Careful What You Say:

Media Control in Putin's Russia – Implications for Online Content

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the practices of state control over Internet content in Russia and highlights their grounding in the information culture and media environment of the country. Building on existing data on freedom of the press and online censorship, the text explores the socio-cultural context of Kremlin's considerable influence on the Web. To this end, three relevant spheres of power relations are explored. The first one involves censorship and self-censorship routines embedded in the Russian information tradition. The second pertains to the state-controlled mainstream media where news goes through a political filter and the framing of Internet's role in the Russian social life is predominantly negative. The third domain concerns local legislative frameworks and their selective application. The analysis suggests that most of the tools used to control objectionable materials on the Russian Web are not Internet-specific. Rather, they can be seen as a natural extension of the censorship mechanisms used in traditional media.

Keywords: Journalism, Russia, Censorship, Internet, Media, Propaganda, Framing

In Putin's Russia, Information Has You:

Media Control and Internet Censorship in the Russian Federation

Press freedom and media censorship across political regimes have long been a subject of academic interest (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). The advent of the Internet – a decentralized and unruly communication medium – introduced new complexities into both the research and the policy-making efforts in the field (Sussman, 2000). The Web's impact on democracy, while difficult to evaluate fully (Morozov, 2009), is undoubtedly fundamental. Social media platforms have often been deemed an alternative space for civic dialogue and public participation (Faris, Wang, & Palfrey, 2008). In countries with restrictive media environments, web services can provide a way of circumventing official information channels (Shirky, 2008).

As Internet censorship is typical of non-democratic regimes, it is most often studied in the context of authoritarian societies. In recent years, research in the area has focused largely on China and the Middle East (Lum, 2006; MacKinnon, 2008; Faris, Roberts, & Wang, 2009). The People's Republic of China is said to have deployed one of the most sophisticated and intrusive Internet filtering systems currently in existence (OpenNet 2009). Access to online information in the country is selectively blocked through blacklisting of web addresses and scanning of Internet traffic for banned keywords.

Although it is a particularly invasive technological censorship tool, filtering is only one of many mechanisms used to limit access to Internet content. In their *Access* book series, Deibert et al. (2008, 2010) discuss numerous non-filtering solutions, or *soft means of control*. Those include laws and regulations related to media, telecommunications, or national security that restrict the publication of objectionable materials on the Web.

In reaction to the Arab Spring and recent unrest in former Soviet Republics, the Kremlin has also expanded its surveillance program, using it to track the movements of opposition figures. Russia's main surveillance system, known as SORM, has now been adopted in other states, including Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine (Freedom House, 2013).

While not engaged in large-scale technology-based Internet censorship efforts, the Russian government does use soft means to deal with disagreeable online content. Russia presents an important case study in part precisely because the state is so successful in establishing its

influence on the Web (Fossato, Lloyd, & Verkhovsky, 2009) without resorting to extensive real-time content filtering techniques.

This work aims to provide a framework describing the existing practices of Internet control in Russia, as well as their grounding in the country's idiosyncratic information culture and media environment. The study draws on findings coming from two separate lines of research. Reports on freedom of expression provide statistical data and details about the country's legislation and its application to online materials (Annenberg SPRC, 2007; Freedom House, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2011, 2012, 2013; Global Integrity, 2008, 2009, 2011). The text also builds on a body of literature exploring Russian cultural practices, socio-historical circumstances and their effects on political and civic dialogue. Particularly relevant in this regard are Zassoursky's (2004) work on the transformations of the Russian media-political system; de Smaele's (2007) analysis of the dimensions of information culture; and Koltsova's (2001, 2006) model of power relationships between the Russian authorities, media and citizens.

In a report published by Freedom House, Karlekar and Cook (2009) outline three broad categories of Internet control mechanisms:

- Obstacles to access (including blocking applications or technologies, infrastructural and economic barriers, etc.)

- Limits on content (including filtering software, blocking of websites, censorship and self-censorship, online propaganda, etc.)

- Violations of user rights (including legal restrictions, surveillance, legal prosecution, harassment, etc.)

Even though the Internet penetration in Russia remains relatively low and the access speeds relatively slow, there is no evidence of specific efforts on the part of the authorities to keep citizens offline (*obstacles to access*). This study examines control practices that fall in the last two categories, including:

- Censorship and self-censorship prompted by the information culture and political traditions of the country

- Control over mainstream media leading to restrictions of the available content and a negative framing of the Internet

- Legal frameworks and their selective application; threats and intimidation of individuals by the authorities

Based on an analysis of Russian history and information culture, this study concludes that the tools used to control online content in the country are neither new nor particularly high-tech. On the contrary: Internet censorship mechanisms are often indistinguishable from the ones used in traditional media.

The Evolution of Russian Media

In order to explain the nature of Kremlin's influence over the internet, this work takes a brief look at the evolution of Russian society and the history of its media. Censorship and control have been implicit dimensions of Russia's lived experience for centuries. Simons and Strovsky (2006) attribute that to the deep-rooted authoritarian traditions of the nation that have permeated the practices and everyday life of the population. Those traditions emerged as a result of the harsh living conditions and the immense territory of the country, which had to be defended from constant attacks on all sides. Survival under those circumstances was premised on the unity of the Russian people under the rule of a strong leader. Predictably, a hierarchical political structure evolved.

This political environment had its effect on the media development in Russia. The first newspaper in the country - *Vedomosti* - was established in 1702 as a means of informing the population about the plans and wishes of Tsar Peter I the Great. The publication was under the monarch's full control – he was not only its editor, but also one of its most active writers. Vedomosti (as well as the Russian press that emerged in later years) was never meant to serve the citizens – its goal was to popularize the current priorities of the country and its ruler. In contrast to the Western press which was driven by competition and private interests, Russian news media were always primarily a political tool.

Soviet Times (1922–1991)

During the Soviet period, the state retained a virtually unlimited control over journalistic institutions and the content they produced. After the October revolution (1917), the Bolsheviks faced a critical problem: they had seized power but were struggling to appropriate meaning. The faction strived to achieve dominance over the public discourse - an effort which required the introduction of a new system of symbols, rituals and imagery. This discursive transformation entailed a redefinition of social values (Bonnell, 1997). The media – particularly print and radio – became a particularly helpful means to that end. The press and broadcast outlets were used for the purposes of propaganda. There was a strict control over content, establishing practices meant to limit the information available to the masses. Newspapers, radio, and later television served as tools for the "propagation of an ideologized reality" (Zasoursky, 2004) to which they gave a formal shape. Media were supposed to serve the *nomenklatura* system and reinforce an ideology which governed not only the public space, but also interpersonal relations and everyday routines.

In Soviet Russia, information was seen as an exclusive right of the chosen few. The privileged elite had access to forbidden periodicals, books and movies - the masses did not. The audience was considered to be too fragile and in constant need of protection from anything seen as remotely disturbing or alarming. A ban on publishing negative reports and covering domestic catastrophes was imposed on all Soviet newspapers. Not even road accidents, train collisions or street crimes could find their way into the news. The information access segregation was severe. The TASS news agency actually produced separate bulletins (printed on paper of a different color) for the ruling class. Party officials had access to more detailed and international news, while the common people read inspiring local stories. Mundane materials like street maps, catalogues and telephone books were not available to the masses – they were considered a military secret. Banned book had "special editions" available "for administrative use" only (Gorny, 2012).

The closed, centralized Soviet model that relied on complete control over information may in fact have played a major role in the collapse of the Union. According to some scholars (Castells & Kiselyova, 1995), that restrictive system was the reason why the communist regime was unable to adapt to the new information economy.

From Soviet to Contemporary Russia (1991 - 1999)

Shortly before the fall of the USSR, the Russian media got a relative freedom. News outlets used their new-found independence to lead the opposition against the communist party. Yeltsin became the first democratically elected Russian president – and with his coming to power the freedom of the press came to an end. Ivan Zassoursky (1999) describes the period that followed as "the formation of a new *media-political system*". Rather than being governed by the communist party, the media became dependent on corporate players and oligarch capital. Instead of catering to a mostly united elite with a single ideology, they started serving a number of different (and often contradictory) commercial interests. Censorship was once again prevalent but it became increasingly multidirectional and therefore less predictable.

During that period, Zassoursky reports, newspapers saw a striking drop in their circulation and importance. They stopped receiving a state subsidy, their prices went up, and their distribution system collapsed. Television, which was already very influential, became the most powerful media in the country.

Putin's Russia (1999-today)

In the first years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, the government's political control over national TV networks was fully restored. With his coming to power, Putin adopted a number of policies aimed at restricting the autonomy of independent news outlets (Becker, 2004). Claiming that he was liberating the media from the oligarchs, he launched a campaign to take every television and newspaper that mattered under state control. As a result, all large national TV networks in Russia are currently governed by the Kremlin, as are a number of the larger newspapers. The vast state media empire includes the news agencies ITAR-TASS and RIA-Novosti; the national radio stations Radio Mayak and Radio Rossiya; the leading TV networks Channel One, Rossiya and NTV (Freedom House, 2009b). Controlling the television programming is particularly important as TV remains the dominant source of news for the vast majority of Russians (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2014). A research brief published by the US government agency BBG reports that over 95% of the Russian population turns to television broadcasts for news at least once a week.

While constitutional limitations forced Putin to relinquish the presidency from 2008 to 2012, during that period he remained the prime minister and de facto national leader of Russia (Kimmage, 2009). Today, Vladimir Putin is still the most powerful political figure in Russia. He has continued to keep close ties with the owners of mainstream media.

With his return to the presidency in 2012, Putin tightened his control over both traditional and online news. The state interference with the press was particularly heavy-handed during and after the recent Crimea crisis. Around that time, strong political pressure from the Kremlin resulted in a number of reorganizations and leadership changes in large Russian media outlets. Those included, among others, the liquidation of the state news agency RIA Novosti, and the dismissal of radio Ekho Moskvy's director Yuri Fedutinov.

The Russian Internet

By the time President Putin came to power, the Russian Internet had already been around for quite some time. The first computer network - Relcom/Demos was created as a joint effort of a university research lab and a nuclear physics institute. In 1991 it already had 20 thousand users in more than 120 cities (Castells & Kiselyova, 2001). In August that year, a number of high-level state officials organized a coup trying to restore the communist regime and oust President Gorbachev. Traditional media were heavily censored: while tanks were patrolling the Red Square, the radio played classical music, the television broadcasted Swan Lake, and most newspapers were banned. The Relcom network emerged as the main channel used to disseminate information about the events, both to USSR users and to the West.

 Although that experience fueled optimism about the future of the Russian Internet as an alternative public space, in the years before 2000 very few people considered it to be a "real" news media platform. It was used by a relatively small number of early adopters, and the authorities did not deem it worthy of too much attention. In 2000, the Russian government finally started to recognize the Internet as a possible instrument of influence. It launched a new and very ambitious online project: a national information service called *Strana.ru*. The service was meant to be used for official propaganda and had correspondents and editorial staff in all federal regions. Even though it was heavily advertised, the website eventually failed. Russian Internet users favored other outlets, and the general population preferred television.

Private online media were somewhat more successful. Online news sites were initially maintained by enthusiasts, but big companies soon stepped in and the altruistic creative collaboration gave way to commercial models. In recent years, politicized capital undoubtedly plays a big role on the Web, just as it does in the traditional media sphere (Freedom House, 2009b).

Information Culture and Media Control

The government influence over Internet content in Russia can only be understood in the context of the media-political system in the country and the existing attitudes of its population. Research has found no heavy-handed soviet-style technological censorship on the Russian web. There is no evidence of online content filtering (Faris & Villeneuve, 2008). Instead, the state administration extends its quite sophisticated manipulation strategy to encompass the Internet. What makes this possible is the established *information culture* that dominates the Russian society.

A number of researchers have suggested that cultural practices regarding information should be taken into account in studies investigating media control. In their analysis of Russia and the network society, Castells and Kiselyova (1998) note that it was "the culture in which make believe is belief in the making". Simons and Strovsky (2006) point out that content in Russian media has always been affected by cultural traditions – and censorship and self-censorship are "an embodiment of these traditions".

The following sections describe several key constructs that have been used to map the dimensions of the Russian information culture. They provide an overview of the distinctions between *public* and *private* spaces, *universal* and *particular* principles, *individualistic* and *collectivistic* values.

The Public-Private Tension

As is often the case in totalitarian and authoritarian states, the Russian society had - and still has - a strong differentiation between public and private life. The public-private split draws a boundary line dividing spaces, actions, and conversations into two separate realms. This division was an absolute necessity in Soviet times – it was the only way to reconcile the discrepancies between ideology and everyday life. The communist regime created an environment requiring the

emergence of a complex system for control and repair of reality. Much like the Orwellian characters in 1984, the Soviet population needed *doublethink* – the power of simultaneously holding two contradictory beliefs (Orwell, 1950). The prevalent rhetoric of equality was belied by the reality of daily life where people met with party privilege, resource scarcity and bureaucracy (Rohozinski, 2000). Public values and private norms were highly inconsistent.

In contemporary Russia this double standard continues to exist. Putin's "Strong Russia" ideal justified some of the more dubious media control practices of his administration – practices which were seldom discussed in public spaces. The Russians invented their own term for the private, informal sphere where open discussions (even if performed in an altered state of consciousness) are held: *kitchen-table talk* (Gorny, 2007). In contrast, the terminology Western researchers usually employ in discussions of political communication and participatory democracy is not appropriated by scholars in Russia. The Habermasian *Öffentlichkeit* (public sphere), a social space where meaning is negotiated, is not considered relevant to the Russian reality. The substitute proposed by Zassoursky (2001) in one of his works on media and power in post-communist societies is *the public scene.* The same phrase is deliberately used by Oleg Kireev in his "Cookbook of the media activist" (2006). He links the term to Guy Debord's *society of spectacle* (Debord, 1983), emphasizing the fact that the Russian public sphere is simulated rather than genuine.

An important point to consider in this context is the positioning of the Internet along the public-private axis. Although the medium is open and accessible (to the state authorities as well as anyone else), its users have long treated it as an informal, semi-private environment. In recent years, however, the Russian Internet population started undergoing an attitude change. It has become increasingly obvious that publishing materials online has real-world consequences. The numerous cases of fined editors, threatened site administrators and arrested bloggers have clearly proven that point.

A number of researchers – both Russian and international – have argued that the web is a viable alternative space for political discussion and social debate (Gorny, 2006; Kireev, 2006). Their claim is that the semi-private virtual space provides a *surrogate civil society*, a substitute of the missing public sphere. Recent evidence, however, suggests that this is likely just wishful thinking. The Russian Internet can hardly provide this idealized space for nation-wide debate

where dissent can be safely voiced. Marcus Alexander (2003) identifies three trends that prevent the Web from increasing individual access to free information and providing a channel for one-to-one and one-to-many communication without government interference. According to him, in Russia:

(1) The digital divide, a gap between those with access to the Internet and those without, is likely to increase

(2) The Internet access has traditionally depended on older technologies such as the telephone and so the rich and the politically-privileged are much more likely to use it than the disenfranchised and the poor.

(3) The pattern of internet use has started to reflect the pattern of traditional media consumption rather than fulfilling its potential as a truly democratic means of public and private communication.

Access inequalities, as well as the current normative practices in Russia, make it harder to think of the Internet as a space of free expression allowing an escape from censorship. Recent events have challenged the utopian notion that communication technologies are necessarily empowering and effective in promoting democratic values (Morozov, 2012).

Focusing on the Russian case, Rohozinski (2000) cautions that the impact of ICTs is critically shaped by the social context in which they are deployed. As far as democratizing Russia is concerned, the transformative potential of information technologies has not been fulfilled. Studies of the Russian web (Fossato et al., 2009) have further suggested that its online communities there tend to be closed and intolerant - and their leaders can often be coopted or compromised.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

In her work on the media climate in post-communist Russia, de Smaele (2007) explores two dimensions of information culture particularly relevant to practices of government control over online media. The first one deals with the discrepancy between universalistic claims and particularistic reality; the second – with the tension between individualism and collectivism.

As de Smaele's work recaps in greater detail, particularism presupposes a priority of human relations and specific situations over general rules. In contrast, universalism assumes a precedence of general policy, values and codes over particular needs or contacts.

Particularistic cultures are high-context communication environments. Since little information is given explicitly, individuals need to possess a significant amount of metadata as a prerequisite for successful communication. Universalistic cultures, on the other hand, are low-context – all the necessary data is transmitted with the message.

The Russian reality makes claims for universal values and rules but is in fact largely dependent on interpersonal relations and intergroup dynamics. Corruption and privilege are the norm rather than the exception – not least of all in the context of access to information. Withholding information from the media and the citizens is a prevalent practice that is only very rarely deemed unacceptable by the public. This is true even in cases when the law is explicit in granting open access to the data in question.

Another important property of the Russian culture is that it is oriented towards the collectivistic ideal: the individual's role is above all that of a cog in the wheel of the community. That distinguishes it from individualistic cultures where the person is seen as a rational agent whose happiness and well-being are the goals of society.

The focus on collectivistic values in Russia does not go away with the fall of the communist regime. They are invoked in Putin's speeches through the ideal of "Strong Russia" and the marked stress on patriotism and social solidarity. This has a predictable effect on the freedom of information and the perceived role of the media. While individualistic cultures demand to be fully informed by objective, independent journalism, collectivistic societies value loyalty above all else. Media are viewed as instrumental; they are tools in the hands of the governing elite. Individuals are conditioned to see information as necessarily modeled to serve a social purpose. Selective filtering of the news that reaches the people is not only tolerated – it is expected. To quote just one example illustrating this way of thinking, Sergei Yastrzhembsky - Putin's chief spokesperson at the time - once told journalists that "The media should take into account the challenges the nation is facing now. When the nation mobilizes its strength to achieve a goal, this imposes obligations on everybody, including the media" (Becker, 2004).

This view of the authorities, furthermore, is almost never contested by journalists. According to de Smaele (2007), media owners voluntarily associate with political and economic power groups to secure their own wealth, status and influence. Individual reporters - whether for normative or material reasons - accept their instrumental role and consider themselves "missionaries of ideas rather than neutral observers". This notion is also largely supported by the population. In a national poll conducted in 2003 (as cited by Lipman, 2005), 36 percent of the respondents agreed that more state regulation would be beneficial for mass media. A survey conducted in November 2012 by the Russian sociological research organization Levada Center suggests that Russians would also like to see tighter state control over the Internet. Asked whether there should be censorship for online content, 63 percent said yes, 19 percent said no, and 17 percent were unsure. A more recent study by the Pew Research Center (2014) reported more optimistic numbers. According to that poll, 30 percent of Russians thought that access to the Internet without government censorship was very important, and 33 percent considered it to be somewhat important. Another 28 percent deemed it unimportant, while the remaining 10 percent had no opinion or refused to give an answer. The Pew report, however, also points out that given the Internet penetration in Russia, the support for online freedom there is lower than expected.

Indirect Control through Traditional Media

The control over Internet content in Russia involves virtually the same mechanisms, power dynamics and even most of the legislative frameworks that are used to control traditional media. Indirect influence through mainstream media outlets provides a powerful leverage mechanism that can, in many cases, replace the direct regulation of the Web.

State restrictions limiting the freedom of the mainstream press and television networks can affect the Internet in two major ways. First, they restrict the media information flow. Second, they promote a particular framing of the online environment affecting the nation's attitudes towards the Web and the perceived reliability of digital content.

Controlling the information flow

Explaining the power relationships and censorship practices typical of traditional media in contemporary Russia is part of understanding the control exercised over the Internet. Any pressure put on the press tends to spill over to the web. One reason is that many of the popular

online news sites are spin-offs of existing printed publications. As far as user-generated content is concerned, a number of researchers have suggested that it is largely dependent on the agenda-setting function of the traditional media. Blogs, user-produced videos, and forum posts may put a particular spin on a topic, but seldom bring it up if it is completely absent from the mainstream news coverage (Murley & Roberts, 2005; Wallsten, 2007). The websites addressing Russian events and politics mostly reflect the limited news diversity found in the mainstream media outlets (Oates, 2007). While people do not necessarily internalize media positions, they do rely on the press when assessing the significance of factors in their social reality. As noted by Castells and Kiselyova (1998), presence or absence in the Russian media largely determines who and what will have the chance to influence institutional decision-making in the country.

Apart from setting the agenda, the press often serves as a model, delineating the boundaries of permissible discourse in a society. It marks the limits of expression that the community and the authorities will tolerate in a public space. In countries with strong and autonomous media, setting those limits is an important and valuable service. In post-Soviet Russia, the permissible discourse is established under a strong pressure from the government. There are well-known "stop lists" of topics that cannot be mentioned and individuals who are banned from appearing on television (Lipman, 2005). Through ownership and selective application of financial, criminal and other laws, the state administration has established its influence over mainstream media. The few remaining independent news outlets are not too eager to criticize Kremlin – those who have done so in the past have often been subject to sanctions. The authorities did not have to resort to libel or defamation lawsuits: a strict application of the ever-changing tax laws was often enough (Oates, 2007). As a result, Kremlin does not need to engage in prepublication censorship – the threat of future penalties is enough to keep most outlets obedient.

Framing the Internet

Another powerful mechanism hampering the democratic potential of the Internet involves convincing the audience that online content is unreliable, biased and dangerous. This is facilitated by the digital divide in Russia. Even today, many people in the country do not have first-hand experience with the Web and their perception of its promises and dangers is solely based on what they have learned from traditional media outlets. According to the International Telecommunication Union (2013), the Internet penetration in Russia in 2013 was 53 percent. In

that context, the traditional media framing of the Internet – a framing heavily influenced by the government – becomes particularly relevant.

In his book on power and media, Entman (2004) defines framing as the "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution". Frames are a mechanism that organizes both the journalistic practices of interpreting reality and the interaction between media products and the general public. Entman's cascading network activation model suggests that four groups of actors contribute to the development of news frames (administration/the President, Congress/other elites, journalists/media organizations, and the public). With some adjustments regarding key actors and power relations, a similar model can be applied to the current Russian reality.

As the concept of civil society is hardly applicable to post-communist Russia, scholars have suggested looking into a less normative approach to the exploration of power relationships in the media system. Olessia Koltsova (2001) proposes a useful model based on the works of de Certeau and Foucault. This theoretical foundation brings two important features to the model: (1) it sees power as a practice, both repressive and productive, and (2) it focuses on agency. Koltsova defines all power agents in terms of their access to a number of resources:

(1) Access to violence/ enforcement, (internal resource)

(2) Economic capital (internal resource)

(3) Information resource (internal resource)

(4) Access to creation of rules (internal resource)

(5) Access to media production (external resource)

(6) A monopoly upon certain skills (external resource)

The detailed analysis of influence patterns underlying the power to frame the Internet in Russian media is beyond of the scope of this paper. The outcome of it, however, should be mentioned here. An investigation of relevant theoretical literature, government announcements and press publications has so far shown that the web is indeed largely framed as a threat to the

public. This is achieved mainly through the prolific use of fear metaphors. Many of those can be found, for example, in an emblematic article written by Jury Luzhkov (at the time Mayor of Moscow) in 2004:

- "Propaganda of drugs and violence, human trafficking and child prostitution – that's the reality of today's Internet."

- "The Internet is gradually being settled by unconcealed terrorists who turn the web, not only into their own mailbox, but into a real, underground, military infrastructure."

- "A growing number of online library owners are, at their own discretion, dealing with texts they don't own."

- "Even fundamental human rights such as the inviolability of privacy have practically no protection of any sort. With minimal button pressing, individuals have access to data bases with information about your identity card data, phone numbers, bills, relatives and friends."

- "Following the well-known principle of Goebbels, that, 'the bigger the lie, the better', on the Internet anything can be published."

(Schmidt, Teubener, & Konradova, 2006)

Recent revelations made by former CIA employee Edward Snowden additionally fueled Kremlin's fear rhetoric. At a press conference in St. Petersburg, Putin told journalists that the Internet was "a CIA project" (MacAskill, 2014), created and shaped to this day by the intelligence agency. He added that Russia had a duty to resist that influence and protect its online interests.

In addition to American interference, online dangers frequently depicted by state officials in Russia include security breaches, privacy violations, false information, fraud, cyberterrorism, extremist content and foreign propaganda, illegal activities, and indecent materials. Schmidt et al (2006) affirm that promoting fear and distrust appears to be a deliberate strategy to win public approval for government censorship of online content. At the same time, the threat of state regulation of the Web stimulates self-censorship among Internet users. Reports of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Fossato et al., 2009) suggest that on the Russian web, the lack of trust is widespread and, on occasion, skillfully manipulated by the authorities.

It is difficult to assess the full effect of that framing on the Russian public. A media usage survey performed by the USC Annenberg Strategic Public Relations Center (2007) has shown, however, that the population of the country perceived online news as less credible than mainstream media coverage:

Perceived media credibility in Russia on a 1-10 scale

- National newspapers 6.1;

- Local newspapers 4.6;

- Major network news 6.2;

- Local broadcast news 5.1;

- Local news websites 4.4;

- Internet blogs 4.7;

- Internet search engines 7

(USC Annenberg SPRC, 2007)

Legal framework and Internet control

Attempts to integrate information technologies into existing regulatory frameworks in Russia began in the early 1990s. At that time, ICT concerns were addressed in two domains of legislation: commerce and media. By 1994, the need for a body dedicated specifically to IT regulation became obvious and the Russian Federation Presidential Committee for Information Policy (*Roscominform*) was established. Its main goal was to draft legislation and guide cooperation with international organizations.

Early legislation attempts

In 1998 a draft "Law on the Internet" was first proposed in the Federation Council of Russia. The bill had so many technical and conceptual defects, however, that it was discarded before even being discussed in the lower house of the Russian parliament. The amended draft was pushed again in 2001 and 2004, but due to intense public criticism those efforts also failed.

The first truly invasive move meant to establish control over the Internet was made in 2000. The Federal Security Service (FSB) started forcing Internet service providers (ISPs) to install surveillance equipment. The system, known as SORM (System for Operational-Investigative Activities), is still active. Several providers who did not want to cooperate were forced to go offline and threatened that their licenses may be revoked. Some authors (Rohozinski, 2000) claim that SORM was not intended so much as a surveillance system, as it was a mechanism for applying pressure to ISPs and forcing them to pay for compliance certificates.

After a public outcry, SORM was revised and the FSB was required to obtain a warrant prior to looking at users' electronic traffic. This changed again in 2008 when a new decree dealing with the subject was issued by the Russian Ministry of ICT. Based in the document, the FSB received an unrestricted access allowing it to monitor all communications (including phone calls, text messages and e-mails) without the knowledge of either the provider or the users.

Another important early document, the Information Security Doctrine, provided an overview of the Russian administration's plans for regulating communication infrastructure and media content. The doctrine was signed by President Putin in 2000 and became the first document to define the Internet as a national security concern. The text sent out a clear signal that the state intended to impose strict control of both access and content on the Web. The document positioned the government as a dominant actor in the development of information infrastructure and network architecture (Alexander, 2004).

The doctrine, which gives precedence to patriotism and national goals above individual rights and freedoms, is an embodiment of the collective values discussed earlier in this paper. The document calls for the development of fair and strong media that would adequately represent Kremlin's activities. At the same time, the doctrine limits free speech with regard to the coverage of terrorist attacks and antiterrorist operations. It establishes beyond doubt that national security has a priority over the freedom of the press. The doctrine further stresses the importance of protecting Russian citizens from both online and offline foreign propaganda and disinformation (Kravchenko, 2000).

Mechanisms securing state control

As of 2013, Russia does not have a dedicated legislation that could allow extensive filtering of online content of the kind we see in China. Instead, there are a number of laws in different areas that make it possible for the authorities to take down politically sensitive information and prosecute its publishers. Among others, those include the *Mass Media Law* and the *Law on Fighting Extremist Activity*. The latter turned out to be especially useful in suppressing inconvenient information.

The Extremism Law was passed by the Federal Assembly in 2002. It deals with a wide range of materials considered by the authorities to be extremist. The law prohibits not only the publishing and distribution, but also the possession and reading of the presumably harmful content. Online news venues were surprised to discover, for instance, that they were not allowed to post quotes from the prohibited materials in their coverage of arrests made under the Extremism law.

In 2006 and 2007, in spite of serious public criticism, the parliament passed a number of amendments to the Law on Fighting Extremist Activity. The definition of extremism was expanded to include criticism of state officials, ideologically-motivated hooliganism, humiliating national pride, and threats of violence.

Individuals convicted of offending a state official face up to three years in prison and suspension or closing of their publications. The vague phrasing of the legislation left Russian online media alarmed that virtually any text can be seen as violating the law. Another cause for concern was the fact that intelligence services are allowed to monitor the phone calls of anyone suspected of extremism.

On multiple occasions, the government has used the Extremism Law against some of Russia's leading news sites. *Pravda.ru*, *Bankfax.ru*, and *Gazeta.ru*, are among the online media that have been accused of spreading extremist ideas. The editor of the Internet publication *Kursiv* was also fined for publishing an offensive article about Vladimir Putin (Freedom House, 2007).

Article 13 of the law (which deals specifically with online content) states that when the extremist material is published on a website, both the site administrator and the hosting company are under obligation to delete it. According to reports in the Russian press, the Prosecutor

General's office has also proposed holding Internet providers responsible for "objectionable and extremist materials" found online.

Recent Developments

In the last few years, the Federal Assembly passed a number of changes to Russia's Mass Media Law. One of the most widely discussed amendment proposals suggested giving online publications the same status as traditional mass media. The amendment, approved in early 2014, mandates that every web site with more than 3000 unique visitors per day should register with the Russian communication regulatory body. Bloggers are also required to conform to mass media regulations. The manifest goal of the proposed change was to give the state more control over online content. According to its supporters, the modified law would impose higher quality standards upon the information published on the Internet. Russian bloggers and activists, however, have expressed deep concerns about the increasingly strong government control over online content.

In 2012, the Russian State Duma passed a bill that became known as "the Internet blacklist law". The legislation, ostensibly meant to protect minors from harm, allows the Russian authorities to block websites containing extremist materials, child pornography, information related to illegal drug use, suicide techniques, and other sensitive subjects. The law came under international criticism from organizations that saw it as a major threat to online freedom of expression (Reporters Without Borders 2012a, 2012b). Free speech advocates objected to the lack of transparency with regard to the blacklisted sites and the procedures used to identify them, as well as the vague and broad definition of "harmful content". According to the law, taking down a website does not require a court ruling – the decision is left in the hands of unnamed "experts". The full list of blocked online resources is not publicly available – although a government service (online at zapret-info.gov.ru) allows users to check whether a particular website has been taken down by the authorities. According to Reporters Without Borders (2012b), "[t]he law's vagueness and inconsistencies render its repressive provisions even more threatening and are encouraging journalists to censor themselves".

As Russian ISPs found it difficult to block only individual web pages, on several occasions the Internet users in the country lost access to the entire domains of large online platforms. The collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia, for example, found itself blocked over an article on

cannabis. YouTube was also temporarily inaccessible because of a single anti-Islam video blacklisted by the authorities.

Soon after the blacklist law came into effect, the government started using it to suppress criticism from opposition leaders. During the 2014 Crimea crisis, the Russian telecom regulator Roskomnadzor blocked a number of websites condemning the state's actions in Ukraine. Among the blacklisted sites were the blogs of prominent critics including the activist Alexei Navalny, as well as the chess grandmaster (and vocal opponent of Putin) Garry Kasparov. The websites were deemed extremist because they encouraged people to attend unsanctioned rallies against the annexation of Crimea. At the same time, the authorities also closed several Ukrainian groups on the Russian social network platform VKontakte.

Selective Application of the Law

The Internet blacklist law is only one of many legislative tools the Kremlin has exploited to silence and punish vocal critics. The mechanisms authorities use to cement their control over the Web include the selective application of a wide range of laws against those who violate the implicit rules of conduct imposed by the government administration. This includes prosecuting online journalists and bloggers speaking against state officials, as well as the random application of financial and criminal laws. Outspoken Kremlin critics have faced a wide variety of criminal charges. The leading opposition activist Alexei Navalny, for instance, was prosecuted multiple times for embezzlement and fraud. Navalny was finally convicted in 2013, but his five-year sentence is suspended until a higher court has ruled on his appeal.

In another emblematic case, a local newspaper that criticized the city mayor was shut down after a sanitary inspection which revealed that computer users did not have special feet-support pads. Those pads, according to the authorities, were essential for the health and safety of the journalists (Relik, 2005). Media outlets have also been harassed under the pretext of suspected use of pirated software, or alleged illegal transfers of funds (Reporters Without Borders, 2009).

Ensuring that online publishers comply with Kremlin's requirements follows a similar pattern. Self-censorship is prevalent under the threat of having one's license revoked or being fined for disregarding an obscure article of the tax law. When it encounters sustained criticism from a news outlet (be it traditional or online), the state administration occasionally reacts by

arranging for a change of ownership and a more accommodating management team. Physical violence and intimidation of journalists and bloggers (and increasingly often in recent years, their families) are also not unheard of (Freedom House, 2012).

Conclusion

While punishing random dissenters to set an example is certainly a technique used by the Russian government, its power over online content is derived in a more subtle way from media practices and cultural norms. Blatant censorship (usually through creative application of existing laws) is typically used a last resort when other options have been exhausted. Specifics of the culture and development of the Russian society make it easy to ascertain a priority of patriotism and social solidarity over individual rights and freedom of speech. The state has established control over virtually all mainstream media (including many news websites) by either direct ownership or dependency ties. This allows it to appropriate both the agenda-setting and gatekeeping functions typically held by the press. Consequently, the Kremlin has a vast influence over the news and the capacity to manipulate public opinion. Being able to do that, the administration has little motivation to engage in resource-intensive large-scale real-time monitoring of online content. Prominent opposition sites are taken down strategically, for a limited period of time, when high-stakes events like the annexation of Crimea are taking place. To this day, Russia has not been subjected to systematic comprehensive technological censorship, although there have been concerns about that possibility (Gorny, 2006; Freedom House 2009a). Restricting the information flow, framing Internet materials as corrupt and biased, and shaping the audience attitudes are still Kremlin's main means of controlling the online space.

Future research in this area could explore tensions and conflicts within the state apparatus and their impact on online censorship. Additional studies could also help further unpack the power relations between the government, various media sectors, and online activists. Another illuminating line of work may focus on the framing of the Russian Internet in media coverage, in speeches given by state officials, and in user-generated content on the Web.

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