

Article

From “Troll Factories” to “Littering the Information Space”: Control Strategies Over the Russian Internet

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Abstract

This article explores aspects, transformations, and dynamics of the ideological control of the internet in Russia. It analyses the strategies of actors across the Russian online space which contribute to this state-driven ideological control. The tightening of legislative regulation over the last 10 years to control social media and digital self-expression in Russia is relatively well studied. However, there is a lack of research on how the control of the internet works at a structural level. Namely, how it isolates “echo chambers” of oppositional discourses while also creating a massive flood of pro-state information and opinions. This article argues that the strategy of the Russian state to control the internet over the last 10 years has changed considerably. From creating troll factories and bots to distort communication in social media, the state is progressively moving towards a strategy of creating a huge state-oriented information flood to “litter” online space. Such a strategy relies on the generation of news resources which attract large volumes of traffic, which leads to such “trash information” dominating the internet.

Keywords

alternative media; ideological control; digital self-expression; power; RuNet; Russian media; social media

Issue

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1. Introduction

The question of ideological control over the Russian information space remains central in understanding the peculiarity of Russian, and even more broadly, post-Soviet media systems. The institutional side of the post-Soviet media system has been studied relatively well, especially the role of “oligarchs” (Mickiewicz, 2008; Zassoursky, 2016) in distorting the democratic model of media. Macro-analysis of the whole media system has been conducted quite thoroughly (Kiriya, 2019; Oates, 2007; Vartanova, 2011). Other researchers have preferred the micro-social approach and have demonstrated how ideology is created based on routinised actions such as self-censorship (Koltsova, 2006; Schimpfossel & Yablokov, 2014).

The topics of the internet and mass-self communication are often not included in the analysis of the dynam-

ics of the post-Soviet media system and ideological control. Prior to 2011–2012, the internet was not a topic considered in the analysis of post-Soviet media. After the Moscow 2011–2012 uprisings (i.e., Moscow uprisings of winter 2011 and spring 2012, provoked by the movement For Fair Elections), the topic of the so-called new media’s role in post-Soviet social dynamics became more visible in media studies. Conversely, although the role the internet plays in the overall media system has been idealised for a long time, the idea that the internet represents a kind of new liberal force or alternative media in which the agenda differs drastically from traditional media has since been refuted. Thus, most research now focuses on new hyper-restrictive legislation bringing the RuNet under control of the Kremlin (Gabdulhakov, 2020), analysis of agenda and topical clusterisation of the Russian discourse in social media (Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015), the role of the Russian trolls and hackers in the 2016

US presidential elections (McCombie et al., 2020), and so forth. All visions of scholars can be divided into two polar camps: internet-optimism (expressing hopes that internet discourse is creating the alternative public which will positively contribute to liberal dynamics of the media development) or internet-pessimism (generally arguing that the internet is just contributing to the isolation of oppositional groups, their marginalisation, and formation of echo-chambers).

The techno-deterministic vision of the internet as a new actor opposing the “old media order” has been dominant and has finally led to the relative autonomy of the internet from other media systems in analytical frameworks. Until now, we have usually read forecasts about the huge difference between the RuNet audience and the television audience. Such differences between these two audiences were central in the denomination of protest groups during the uprisings of 2011–2012 and 2019 as “hipsters” against “vatniks.”

Nobody has tried to understand, from a systematic point of view, the role of the internet in state communication control and inside the whole media system, including the still powerful “traditional” television and periodical press sectors. In our own approach, we prefer not to compare the internet to traditional media, their audience, or content, but instead look at them as dynamic systems of information control oriented towards maintaining the dominant order, the high level of trust in the president, and core state institutions. In this article, we will trace the main changes in state control over the internet in Russia over the last 10 years and show how this control works together with other institutional mechanisms, to ensure the restrictive and state-oriented character of the whole media system.

Our basic hypothesis counters the idea of the liberalising mechanism of the internet for Russian society and shows that the state has progressively changed its methods of control over the internet according to changes in general media consumption. This includes methods such as “troll factories,” progressively passed towards other more structural incitements related to the massification of internet use. In this conclusion, we are generally adding to the idea that the Russian model of restricting mass media is rather different from direct censorship based on filtering and technical blocking, as is the case in China and Iran (Toepfl, 2018, p. 542).

2. (De)Mythologising the Internet as Alternative Media

Before 2011, the internet did not appear among major topics discussed on the Russian media system, while the academic analysis of this field was primarily focused on the renaissance of Soviet rules of journalism (Oates, 2007) or the emergence of a “neo-authoritarian media system” (Becker, 2004) and the peculiarity of post-Soviet media systems (Vartanova, 2011). Thus, Vartanova (2011) clearly compares the emerging internet (at the time of writing in 2010, it was not so massively used by its

audience) to the remaining part of the media sphere, saying that “marginalized forces opposing state influence in the media (investigative and opposition journalists, internet activists, and active audiences) have been active in promoting a free press, a free internet, and ethical norms in new media” (p. 142).

Thus, for a long time, the idea of the internet as a tool of resistance to the conservatism and state dirigisme of the Russian media landscape was mainstream in studies on the Russian media and internet. In 2010, the Berkman Centre at Harvard University made the map of the Russian blogosphere, where the internet was represented as an alternative public discussion arena where liberal opposition could coexist with other marginal political movements outside the mainstream spectrum (Etling et al., 2010).

Bode and Makarychev (2013) argued that the potential of the new social media was substantial, especially when compared with the Kremlin’s loss of ability to generate socially acceptable meanings, “to convey messages to target audiences, to dominate the symbolic and ideational landscapes, and ultimately to maintain its discursive hegemony” (p. 61). Koltsova and Shcherbak’s (2015) study of the online discourse of the 2011 uprisings shows that “the blogosphere belonged predominantly to oppositional bloggers” (p. 1724). In conclusion, they pointed out that in comparison with over-censored TV and mainstream media, the internet represented an arena for alternative political communication (Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015, p. 1727).

What is quite emblematic is that even after the Crimean consensus (when a large part of the population welcomed the state’s geopolitical game), the positive vision of the internet as enabling opposition with real political power continued to exist inside academia. Thus, Remmer (2017) argued that the internet “facilitated the formation of personal networks of digital activists who challenged the regime’s control of the public sphere and offered an alternative discourse to the official political narrative” (p. 126).

As we can see in all such approaches, the internet and social media are especially associated with some holistic entities opposing the mainstream discourse. Even if all previously mentioned authors never used an alternative media framework to represent the subversive potential of RuNet, the opposition they have established between internet and non-internet media agendas pushes us to examine the alternative media concept from the Russian media landscape perspective.

The idea of alternative media has been well formulated by Bailey et al. (2008, p. 6) as based on four different approaches: (1) alternative media as serving the community; (2) alternative media as opposing the mainstream media; (3) alternative media as serving civil society; and (4) alternative media as a rhizomatic concept (emphasising the purely floating sense of the term).

The first approach cannot be directly applied to the Russian internet because the internet does not serve

a particular community. Social media on the internet can contribute to the creation of communities, but even in the case of the Coordination Council of Opposition formed just after the Moscow uprisings of 2011, it is quite difficult to call this a community because of its very heterogeneous and strong participatory nature. The second approach can be applied only if we understand perfectly what we mean by “mainstream media.” However, not all principles of alternativity can be applied to the RuNet. Bailey et al. (2008, p. 18) give four characteristics of mainstream media: (1) large-scale and geared towards large, homogeneous (segments of) audiences; (2) state-owned organisations or commercial companies; (3) vertically (or hierarchically) structured organisations staffed by professionals; and (4) carriers of dominant discourses and representations.

When one compares RuNet to the mainstream media, it is represented as: (1) small-scale and oriented towards fragmented audiences; (2) non-controlled, either by the state or commercial bodies; (3) horizontally structured and run only by non-professional politicians (citizens themselves); and finally, (4) opposing dominant discourse and representations. We argue that the Russian internet does not match all these criteria. First, it is not always oriented towards fragmented audiences or low scale: large mainstream media corporations are active within it. Second, politically opposing content on the internet is not always created outside the commercial realm or state control, and even social media represents predominantly commercial corporations who earn money from the users’ activity. Third, not all content of political opposition in social media is created horizontally. Some of it is organisationally enabled, and after the 2011 uprisings, the level of organisational control of such activities became even higher with the election of the Coordination Council of the Opposition (Toepfl, 2018). Finally, not all internet and social media oppose the dominant discourse. This argument could also be considered “universal” and fair for all other media landscapes and not only Russian ones. We can see generally in the wider world that not all internet media can be considered “alternative” since a large part of internet audiences are generated by organisationally enabled commercial media, which use the internet as a new way to produce surplus value and maximise profit (Fuchs, 2014).

At the same time, the Russian peculiarity is that the borderline between so-called grassroots media and elite or organisationally backed media (such distinction is based on Fuchs, 2010) is blurred. We know of some examples when media initially created by a group of independent journalists (sometimes a group of journalists who had been fired from big media for political reasons) rapidly gained some powerful investors. This is, for example, the case of Meduza.io, the internet media created and based in Riga by a self-organized group of journalists fired from Lenta.ru. This creation of Meduza could be considered a grassroots initiative of a group of journalists. However, we know (Surganova, 2014) that Meduza

is financed by some undisclosed oligarch and that its founder, ex editor-in-chief of Lenta.ru, Galina Timchenko, negotiated financial issues with Michail Khodorkovsky (a Russian oligarch in exile in London). From this point of view, we might consider Meduza a classic commercial dependent media. In the case of some Russian offline media such as TV Rain or, for example, *Novaya Gazeta*, such distinction might also be problematic. On one hand, such media self-position themselves as a community of critically thinking journalists, and they also rely on grassroots business models such as crowdsourcing. *Novaya Gazeta* proposes that readers “support the independent journalism by making donations” in the disclaimer at the end of each publication. TV Rain is subscription-based, but this television channel communicates with subscribers as contributors whilst at the same time being privately owned. *Novaya Gazeta* is co-invested by Aleksander Lebedev, a Russian liberal oligarch, very well-known in elite circles and an ex-officer of the Russian KGB.

The third approach (alternative media as civil society media) does not work either, because the oppositional forces in Russian social media are very heterogeneous and do not necessarily rely on civil society structures. Some of them act on behalf of wealthy oligarchs (such as internet-media MBH-Media, owned and financed by Michael Khodorkovsky) or other elite-based structures. Finally, the rhizomatic approach to alternative media is also deficient in the case of RuNet because, as Bailey et al. (2008) argue, alternative media plays the catalytic role in “functioning as the crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate.” As Kiriya (2012, p. 461) argued, RuNet is much more oriented towards isolating and fragmenting communities rather than uniting them.

The Russian internet is multi-level and multi-faceted and should simultaneously be considered as a means of resistance and a means of maintaining ideological order. For a long time, academic discourse has privileged its resistant side without seriously considering its ability to control and maintain the dominant order. Such discourse can be explained. In 2010, big state-owned and oligarchically supported media never considered the internet as an important source of audience and revenue, while some oppositional media outlets, such as self-organised media, considered the internet as a kind of parallel public sphere with a more intellectual audience, more oriented towards a Western way of life and civic freedoms.

3. The Internet as a Part of the Controlled and Surveilled Media Sphere in Russia

In parallel to the mainstream media studies’ discourse on the resistant character of the RuNet, we can see some studies appearing in the second decade of the 2000s trying at least to question the emancipating character of the internet. Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) made quite a full review of different methods of internet control on

post-Soviet space more than 10 years ago, although, at that time, Russian state control over the internet had not yet even begun. However, we will largely use their framework in the next part when analysing the dynamics of state control.

The most popular way to incorporate new media within the whole Russian media system was a “fragmentationist” approach, which tried to represent Russian media as a set of a few public spheres with different rules with the state merely acting as a gatekeeper between them. Toepfl, in the early 2010s, showed how Russian ruling elites managed public scandals originating from “new media postings” by providing them with biased coverage within mainstream media and re-framing them in a manner that did not harm the dominant regime’s legitimacy (Toepfl, 2011). Kiriya (2012) showed the fragmentation of the Russian public sphere which contributed to the maintenance of the relative pro-state order in RuNet. Bodrunova and Litvinenko (2015) analyse the fragmentation of the Russian public sphere mainly on the basis of the fragmentation of the population.

The isolation of oppositional communities and their concentration around oppositional media allows the government to “promote dominant agenda via state-controlled outlets” and to monitor protest moods by surveilling such oppositional information ghettos (Denisova, 2017, p. 989). Moreover, the participatory content created and shared within such a community could be regarded as an alternative to protest mobilisations and has even been tolerated by the state (Karatzogianni et al., 2017, p. 120). We should be very careful in stressing that such oppositional ghettos are organised around the internet media. As Oates (2016) wrote: “There was no complete division of the public between anti-Putin/online and pro-Putin/traditional media...This underlines the point that the internet is not a sphere separate from the political and media logics of the state” (p. 410).

Other studies describing internet control in Russia have been rather oriented towards analysis of measures implemented by the Russian government and parliament to place RuNet under their control. Here we can mention works analysing 2013 anti-piracy laws (Kiriya & Sherstoboeva, 2015), online self-expression regulations (Gabdulhakov, 2020), the corporate takeover of internet companies (Vendil Pallin, 2017), and implicating users and volunteers through surveillance and control of internet content (Daucé et al., 2019).

More generally, there is a lack of work researching the general philosophy of the Russian state towards the internet. Budnitsky and Ji’s (2018) analysis of the Russian and Chinese policies in the field of internet sovereignty represents a good overview of this field.

In this article, we are trying to put all these methods of control together to show the dynamics and understand the strategy of the state in this field in its complexity. For the analysis, we rely on models of control distinguished by Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) and on

the theory of alternative media. In our opinion, the core shift in state regulation of the internet is related to mainstream/alternative cleavages. Thus, the core hypotheses of this article are:

H1: The core difference of the Russian model of networked authoritarianism is in balancing between the open prohibition and structural measures affecting the circulation of messages between “mainstream” and alternative media;

H2: The usage of the internet inside the mechanism of control of the whole Russian media system has evolved considerably over the last 10 years and has depended hugely on the massification of the internet as a communicative platform.

4. Dynamics of Russian Internet Control

4.1. *Between Censorship and Self-Censorship*

Despite the digital pessimism of some analysts who interpreted the tightening of internet regulation in Russia as a step towards the building of a great firewall (Roth, 2019), the “Chinisation” of the Russian internet still seems far off. For instance, the Russian strategy seems considerably different from the Chinese, according to Toepfl (2018, p. 542), at least three elements contribute to their difference: (1) In contrast to China, the mass media landscape in Russia is only partly controlled by authoritarian elites—the alternative opinion space is shrinking, but now the public can have access to alternative partisanship media, foreign media, and media financed by foreign institutions; (2) unlike in China, the Russian internet as a communicative space is not subject to large-scale technological filtering—even having adopted some restrictive laws, the control is more post-publication based rather than the real filtering of prior publications; and (3) opposition groups, NGOs, and parties can operate legally in Russia, even if the state puts them under considerable control.

Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) distinguish three generations of internet control in the post-Soviet space. The first generation is based on denying access to specific online media by directly blocking access to servers, domains, keywords, and IP addresses. The second aims to create a legal framework for denying access and considerably reducing the possibility of discovering certain content.

The third generation is based on proposing competing content and making counterinformation campaigns to discredit opponents. When this framework was proposed, the Russian internet remained a relatively free space, and many of these measures were quite far away. However, since the Moscow uprisings, we can observe some dynamics in the tightening of control over RuNet. It is obvious that Russian authorities started to put more effort into restricting the internet after the Moscow

uprisings of 2011–2012 because social media played some role in the mobilisation movement. At the same time, the core reason for changing the policy of Russian authorities on the internet should be related to crucial changes in the configuration of the public sphere(s) since then.

The core change is related to the massification of the internet as an information space. In 2011–2012, the share of monthly internet users in Russia was 46%. If we take the most active daily users, this figure was 33% (Public Opinion Foundation, 2011). As usual, not all used the internet as a news source. As a result, during this period, the politically active internet audience was not so significant (around 10% of the population) and was essentially concentrated in big cities where generally the level of opposition votes is higher. At the end of 2020, the share of monthly users reached 78% and daily users reached 71% (Mediascop, 2021). From this point of view, we can understand why some researchers apprehended the internet as an alternative source of information in 2011–2012 because it was a platform for a relatively prosperous minority. Therefore, the Moscow uprisings were called the hipsters’ protests or the creative-class uprisings (Goryashko & Prokofiev, 2012). However, in 2020, such characteristics are problematic due to the huge massification of the internet. Today 88% of internet users report having consumed television at least once in the past two weeks, a figure which has been in a slight decline over the last five years (Figure 1).

It is obvious that such quantitative changes in the number of internet users cannot be ignored by state policy in the field of the internet. The initial practice largely used against opposition leaders online was trolling, with the introduction of “trolls” into the debate distorting sustainable communication. Such pointed measures were probably enough to marginalise and distort opposition

minorities online, but since 2013, the state has operated a massive campaign by creating a legal restricting framework oriented towards legitimising the blocking and the denial of access to internet sites. Here we can refer to the anti-piracy law, which can be used to block some resources (Kiriya & Sherstoboeva, 2015). Similar cases are related to progressive criminalisation of the users’ activity on social media (such as Article 148 in the Criminal Code “in the aim of protecting religious convictions and feelings”; Article 205 on the endorsement of terrorism, etc.; Russian Federation, 2021). Finally, we can mention the 2019 law on “fake news” giving unprecedented rights to block content considered fake news, as well as any content deemed to be insulting to the authorities (Russian Federation, 2019b). From this point of view, we can stress that Russia adopted the second strategy of the Deibert-Rohozinski model (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010) without employing the first one.

Another strategy that we can partly classify as the second model of control is oriented towards the development of self-censorship and is based on two tools. The first is creating fear among internet users that any action inside the mass-self communication can be tied to repressive legislation. A good example of this is Law 530 FL “On information, information technologies, and information protection” from 30 December 2020, which since 1 February 2021 obliges social media to block any obscene words in users’ posts without really explaining how the law will be applied and without introducing clear responsibility (Russian Federation, 2020). Since technically blocking all obscenities seems to be impossible, the authorities are able to apply the law selectively. The second tool is relying on collective moral and taste norms, which are massively introduced online by internet user associations within the framework of “digital vigilantism,” so a kind of parallel to the police form of civic

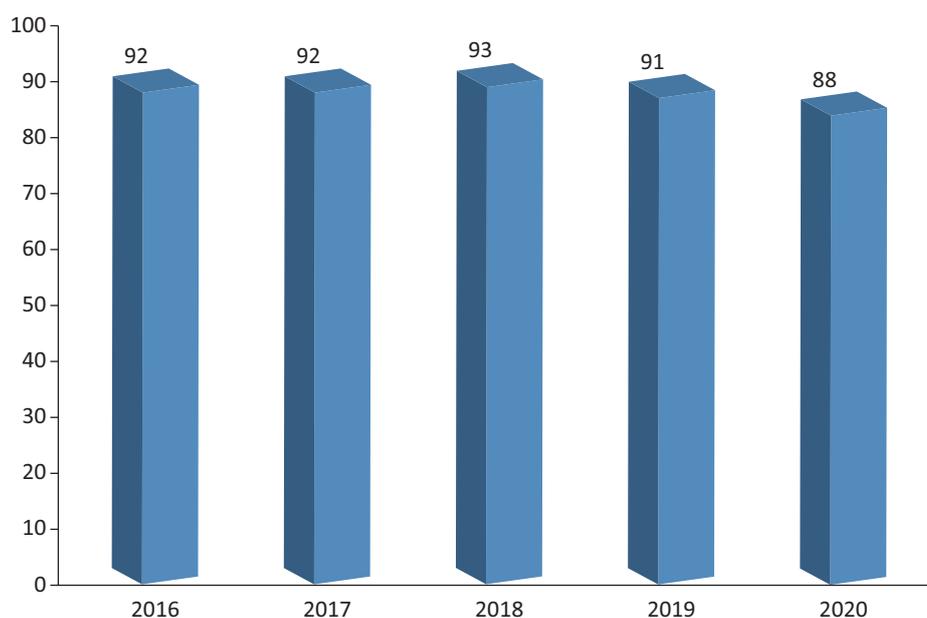


Figure 1. Share of internet users who watched TV at least once during the last two weeks. Source: Deloitte (2020).

enforcement: cyber patrols, cyber cossacks, leagues, and some other organisations oriented towards surveillance of users (Daucé et al., 2019).

Together, such tools show that Russian police and security authorities are unable to curb the resistant potential of new media without relying on “superficial measures designed to stimulate self-censorship” (Gabdulhakov, 2020, p. 297). They are creating the surveillant assemblage, which to a great extent works without enforcement from the state, but is based on other disciplining practices from various other actors which influence the mass behaviour of users (Gabdulhakov, 2020).

To simplify its task of blocking and controlling the parallel realm of social media, the state uses the same strategy as in the field of traditional media. It acquires the capital of major social media platforms under the financial control of loyal oligarchs. Thus, close to the Kremlin oligarch, Alisher Usmanov and his Mail.ru Group obtained control of VK (the most popular social media platform) by putting pressure on its previous owner and founder, Pavel Durov (Vendil Pallin, 2017, p. 25). While the president of Mail.ru Group is Boris Dobrodeev, very close to pro-power elite circles.

In parallel with building surveillance practices, the state maintains the public interest in such issues as internet sovereignty. The adoption of the law on “sovereign internet” (Russian Federation, 2019a), which gives the ability to organise internet traffic and routing locally in case of exterior disconnection, plays the role of the public trigger for any forces relying on local regulation of content and self-censorship. The law, together with massive coverage of the Russian hackers’ infringement into US elections, creates among mass users the feeling that we are dealing with a cyberwar.

All mechanisms of self-censorship show that the mechanism of internet control in Russia is balancing between direct oppressive measures and the creation of an atmosphere disciplining users themselves or orienting them towards pro-state behaviour.

4.2. *Between Mainstream and Alternative*

Kiriya (2012) proposed the framework of the “parallel public sphere” to interpret the diversity of agendas between the internet and mainstream media. The public sphere has been divided into the mainstream public sphere and the parallel public sphere. The parallel public sphere, in turn, has been divided into a parallel institutionalised public sphere and a parallel non-institutionalised public sphere. The parallel institutionalised public sphere represented some official media (both offline and online) existing as organisations and oriented towards opposition points of view. It includes *Novaya Gazeta*, Echo Moskv radio station, Ren-TV channel, and TV Rain, amongst others. A huge part of such opposition outlets was under the financial control of big oligarchic groups (such as Gazprom, state loyal bankers, etc.). In recent years, we may include

the MBH media internet portal financed by Michail Khodorkovsky (was closed in 2021), Meduza.io portal based in Riga. Some media became less oppositional and much more pro-Kremlin (such as Ren-TV channel). The non-institutionalised parallel public sphere was represented by grassroots projects existing only based on social media, video sharing, and blogs. The core difference between institutionalised and non-institutionalised media was the greater level of pressure on the institutionalised parallel public sphere. Since the internet audience in this period was much more different from the mainstream media audience and pretended to have a much higher degree of partisanship, even the mainstream media on the internet proposed a more liberal agenda than their purely offline colleagues. For example, the state-financed information agency Ria Novosti covered the Moscow uprisings quite broadly (which became one of the reasons the editor-in-chief of Ria Novosti, Svetlana Mironyuk, was forced to resign by the Kremlin). From this point of view, when the internet was relatively young and assembled the oppositional public, there was a broad phenomenon of “alternativisation” of mainstream media.

Massification of the internet, including online news consumption, means much broader audiences are unlikely to remain free from the states’ attention, as it started to increase its symbolic presence within the net. From this point of view, in parallel to the strategy of prohibitions, penalisation, and restriction of self-expression in social media, the state starts to build a system countering oppositional messages which we might call the “mainstreamisation” of the alternative media.

To show the level of state control over internet resources and its evolution between 2012 and 2020, the author analysed and classified the main internet outlets of these two periods of time based on their political orientation. The author took the main media internet outlets in 2012 according to data of TNS (Russian audience measurement company of this time, projection Web Index) based on their audience (average issue readership). Later, new news media outlets that appeared after 2012 were added to this list.

Some methodological remarks must be made prior to analysis. As pointed out by Degtereva and Kiriya (2010), there are three types of state control over the media on the level of ownership: (1) media directly owned by the state (e.g., Channel One where 51% of shares are directly owned by the Russian government); (2) media owned by the state, but may have some private monetary capital (e.g., NTV channel owned by Gazprom); and (3) media owned by state-loyal oligarchs related by non-formal connections with ruling elite groups and the president personally (such as National Media Group, owned by Yuri Kovalchuk and his financial structures).

Such classification makes the task of separating media outlets into “oppositional” and “state-controlled” very difficult because formal ownership does not necessarily mean the degree of editorial independence.

In some works, Kiriya (2017) points out at least three main loyal oligarchs connected personally with the president (Yuri Kovalchuk who owns National media group, Alisher Usmanov who controls Mail.ru Group, and Kommersant and Yuri Berezkin who own RBC and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*). At the same time, it is important to say that in 2012, some loyal Kremlin oligarchs have been allowed to own critical media outlets, ready to present alternative critical points of view and covering activities of opposition leaders (notably Alexey Navalny, Serguey Udaltsov, Boris Nemtsov, and some other opposition leaders). Among such media, we can find some commercial news sites which are relatively independent such as the RBC Group, Echo Moskvyy radio station (owned by Gazprom but editorially independent), and Kommersant, which has been recently acquired by Alisher Usmanov but was oriented towards being more provocative, addressing a more oppositional, well-educated public. The same can be said for both online media operated by well-known liberal RuNet activist Anton Nossik: *Gazeta.ru* and *Lenta.ru*. The entire table with classification is in the Supplementary File.

In Table 1, it can be observed that in 2012, the total average monthly reach of oppositional outlets on the internet represented around 50%. If we associate it with some state-controlled outlets that objectively covered the Moscow uprisings (*Ria Novosti*, for instance) we will obtain a much bigger figure.

In 2020, the situation changed drastically. The most important changes were structural and related to taking the most important internet outlets under financial or editorial control. *Ria Novosti* was restructured and became a part of the big propagandist holdings *Rossia Segodnya* [Russia Today] controlling pro-state networks of web-portals and radio stations outside Russia. The Kremlin forced the owner of *Lenta.ru* to change its editorial staff. *Rbc.ru*, known for its journalistic investigations and owned by oligarch Michail Prokhorov, changed the editorial team of Elizaveta Ossetinskaya under pressure from the Kremlin (Seddon, 2016) and later changed the owner to Grigory Beriozkin, the loyal oligarch who already controlled the big popular newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (*kp.ru*). In 2016, in response to foreign sanctions, the Russian Duma adopted a law limiting the foreign ownership of any media to 25%, which finally led to the great departure of foreign media

owners from the print media market (Kiriya, 2017). It changed the ownership of nearly all important critical media outlets such as *Forbes* (previously owned by Axel Springer) and *Vedomosti*, where the new editor-in-chief, loyal to Russian state oil company Rosneft, provoked a change of editorial staff in 2020 (Seddon, 2020).

All such changes provoked great “alternativisation” of the public sphere, while the expelled editorial teams often created their own media outlets (e.g., former editor-in-chief of RBC, Elizaveta Ossetinskaya, created *thebell.io*, and *Vedomosti* staff opened *vtimes.io*). However, just one medium among them attained real success in terms of audience, *Meduza.io*. Thus, “alternativisation” means marginalisation and does not represent a considerable risk for the Kremlin.

In parallel to taking control of major media platforms, which might represent the alternative opinion, the state power considerably enlarged its presence in the internet space. Such big state online media as *Rt.com*, *M24.ru*, and *Tass.ru* started to acquire bigger audiences. All such outlets represent just web news versions of other known media. *M24* is a subsidiary of Moscow 24 television station (controlled by state-owned VGTRK), *Rt.com* is under the control of Russia Today, and *Tass.ru* is the web version of the great state-owned information agency *Tass*.

In addition, we can see a rise in state-owned online media. In 2017, RBC published an investigation about the so-called “media factory,” an informal group of reactionary online media sharing the same building and common investors with the legendary “troll factory” in Saint Petersburg (so-called “Agency of internet research” organizing troll propagandistic anti-opposition campaigns which is one of the Russian organizations accused by special prosecutor Robert Mueller in intervention into US elections). All such online media collected more than 30 million users in RuNet (Zakharov & Rousiaeva, 2017). After denying any connections with the “media factory” Evgeni Prigozhine, the oligarch close to Putin and owner of the “troll factory,” transformed the “media factory” into media holding “patriot media,” connecting such online media as *Polit.info*, *Politpuzzle.com*, and *Riafan.ru* (called Federal Agency of News). The editor-in-chief of the Federal Agency of News in his interview with Andrei Loshak described his work as “working in the context of the information defence” against the West (Loshak, 2020).

Table 1. Total monthly reach and share of opposition and state-controlled online media.

| | 2012 | | 2020 | |
|-------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Total monthly reach (thousands) | Share of total monthly reach % | Total monthly reach (thousands) | Share of total monthly reach % |
| Opposition | 38,482.8 | 49 | 3,596 | 5 |
| State owned | 40,052 | 51 | 71,641 | 95 |

Notes: *Echo.msk.ru* and *novayagazeta.ru* have been excluded from the coverage of the database since 2016. Some figures on media outlets (such as *Meduza*) were unavailable for 2020—thus, the most recent data was used. Source: Built based on Web Index database provided by the official media measuring company Mediascope (before 2016, company TNS Russia; Mediascope, 2021).

The usage of original Web Index data for 2020 was not so relevant for comparison just because the Web Index is the database that includes media outlets based on their willingness to be measured. This means that some media outlets' coverage by measurements is not stable. Some media (and notably some relatively new media outlets including state-owned outlets) have never been covered by measurements. Therefore, we used the data of monthly visits provided by the media analytical tool Similar Web.

Such strategies allow state-controlled media to dominate in the online realm. In Table 2, we can see that such media accumulate more than one billion (1,020,698 thousand) visits monthly. It is emblematic that state-owned online media commonly not only use the alternative model of distribution, which is based on non-organic traffic, but they also make use of referral traffic, where users come to the pages by clicking links promoted on social media or search engines. A higher share of organic traffic means that users come to the web page of the media outlets by themselves because they trust such media and visit them consciously. A higher share of non-organic traffic means that users click on links from social media, search engine links, and aggregators. Such users occasionally come to the web page attracted by aggressive headlines. Such sites usually publish conspiracy theories, non-checked facts, and very dubious editorials. Thus, such media exploit the curiosity and occasional attention of mass users who are not very familiar with fact-checking and basic media literacy. Thus, we are calling such a strategy "littering the information space" with different kinds of propagandistic trash to increase the total traffic on state loyal internet media to make the pro-state discourse and topics largely dominate the internet.

To increase the presence of the state online news on the internet, the state adopted the so-called "Lugovoi law" (named after the deputy who proposed it), according to which news aggregators become responsible for the news they are aggregating on their top pages. Thus, search engines (starting with Yandex, the biggest) became responsible for the aggregated content coming from internet news that were not registered as mass media in Ruskomnadzor, the Russian internet watchdog. Eventually, it hugely transformed the key sources indexed by Yandex and almost eliminated alternative media from its top news (Daucé, 2017). Together with the strategy of "littering," the control over the Yandex algorithm gives the Russian state the ability to maximise attention on pro-state discourse.

We argue that all such strategies are oriented towards making state-manipulated and controlled news prevail in internet space, including social media. This corresponds to the third model of Deibert-Rohozinski (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010), which is aimed at proposing competing content by the state.

5. Conclusion

In this article, all described methods of internet control in Russia have been put together to find a common logic between them. For a long time, the internet was interpreted as opposing state control, a liberal means of self-expression, and consequently a kind of parallel opposition discourse. Such a vision was inspired by the huge difference between an offline audience of traditional media and an online audience representing a more educated, critically thinking public. Through the present analysis, it has been demonstrated that such a vision does not correspond to the current digital mass reality, where most of the Russian population now has access to the internet. As a result, if 10 years ago the internet mainly attracted oppositional discourses, in the current situation it represents just a mini-model of the mainstream media, where the state has predominated since the mid-2000s. We may have called such processes the "alternativisation" of the internet space ten years ago, but today they represent its "mainstreamisation."

As a result, control over the internet in Russia has changed considerably over the last eight years since the Moscow 2011–2012 uprisings, and most structural measures are related to the massification of the internet and involvement in broader parts of the Russian media audiences, which makes mainstream media more visible inside internet space. This finally led to the structural measures oriented towards the "mainstreamisation" of the internet. Together, the balance between direct prohibition measures and structural measures ensures the Kremlin has control over the total media system, including the internet.

Kiriya (2014) formulated the main strategy of internet control in Russia as based on a gatekeeping function on the borders between different clusters of parallel and mainstream public spheres. As a result of the massification of internet media, such a strategy may be reconsidered. The borderline between mainstream and parallel public spheres is passing inside the internet. At the same time, the internet is not losing its status as a platform for "opposition" projects since the bargaining costs are low. As a result, oppositional political forces, as well as differ-

Table 2. Total monthly visits and average share of organic traffic for state-controlled and opposition outlets in 2020.

| | Opposition online media | State-controlled online media |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Total monthly visits (thousands) | 100,107 | 1,020,698.75 |
| Average share of organic (natural) traffic (%) | 62.72 | 39.54 |

Note: Built-in Similar Web analytical tool based on March 2020 data from all main online outlets.

ent radical movements rejected by mainstream media, still use the internet to create their own media spaces. It makes the application of the term “alternative” media more difficult (in terms of self-organised or grassroots).

As we can see, the model of internet control in Russia combines direct blocking measures and the promotion of more structural measures oriented towards making state-produced online news prevail in the online information space. It is maintained by some ownership-related issues (such as the acquisition of a larger part of alternative media by loyal oligarchs), the development of state-owned information resources, and legal measures (such as influencing search engine news aggregation). Such measures were developed in parallel with some self-censorship measures: Making social media users afraid to comment in ways considered inappropriate by the state. Such methods represent a kind of balance between direct prohibition and self-control, which addresses our first hypothesis.

The utilised model of internet control and its evolution clearly distinguish Russian strategies of internet control from their more authoritarian analogues and notably from its analogues in the post-Soviet space. In this article, we made a clear distinction between Russian internet control and the Chinese model based on direct blocking and filtering measures. Thus, Russia differs considerably from other countries in post-Soviet spaces using the same measures—especially in the case of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The findings of this article clearly show that the internet (and social media) should no longer be regarded as an oppositional or protest space, but as a part of the whole media landscape oriented towards maintaining the status quo. Here, we suggest a closer analysis of post-Soviet countries such as Kazakhstan or Belarus, which are much more like Russia in their models of control. In recent protests in Belarus, some analysts preferred to continue the “emancipating discourse of internet” (Bush, 2020). However, since summer 2020, the Belarussian regime does not seem to have demonstrated any willingness to change, so a more detailed analysis of Belarussian internet space and internet control is needed.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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