

Careful What You Say:

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

Katherine Ognyanova *

katherine@ognyanova.net

Annenberg School for Communication,

University of Southern California

3502 Watt Way, Los Angeles,

CA 90089-0281, USA

Abstract

This paper outlines the practices of state control over Internet content in Russia, explaining 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 present work provides a socio-cultural context expanding the understanding of Kremlin's influence on the Web. To this end, three relevant planes of power relations are explored. The first one involves censorship and self-censorship routines embedded in Russian information traditions. The second pertains to the state-controlled traditional media, where news go through a political filter and Internet gets framed in a particular restricted manner. The third domain is that of legislative frameworks and their selective application. The paper suggests that the tools used to control objectionable materials on the Russian Web are not Internet-specific. Rather, they should be seen as an extension of the censorship mechanisms used in traditional media.

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

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Press freedom and media censorship have long been a subject of academic interest, particularly with regard to their characteristics within different political regimes (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). The advent of the Internet – a decentralized and unruly communication medium – introduced new complexities into both research and policy-making efforts in the field (Sussman, 2000).

The Web's impact on democracy - while often difficult to assess (Morozov, 2009) - is undoubtedly fundamental. Online social media platforms are increasingly seen as an alternative space for civic dialogue and public participation (Faris, Wang, & Palfrey, 2008). In countries with restrictive media environments, web services provide a convenient way to circumvent 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, 2009; OpenNet, 2009a). 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 2009b). 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. Zittrain and Palfrey (2008) call the numerous non-filtering solutions *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.

While not engaged in large-scale Internet monitoring efforts, the Russian government does use soft means to deal with disagreeable online content. Russia presents an interesting case study in part specifically because the state is so successful in establishing its influence on the Web (Fossato, Lloyd, & Verkhovsky, 2009) without resorting to content filtering technologies.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive framework describing existing practices of Internet control in Russia, as well as their grounding in the country's idiosyncratic information culture and media environment. In order to achieve this, the study draws on data 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; Global Integrity, 2008, 2009). Furthermore, the text 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 analysis of the dimensions of information culture; and Koltsova's (2001) model of power relationships between the Russian authorities, media and citizens.

In a report published by Freedom House, Karlekar and Cook (2009) cite 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 is slow and the access is mostly low-speed, there is no evidence of specific efforts on the part of the authorities to keep citizens offline (*obstacles to access*). This paper will therefore focus on control practices that fall in the last two categories. Those include:

- » Censorship and self-censorship prompted by the information culture and political traditions of the country
- » Control over mainstream media leading to restrictions of available content and negative framing of the Internet
- » Legal framework and its application; threats and intimidation of individuals by the authorities

Based on an analysis of Russian history and information culture, this study suggests 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.

Background – the Evolution of Russian Media

In order to explain the nature of Kremlin's influence over the internet, this work will take 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 - traditions that have permeated the practices and everyday life of the population. They have 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. Surviving under those circumstances required 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 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 requirements of Tsar Peter I the Great. The publication was under the monarch's full control – he was not only the editor but also one of the most active writers in it. (Rohlenko, 2007) *Vedomosti* (and this is also true of the subsequent Russian press) was never meant to serve the citizens, its goal was to popularize the current priorities of the country and its ruler. In contrast to western press which was driven by competition and private interests, Russian news media was always a primarily political tool.

Soviet Times (1922–1991)

During the Soviet period, the state retained a virtually unlimited control over journalistic institutions and the content produced by them. 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 the press and radio – became most helpful tools to that end. They were used for the purposes of propaganda; there was also strict control over them meant to limit the information available to the masses. Newspapers, radio and later television served as a “tool for propagation of an ideologized reality” to which they gave a formal shape (Zasoursky, 2004). Media were supposed to serve the *nomenklatura* system and reinforce an ideology which governed not only the public space but also interpersonal relations and daily routines.

During Soviet times, 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 fragile and so had to be protected from anything seen as even remotely disturbing or alarming. A ban on publishing negative reports and covering domestic catastrophes was imposed on Soviet newspapers. Not even road accidents, train crashes or street crimes could find their way into the news. The segregation in terms of information access was severe. The TASS news agency actually produced separate bulletins (printed on a different color of paper) 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, 2006)

The closed, centralized Soviet model relying on complete control over information may in fact have played a major role in the collapse of the Union. According to Castells and Kiselyova (1995), the communist regime was manifestly unable to adapt to the new information economy.

From Soviet to Contemporary Russia (1991 - 1999)

Shortly before the fall of the USSR, the 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) calls the period that followed “the formation of a new *media-political system*”. Rather than being governed by the will of the communist party, the media became dependent on corporate players and oligarch capital. Instead of united elite and a single ideology, they

started serving numerous different (often contradicting) commercial interests. Censorship was once again prevalent but it became multidirectional and thus less predictable.

During that period, Zassoursky reports, newspapers saw a striking drop in circulation and importance. They stopped receiving 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 Putin's presidency, political control over national TV networks was once again established. With his coming to power, Vladimir Putin started implementing a number of policies directly aimed at challenging the independent news outlets and restricting their autonomy (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 national TV networks are currently governed by 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 is particularly important - according to VTSIOM, one of the major Russian polling agencies (as cited in Global Integrity, 2007), 85% of the Russians have central TV broadcasts as their main news source.

Even though in 2008 constitutional limitations prevented Putin from running for president for the third time, he is still the de facto national leader (Kimmage, 2009) and the prime minister of the country. The former president is considered the most powerful political figure in Russia and has continued to keep close ties with the owners of mainstream media. His relationship with the relatively weak current President Medvedev (allegedly chosen for his loyalty) has been described as resembling regency rather than succession (Antonenko, 2008; Petrov, 2008). Both academics and journalists have suggested that Putin's rule over the country is far from over, especially as he is expected to once again run for president at the 2012 elections (Badovsky, 2009; Stott, 2008).

The Russian Internet (1988 – today)

By the time Putin came to power, the Russian net had already existed for quite a while. 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). When in August that same year a number of high-level state officials organized a coup trying to restore the communist regime and oust President Gorbachev, traditional media were all heavily censored. While tanks were patrolling the Red Square, the radio played classical music, the television broadcasted Swan Lake and most newspapers were banned. Relcom was 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 “a real media”. It had comparatively small number of users – only the early adopters - and the authorities did not deem it worthy of too much attention. In 2000, the Russian government finally began recognizing the Internet as a possible instrument of influence. A very ambitious online project – Strana.ru, a national information service - was started. It was meant to be used for official propaganda and had correspondents and editorial staff in all federal regions. A big and expensive campaign was launched to promote it. That effort failed: the internet users favored other outlets and the general population preferred television.

Private online media had a little more success. Online news sites were initially run by enthusiasts but big companies soon stepped in and the altruistic creative collaboration gave way to commercial models. Today 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 shown that there is in fact little direct, heavy-handed soviet-style censorship on the Russian web. There is no evidence of online content filtering (Faris & Villeneuve, 2008) and only a few known cases involve pressuring providers to take down websites (Freedom House 2009a). 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) actually use the phrase “it is the culture in which make believe is belief in the making”. Simons and Strovsky (2006) specifically point out that content in Russian media has always been affected by cultural traditions – and that “censorship and self-censorship can be regarded as an embodiment of these traditions”.

A number of dichotomous concepts can be used when exploring the dimensions of Russian information culture. Public-private, universal-particular and individual-collective are some of them.

The Public-Private Tension

As is often the case in totalitarian and authoritarian states, 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 in mind - and accepting both of them (Orwell, 1950). The prevalent rhetoric of equality was much contradicted 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 and they were seldom discussed in public spaces. The Russians have 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 for negotiating meanings, is not considered relevant to Russian realities. The substitute proposed by Zassoursky (2001) in one of his works on media and power in post-communist societies is *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) thus emphasizing the fact that the Russian public sphere is simulated rather than genuine.

An important issue to consider then is the positioning of 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. Currently, however, the Russian Internet population is undergoing an attitude change. It is becoming increasingly obvious that publishing materials online has real-world consequences. Known recent cases of fined editors, threatened site administrators and arrested bloggers support that notion.

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; Kovalenko, 2005). Their claim is that the semi-private virtual space provides a *surrogate civil society*, a substitute of the missing public sphere. Recent evidence, however, points to the conclusion that this is probably just wishful thinking. The Russian Internet can hardly provide that idealized space for nation-wide debate where dissent can be safely voiced. Marcus Alexander (2003), an Oxford researcher, identifies at least three trends that prevent the Web from actually 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 have 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.

Those points are still quite valid – they and the current normative practices in Russia make it difficult to defend the assumption that Internet allows free expression and an escape from censorship. The notion that communication technologies are always empowering and promoting democratic values seems to be rather utopic. Rohozinski (2000) looks into the Russian case and cautions that the impact of ICTs is critically shaped by the social context in which they are deployed. He is markedly skeptical about the transformative potential of information technologies as far as democratizing Russia is concerned. More recent studies of the Russian web (Fossato et al., 2009) also do not warrant optimism. According to them, Russian online communities are rather closed and intolerant - and their leaders can often be co-opted or compromised.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

In her work on the media climate in post-communist Russia, Hedwig de Smaele (2007) expands on two dimensions of information culture that seem 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.

Grounded in previous research, De Smaele's paper explains that 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. The individual needs to possess significant amount of metadata as a prerequisite for successful communication since little information is given explicitly. 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. Thus withholding information from the media and the citizens becomes a prevalent practice and is only very rarely condemned as unacceptable. 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 being whose happiness and well-being are the goals of society.

The focus on the 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 its effect on the freedom of information and the perceived role of the media. While individualistic cultures demand to be fully informed by objective, independent media, 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. As a result they expect it to be filtered.

To quote just one indicative case exemplifying this way of thinking, the Kremlin spokesman and Putin aide Sergei Yastrzhembsky 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). No doubt this remark is targeted at online as well as traditional publications.

It is important to note, furthermore, that this view of the authorities 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 increased state control would be beneficial for mass media. During a more recent survey (2008) the SuperJob.ru Research Center asked Russian citizens whether they considered

Internet censorship to be necessary. Out of 1800 respondents, 58 percent replied “yes”, 31 percent said “no” and the remaining 11 percent were unsure.

Indirect Control through Traditional Media

As mentioned earlier, this paper puts forward the claim that state control over Internet content involves virtually the same mechanisms, power dynamics and even most of the legislative frameworks that are used to control traditional media. Following this line of thought, we will argue that indirect influence through traditional media provides at least as powerful a leverage mechanism as the direct regulation of the Web.

State restrictions limiting the freedom of mainstream press and television networks can affect the Internet in at least two ways. First, they restrict the media information flow. Second, they promote a particular framing of the online environment, affecting the 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 more or less directly “spills 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 they will 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 simply 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 stated by Castells and Kiselyova (1998), presence or absence from the media determines who/what will have the chance to influence institutional decision-making.

Apart from setting the agenda, the press often serves as a model, indicating what the permissible discourses are 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, however, permissible discourses are established under a strong pressure from the government. Through ownership and selective application of financial, criminal and other laws, the state administration has established its influence over mainstream media. The remaining independent news outlets are not eager to criticize Kremlin – the ones that have done that in the past have often been subject to sanctions. The authorities did not need to resort to libel or defamation lawsuits for that – a strict application of the ever-changing tax laws was often enough (Oates, 2007). Thus Kremlin does not need to engage in prepublication censorship – the threat of future penalties is enough to keep most outlets obedient. There are, furthermore, well-known “stop lists” of topics that cannot be mentioned and individuals who are banned from appearing on television (Lipman, 2005).

Framing the Internet

Another powerful mechanism through which the democratic potential of Internet is limited involves convincing the audience that online content is unreliable, biased and dangerous. This is facilitated by the digital divide in Russia. Most people 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.

The marketing research company ComScore assesses the portion of regular Internet users among the population of Russia to only 12%, based on data from September 2007. Moscow agencies like the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) have given higher estimates, but even the most optimistic of them do not go beyond 23% (Global Integrity, 2008). Thus the traditional media framing of Internet – which is heavily influenced by the government discourse - becomes particularly relevant.

One recent model of *framing* that can be applied to the issues discussed here was presented by Robert Entman in his 2004 book on power and media. Entman’s (2004) definition involves “*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*” [italics original]. He sees frames as 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 proposes four groups of actor contributing to the development of news frames (Administration/President; Other Elites/Congress; Journalists/Media organization; Public). With some adjustments regarding the power relations and influence, the same model can be adapted 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: it sees power as a practice, both repressive and productive, and 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)

Detailed analysis of the power relations that determine the Internet framing in Russian media is out of the scope of this paper. Some crucial points, however, deserve to be mentioned.

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 through prolific use of fear metaphors. Some of those are easy to identify in an emblematic article written by the Mayor of Moscow Jury Luzhkov in 2004. Quotes from the article follow:

- » “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)

Security breaches, privacy violations, false information, fraud, cyberterrorism, extremist content and foreign propaganda, illegal activities, indecent materials - those are some of the dangers that state officials see online. Schmidt et al (2006) suggest that promoting fear and distrust is possibly 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 the users. Reports of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Fossato et al., 2009) suggest that as far as the Russian web is concerned, lack of trust is widespread and on occasion skillfully manipulated by the authorities.

It is difficult to assess the exact effect of that framing on the Russian public. A media usage survey performed by USC Annenberg SPRC (2007) has shown, however, that the population of the country perceived online news and blogs as much less credible than mainstream news networks:

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

(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 goal was to draft legislation and guide the cooperation with international organizations.

Early legislation attempts

In 1998 a draft of “Law on the Internet” was first proposed in the Federation Council of Russia. The bill had so many technical and conceptual defects 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 Internet was made in 2000. The Federal Security Service (FSB) started forcing Internet service providers (ISPs) to install surveillance equipment. The system allowing that is known as SORM-2 (System for Operational-Investigative Activities). 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-2 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 SORM-compliance certificates.

After a public outcry, SORM-2 was revised and the FSB was required to obtain a warrant prior to looking at users' electronic traffic. However a decree issued by the Russian Ministry of ICT in January 2008 seems to once again change that. According to the document, the FSB receives 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, gives an overview of the Russian administration's plans for regulating communication infrastructure and media content. The doctrine was signed in 2000 by the former president Putin. In it, the Internet was - for the first time - defined as a national security concern. The text sent out a clear signal that the state intended to actively engage in controlling both access and publications on the Web. Furthermore, the document positions the government as a dominant actor in the development of information infrastructure and network architecture. (Alexander, 2004)

As far as content is concerned, the doctrine calls for the development of fair and strong media that will adequately represent Kremlin's activities. The document, however, also limits free speech in regard to the coverage of terrorist attacks and antiterrorist operations. It goes on to establish 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).

Overall, the doctrine is an embodiment of the collective spirit mentioned earlier in this paper. It gives precedence to patriotism and national goals above individual rights and freedoms.

Securing influence mechanisms

As of 2009, 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 from the Web 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 dealing with inconvenient online materials.

The Extremism Law was passed by the Federal Assembly in 2002. It prohibits the publication and spreading of materials considered by the authorities to be extremist. What is banned is not only publishing and distributing, but also possession and reading of the presumably harmful content. Online news sites were surprised to discover that they were not even 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
- » Ideology-motivated hooliganism
- » Humiliating national pride
- » Violence threats

Individuals convicted of offending a state official face up to 3 years in prison and suspension or closing of their publications. The vague phrasing 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.

In 2007, the government used the Extremism Law against some of Russia's leading news websites. *Pravda.ru*, *Bankfax.ru*, and *Gazeta.ru* were 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.

The Law on Fighting Extremist Activity is one of many legal tools allowing state control over online content. In the beginning of 2007, a new regulatory body was established through a decree signed by then President Putin. The agency combined two existing federal services: the Federal Mass Media and Cultural Oversight Service (*Rossvyaznadzor*) and The Federal Service for Telecom Supervision

(Rosokhrankultura). It has received the uninspired name Federal Service for Supervision of Mass Media, Telecommunications, and for Protection of The Cultural Heritage (*Rossvyazokhrankultura*). The body is expected to have competency in both telecommunication and media policy - it has to address technical as well as content questions. The service possesses the power to suspend activities related to all types of communications, including the printed press, broadcasters and online media (Blank, 2008). That gives it the authority to revoke a license, take down online content or block the access to a website. The Global Integrity Report (2008) quotes Raf Sahkirov, a former editor of the *Izvestiya* newspaper, saying "This is an attempt to put everything under control, not only electronic media, but also personal data about people such as bloggers."

Recent Developments

The Federal Assembly of Russia has recently 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. This was supposed to be implemented by requiring that every web site with more than 1000 unique visitors per day registers under the Mass Media Law. That is the current practice in printed press regulation. Publications with circulation above 1000 have to register as mass media while those selling less than 1000 copies a day do not have that obligation.

According to the statistics of the online counter Top.Mail.ru, if the amendment was passed, 3000 to 5000 websites would have to register, among them - many blogs and web forums. 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. After a public outcry, the registration of online media was made voluntary - at least for the time being. This arrangement may change in the next couple of years.

Another relevant bill that has been in preparation since 2004 is the Model Law on the Internet. The body entrusted with that is the Federation Council Committee on Information Policy. It faces the complex task of defining fundamental concepts from the sphere of information technology and providing guidelines for future legislation.

A draft of the law has been published by the regulator on its website in order to probe public opinion. The current version of the document does not seem to contain articles threatening the freedom of speech online. Some concerns about it, however, remain. The very selection of members for the committee seems to indicate the political will for tighter control over the web. The chairperson assigned by former president Putin is Lyudmila Narusova – a parliament member known for her active position criticizing the excessive liberties and lack of accountability on the Internet. Narusova has repeatedly made the argument that taking down politically sensitive content from the web should not be seen as censorship but rather as social responsibility.

Applying the Laws

The mechanisms used to exert influence over Internet content in Russia are in their core the same ones that hold in control traditional media. No sophisticated technological solutions or legal frameworks are employed. Instead, there is a selective application of a wide range of laws against those who violate the implicit rules of conduct established by the government administration. This includes prosecuting online journalists and bloggers for offence against state officials, but also random evoking of financial and criminal laws. In one emblematic case, a local newspaper that criticized a city mayor was shut down after a sanitary inspection which revealed that computer users did not have special feet-support pads. Those pads, apparently, were essential for the health and safety of the journalists (Relik, 2005). Other media outlets have 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. Both in the case of traditional and of online media, when it encounters sustained criticism from a news outlet, the state administration occasionally reacts by instigating a change in its ownership and bringing in a more accommodating management team. Physical violence and intimidation of journalists and bloggers are certainly not unheard of.

Conclusion

While punishing random dissenters to set an example is certainly a technique used by the 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 only used a last resort when other options have been exhausted. Specifics of the culture and development of 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 links. That allows it to appropriate agenda-setting and gatekeeping functions. It consequently has the power to influence news and manipulate public opinion. Being able to do that, the state administration has little motivation to engage in resource-intensive constant monitoring of online content. Russia has not been subjected to consistent large-scale 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 the main tools used to control the Web.

Future research in the area may focus on the specifics of government influence on mainstream media framing of online content in Russia. Employing an adaptation of Robert Entman's cascading activation model, researchers may consider both qualitative exploration of media frames and quantitative textual analysis. One way to compare journalistic to governmental discourse is to juxtapose public announcements and official press releases to corresponding media materials and/or online discussions. This will likely reveal a tendency for traditional media to mirror the state position by framing Internet as a threat in a manner consistent with official statements made by the authorities.

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