The Rise of the Digital Activism in Russia

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**Introduction**

The future of media and the Internet in Russia balance on a knife’s edge as this essay is written. Digitization, the process of switching into a digital format, and the new media landscape, has given the Russian population new outlets to express themselves relatively freely from government scrutiny, and it has in turn caused a headache for the state as they attempt to maintain control of the information flow. The control of information has especially been vital during the Ukrainian crisis. The state is not only censoring the few remaining independent media outlets, but also taking measures to shut down blogs and any platforms that might express a dissenting view of the current happenings in Ukraine. The question remains whether Russia will take additional steps to censor the Internet, moving closer to the tactics of their allies, China, or whether it remains a rhetorical threat by Putin.

In the context of the current happenings in Russia, this essay will seek to highlight the rise of digital activism, facilitated by the growth of Internet penetration, and also further discuss what the future entails for said activists.
The state of the media

In the last few years, the state of media in Russia has been under increased scrutiny due to an intensifying campaign by Kremlin to control all information reaching its citizens and leaving the country. More and more independent media outlets have been shut down, Kremlin has tightened control over state-run press, oppositional bloggers have been prosecuted, outspoken journalists have been attacked and killed, and new laws have been enacted that attempt to censor the Internet. As a response to the crisis of the mainstream media, activism and citizen journalism is on the rise.

The close relationship between a country’s press and its government is illustrated by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) in their book *Comparing Media Systems*. Although, the three country models of media proposed in the book are generalizations of media systems in North/Central Europe, the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and thus do not lend themselves naturally to the media systems of Russia and many of the Baltic countries, some relevant comparisons can be drawn. The Polarized Pluralist Model is characterized by low newspaper circulation, elite politically-oriented press, and weaker journalistic professionalization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Indeed, it is true of Russia as it has been of Spain and France in the past, that the state has a strong presence in the newsroom. Since the Russian ministry of communication has full control over subsidies to the press, it can exercise pressure and censorship. In Russia, there is the additional threat towards journalists and media companies of being prosecuted, being the victim of hacking, and in the case of the individual journalist, he or she is at risk of being attacked. Given these circumstances, and the fact that all major media outlets are owned either indirectly or directly by the state, the press in Russia is a propaganda tool and not trusted by many Russians. An alternative becomes citizen journalism.
Notable cases of citizen journalism and activism occurred between 2011 and 2012. During the mass protests following the 2011 presidential election, citizen journalists utilized blogs and social media sites to organize protests and spread information about what was happening. They did this because most the Russian mainstream media either failed to cover the protests at all or took a pro-government stance (Anna Popkova, 2014). Oppositional politicians, who make up some of the most popular bloggers, took it upon themselves to prove election fraud by going to polling stations and posting pictures on their blogs. The most prominent activist blogger is Alexey Navalny who in 2012 had 25,000 “friends” on Live Journal (Pankin, Fedotov, Richter, Alekseeva & Osipova, 2011). What Navalny attempts to do is “transmit a very negative image of the regime, focusing primarily on the aspects of illegitimacy, incapability, lack of appeal and ridicule” with the aim of “trying to mobilize people” (Bode & Makarychev, 2012, p. 5). Navalny embodies some of the hopes for the Internet as a democratic space by using it for counter-power and creating an autonomous public space for himself and his followers (Fenton, 2012). The efforts by Navalny are also amplified by the Russian government’s inability to censor the Internet, and also the inability of pro-Putin politicians to shape a favorable narrative on their own blogs. In fact, Bode and Makarychev (2012) conclude that the resistance potential of social networking sites, such as the blogsphere, is substantial in Russia because Kremlin does not dominate the symbolic online landscape nor do they maintain the prominent discourse.

The asymmetrical coverage of politics is not new. During the 2007-2008 parliamentary and presidential elections, the three biggest television networks, First Channel, Rossiia, and NTV, and the leading print outlets, Izvestia and Profil, gave positive coverage to the United Russia Party, which is the party of Putin and Medvedev, while neglecting other parties (Hale & Colton, 2010). While there were many alternative news sources for the Russian population to use, the
population heavily relied on the state-controlled television: 89 percent of survey respondents went to state-controlled television for news on politics (Henry E. Hale & Timothy J. Colton, 2010). The survey also found that only 29 percent made use of the Internet to get their news; one place where they could actually seek out differing political perspectives (Hale & Colton, 2010). One explanation for this low usage of the Internet can be explained in terms of Internet penetration. In 2007, 41.7 percent of the population were subscribed and that number soared to 48.4 percent in 2008 (Pankin, Fedotov, Richter, Alekseeva & Osipova, 2011). In 2011-12, the conditions were riper for Internet participation with 52 percent of the population online, and this was in fact one of the main factors for the anti-Putin movement (Yandex, 2013).

The “almost” revolution

The anti-Putin movement was on its height during the 2011-12 elections. Russia nearly had its own “coloured revolution”, meeting basic preconditions for a revolution. The precedent for revolution in the digital age was set by mainly the Tunisian revolution. Castells (2012) identifies three elements whose convergence made conditions ready for an uprising: young unemployed college graduates leading the revolt, a strong cyberactivism culture, and a high rate of Internet diffusion (Castells, 2012). Another two elements can be added to the Russian context: dispute over an election result and different kinds of civil resistance (White & McAllister, 2014). Russia did indeed check all the boxes of the preconditions:

1. Young people were the first to protest and set up Occupy camps (Maria Chehonadskih, 2014).
2. Social media is widely used in Russia. In 2012, there were 51.8 million social network users, which is effectively 78 percent of all Internet users. However, unlike the revolutions in the Middle East, the biggest social media sites in Russia are in fact Russian: VK has 190 million registered users, while Odnoklassniki has 45 million registered users. In comparison, Facebook only has 9 million users, and Twitter has 4.5 million (White & McAllister, 2014).

3. As mentioned earlier, 52 percent of the population were online in 2012, making for a high rate of Internet diffusion (Yandex, 2013).

4. In a survey after the election, 31 percent thought the election had been fair, 36 percent considered it to be unfair, 18 percent thought it had been completely unfair, and 8 percent said it was completely fair (White & McAllister, 2014). Another box was then checked: the contested election.

5. Finally, as a way of showing their dissatisfaction, one of the largest demonstration since Soviet rule took place on December 10th, 2011. Between 25,000 and 50,000 people showed up in Moscow. This demonstration was advertised on Facebook and was “widely publicized among online social network groups” (White & McAllister, 2014).

With all preconditions seemingly met, the question of why the revolution failed is an interesting one. However, it is not a question that this essay will attempt to answer. Instead the focus is on how come the political activism is on the rise in Russia now.

One explanation of why political activism has become more visible in the recent years is because of the relative freedom Russians can enjoy on RuNet (the Russian Internet). Before 2014, there had been “no major attempts by the authorities to block or limit access to online
Whereas most traditional media carries propaganda from the government and is not trusted by a majority of its audience, especially its young audience, the Internet allows users to seek out news beyond the borders of the country.

That the free use of the Internet sooner or later would be contested by those in power in Russia was expected, and it is exactly what is going on right now. After the involvement in the Ukrainian uprisings this spring and being the subject of multiple sanctions, Vladimir Putin has stated that the Internet is a C.I.A. project that opposes the interests of Russia. In line with this comment, Kremlin has aimed at restricting online communication with different measures and laws. The website of opposition politician, Garry Kasparov, has been blocked. The founder of Russia’s most popular social network, VKontakte, has been forced to flee to Europe after his refusal to give the private information of the Ukrainian protesters to Russian authorities. Furthermore, a bill is about to be signed into a law, which requires any Russian blogger with over 3,000 daily viewers to be registered with the government (Doug Bernard, 2014). Despite these attempts to limit the freedom of online movement, Kremlin cannot control foreign companies such as Twitter and Facebook, giving the Russians an opportunity to organize without governmental scrutiny.

**Discussion**

The information war wages on between Russia and the rest of the world, as the Ukrainian crisis escalates week after week. The political uncertainty is taking its toll on the media in particular, which is being censored and controlled in degrees not seen since the Soviet era.
One of the main differences between now and then, is the democratic potential of the Internet readily at hand to the average Russian. The traditional propaganda churning media is no longer the only choice for media dissemination. With the increase of Internet penetration, there has been a notable increase of activism, as activists find online platforms where they can share ideas and plan demonstrations without the interference of the state. Since many of the specifically Russian social networking sites are being monitored, we might see an influx of Russian users on foreign sites in the future.

Based on the large growth of Internet penetration in Russia over the last couple of years, and the continued growth, it is very plausible that we will see more examples of digital activism in the coming years – even possible uprisings like the ones seen in 2011 and 2012. Putin is taking steps to try and control the web, yet should he try to shut it down in this day and age when millions and millions of Russians already have embraced new media, it is likely that he will experience the same resistance that occurred in Tunisia and Egypt during their revolutions.

Reference list


