public aggregation of anger via social-networking sites; and the ability to logistically organize online. At the same time, the ability to witness via the online sphere removed one of the most powerful elements of a repressive regime to isolate and intimidate individual citizens through arrest. Private discontent had evolved into public outrage, facilitated by the communicative affordances of the online sphere.

As during the glasnost period, state-run media could not maintain a unified narrative dictated by the Kremlin.[29] The First Channel's flagship news show *Vremya* (*Time*) attempted to frame the protestors as either dedicated troublemakers or foolish thrill-seekers, but it was impossible to maintain that narrative with almost half of the population having access to direct witnessing and relatively unbiased reports from the events themselves via the internet. There was a noticeable shift in the frame of the events by state-run television to concede that the protests were much

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[28] The estimates of the crowds varied widely between official numbers released by the police and the protestors themselves. Estimates from the British media are used as they are from a relatively objective viewpoint. See "'First we take Sakharov Avenue': The capital sees its biggest demonstration yet against the Kremlin," *The Economist*, December 31, 2011, online at http://www.economist.com/node/21542205, (last accessed November 27, 2013 19) and "Moscow: Thousands join pro- and anti-Putin protests," BBC Online, February 4, 2012, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16885446, (last accessed November 27, 2013).

[29] Oates and Lokot, *Twilight of the Gods?*

broader in both size and scope,[30] although *Vremya* avoided reporting that the main rallying cry for the protestors was "Russia without Putin." This shift was forced from the "bottom up" by the wealth of information online, ranging from full reports from reliable online news outlets to reports on social media from the protestors themselves. While the protests faded at the end of winter with little beyond a minor change in the electoral law to make it easier for political parties to register, arguably the change in the public sphere is permanent. Meanwhile, repressive laws aimed at controlling online dissent in Russia have accelerated since the 2011-12 protests.[31]

The most telling example of how the Kremlin is failing to control the narrative relates to the fate of Navalny, who was arrested on charges of embezzlement and convicted of misappropriating about $500,000 worth of lumber from a state-owned company in a trial that most viewed as politically motivated.[32] Although he was sentenced to five years in prison, he was released almost immediately on bail and continued to campaign for the Moscow mayoral election in September 2013. Navalny had risen to prominence online with his website that encouraged the reporting of corruption via the submission of evidence (much like the Wikileaks model). Once a member of the liberal Yabloko party, but long an independent activist, Navalny is the most prominent internet innovator in Russia. His rise to prominence has led to harassment and attention from officials, notably his arrest at one of the earliest protests after the 2011 elections. Navalny went on to win a respectable 27 percent of the votes for an outsider/liberal candidate in the mayoral race.[33] Eventually, his prison sentence was suspended, although he was banned from the online sphere in February 2014.[34]

What is notable about Navalny's case is that it does not fit the post-Soviet power paradigm, which is the most compelling evidence yet that there is actually a lack of a central power plan in Russia. No one was able to pretend that the charges against Navalny were fair or reasonable. The court proceedings and decision were clearly politically motivated, as Navalny himself said when his sentence was suspended: "Everything

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[30] Oates and Lokot, *Twilight of the Gods?*

[31] Regina Smyth. July 4, 2012. "Welcome to North Korea": Predicting the Effect of Russia's New Protest Law. *Policy Blog for PONARS Eurasia*, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/"welcome-north-korea"-predicting-effect-russia's-new-protest-law

[32] Miriam Elder. July 18, 2013. "Russia: Alexei Navalny found guilty of embezzlement." *The Guardian*. Last accessed November 27, 2013.

[33] Will Englund. September 9, 2013. Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny has strong showing in Moscow mayoral race, despite loss. *The Washington Post*. Available online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kremlin-critic-alexei-navalny-has-strong-showing-in-moscow-mayoral-race-despite-loss/2013/09/09/dc9504e4-1924-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html

[34] Andrew E. Kramer, October 16, 2013. Navalny Is Spared Prison Term in Russia. *The New York Times*. Available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/world/europe/russian-opposition-leader-is-spared-jail.html?_r=1&, last accessed November 27, 2013.

that happened last summer and everything that happens today depends on Putin."[35] It appeared that the state was operating its usual machinery against those they deemed powerful enough to be a threat, a strategy that starts with charges and can lead to indefinite detention. This model was consolidated, in particular, by the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former head of the private energy concern Yukos, who was convicted of fraud charges in 2005 and released in December 2013. The state's ability to put away a billionaire oligarch consolidated the Putin regime's power, authority, and regime of intimidation. Following this playbook, Navalny needed to be imprisoned, preferably indefinitely, in the same manner as Khodorkovsky. However, the surprise release of Khodorkovsky in December 2013 raises intriguing questions: was this a decision by the Kremlin to look "merciful" or a calculated move to respond to the need to appear more democratic in the internet age? If the latter, it would suggest that the 2011-12 protests have changed government strategy.

There have been many theories as to why Navalny was not left in prison, although few observers put forth the idea that Russian officials felt the case was unfair or were following any legal precedents (as politics rather than law dictates action for political challengers such as Navalny). It would appear that the case of Navalny simply did not fit the playbook. By imprisoning him and turning him into a martyr, the state risked giving him more power, visibility, and greater legitimacy. His visibility in the international media increased markedly via reports of his arrest in the first December 2011 elections protest. By letting him remain free, especially as he ran for public office and continues as a powerful opposition leader both online and off, he also remains a threat. The Kremlin, it would appear, simply has no particular strategy for dealing with an online social entrepreneur. As a result, there is no way to predict what will happen to Navalny, which opens a new and interesting era in Russian politics. And this era would be impossible without the "glasnost" that is brought about by the internet. As during the glasnost period, there is little evidence that journalistic norms have changed, but there is a huge diversity of views available to the ever-growing Russian online audience. As in the glasnost era, this suggests that there is a cacophony of media frames, meaning that the state cannot control the narrative. And if a non-free state cannot control the narrative, it is at equal risk of coup or revolution. By admitting in February 2014 that Navalny is too dangerous to have online, the Russian state may have actually amplified his power and influence yet again.

A wild card factor in this shift is the Russian media audience, as a factor that has evolved significantly from late Soviet times is the media choice of the Russian audience. A Russian government report in 2011

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[35] Kramer, Navalny is Spared.

predicted that by 2015, virtually all Russians under the age of 40 would be online.[36] At the same time, older Russians are far less likely to be online for economic and social reasons. Older Russians still report state-run television as their most important media source, while younger Russians select website portals in the same surveys.[37] Thus, the turn away from television and to the smaller screens of the internet (computer, tablet, phone and whatever the future holds) is accelerated in Russia, which has a particularly rapid rise of the younger generation due to significantly lower life expectancy for Russians than most Western counterparts. Russia is changing fast, augmented by the shift in the delivery and sharing of information made available by the online sphere. It would take a smart and responsive repressive regime to adapt and capitalize on that shift in the public sphere, and the Navalny case, in particular, suggests that the regime is falling behind.

Research by Gallup for the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors has identified rapid shifts toward the digital sphere among the Russian audience.[38] In a series of surveys of nationwide samples of 2,000 Russians aged 15 and older, reports of internet access have grown from 45 percent of the population in 2010 to 63 percent in 2012 to 71 percent in 2013. This shift means that internet use surged 58 percent over just two years. The Gallup surveys have found that television still has massive penetration in Russia, with usage at 98 percent in 2013, but the trend is away from the big screen and toward smaller screens: From 2010 to 2012, reported daily television viewing fell from 89 percent of the Russian adult population to 85 percent while internet use rose from just 29 percent for daily use to 46 percent. While television still saturates the Russian population, it is now augmented – or challenged – by information that Russians encounter in the online sphere.

Gallup conducted more in-depth research on media use in November 2013 with a nationwide survey of 5,012 people. Although social networking was the most popular activity online in Russia in late 2013, with half of the respondents reporting they had used it during the past week, almost as many (46 percent) reported using the internet to find information on a topic. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents had used the internet to find news in the past week – indeed, four out of 10 Russians claimed to access news online two times or more *each day*. About a third of the respondents reported that they used social networking sites to share news

[36] Russian Federal Agency on the Press and Mass Communication. 2011. *Internet v Rossii: Sostoyanie, tendentsii i perspektivy razvitiya [The Internet in Russia: Conditions, Trends and Perspectives on Development]*. Moscow: Regional Public Centre for Internet Technology. Available online at http://www.fapmc.ru/magnoliaPublic/rospechat/activities/reports/2011/item6.html, last accessed November 27, 2013.

[37] Russian Federal Agency on the Press and Mass Communication. 2011. *Internet v Rossii.*

[38] For full results,see http://www.bbg.gov/blog/2014/01/08/bbg-research-series-contemporary-media-use-in-russia/

regularly. When the results are shown by socio-economic characteristics, younger, more educated, wealthier, and urban respondents are likely to use the internet more. The differences are particularly marked among the generations; indeed, those 15-24 years old were more likely to have been online (82 percent) in the previous day rather than watching television (73 percent). This compares with the middle age group (aged 35-44) who were more likely to have watched television (87 percent) compared with being online (55 percent). The Gallup surveys over several years have found that this rise in the use of the online sphere parallels a drop in allegiance to the Russian status quo. Approval of Putin has fallen from 83 percent in 2008 to 54 percent in 2013. At the same time, conviction that the Russian leadership is headed in the right direction has decreased from 63 percent to 45 percent. While this fall in approval is correlated with the rise in internet access, it is important not to make direct causal links, although it raises interesting questions. Tellingly, considering an "active opposition" to be "very important" has risen from 35 percent in 2008 to 43 percent in 2013.

Glasnost 2.0 and the Acceleration of Dissent

Online communication offers new and formidable tools to spread information in ways that subvert the power of authoritarian regimes to censor and repress. At the same time, however, domestic factors ranging from political culture to media history shape these affordances in different ways. Underlying this already complex situation is the concern that the authoritarian regimes themselves can hijack the informative capability of the internet for their own ends. Thus, analysts should be looking for ways to fit the affordances of the internet into the media culture and media history of a particular country. In other words, the internet is a game-changer, but the games it changes vary significantly. In the comparison of the Egyptian uprising of 2011 and the Russian street protests of 2011-12, there are factors that point to how the internet challenges the Russian state. At the same time, however, the history of late Soviet media and the experience of glasnost encourage us not to confuse media diversity – or even media cacophony – with freedom of the press. Changes in the media landscape were a significant factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union, but an over-determination of the role of the media in regime collapse blinds us to other factors. The most useful way to consider the Arab Spring effect on Russia is to consider how the new sources of information distribution and communication will specifically affect Russian political institutions.

One of the classic myths about Soviet history is that glasnost was a type of freedom of the press. Ultimately, however, the fact that the Soviet media system did not become a Western media system under glasnost did not matter to the leaders at the time. What the "cacophony" model created

was the lack of confidence in the central power structure. From Lenin onwards, the Soviet system relied heavily on the media in building the image of a powerful state. The actual capabilities of the Soviet state were challenged, particularly at the beginning of the Soviet system, by a range of internal and external factors. The image of a strong central state and a shared vision, however, did not waver significantly in the Soviet media until the glasnost period. Once the illusion was shattered, chaos ensued. Under Putin, the Russian state has again managed to project an image of power and shared vision, with a particular emphasis on nationalism and regaining a significant role in the world order. The internet threatens the ability of the Putin regime to maintain the useful illusion of cogency and power that non-democratic states critically need for legitimacy.

At the next major trigger event in Russia – ranging from anger over spending cuts, reports of high-level corruption, protests over social conditions such as failing healthcare – there will be a public memory of the right and the ability to take to the streets. As in the glasnost period, a lack of a strong central narrative makes this sort of mobilization even more likely and the internet will be there to facilitate that protest. If Russian officials do not want more protests of this nature, they have two choices: Accommodate greater engagement of the Russian public in governance or control the internet. They may not choose to do the former, but it looks unlikely that they can pull off the latter as well. And now that the latest digitally driven revolution has taken place just over the border in Ukraine, change seems more likely.

Worryingly, a third option emerged for Russia in February 2014. This wild card is the use of nationalism to trump calls for individual freedoms, particularly a Russian-led invasion of another country to "liberate" fellow Russians. The threat of the internet to "repression-as-usual" would encourage the Russian government to pursue military incursions or other nationalist acts to overwhelm this new media ecology and re-establish control of the narrative.