

RUSSIAN INFORMATION SPACE, RUSSIAN SCHOLARSHIP, AND KREMLIN CONTROLS

Natalya Kovaleva

Abstract

Fuelled by Russia's annexation of Crimea, the question of how authoritarian regimes like Russia seek to influence information domains of foreign states has received unprecedented attention within the disciplines of security and strategic communications. However, we have yet to examine more deeply the Russian conceptualisation of information space and the Kremlin's ability to exert control over its domestic information domain. The present study contributes toward filling these gaps by providing a more holistic understanding of the term 'information space' as it appears in Russian scholarship, and by analyzing the effectiveness of the economic and legal tools used by the Kremlin to establish control over the domestic information space. Ultimately, the study finds that whilst the Kremlin has been able to exert considerable influence over content production and distribution in certain spheres of the broader information space, it clearly enjoys only limited control over the new, increasingly Internet-dominated spaces and environments.

Keywords—*Russia, information space, internet, media, Russian scholarship, information control*

About the Author

Natalya Kovaleva is a graduate of King's College London Department of War Studies. Her current research explores strategic communications, media studies, and information warfare, with particular focus on Russia's approaches to information warfare.

Introduction

In the aftermath of Russia's seizure of Crimea in early 2014, the academic and policy debate around the notion of 'information warfare' has received unprecedented attention in the fields of security and strategic communications. Observers have been eager to highlight the apparent potency of authoritarian regimes, that of Russia in particular, to challenge democratic values by employing the latest media technologies.¹ However, there has been astonishingly limited inquiry into the ways in which the Kremlin attempts to control its own information space. Apart from a number of publications on the nature of the 'post-Soviet' Russian media landscape, we still know surprisingly little about the modern Russian information environment, the extent to which it is 'controlled' by the state, and whether or not exerting such influence is at all possible in the age of a globalised and Internet-based information environment.

A wide range of studies has been undertaken to analyse how the Russian media system has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to describe the relationship between the state and the media under Vladimir Putin.² To date, most analyses describe Russia's information environment as a 'neo-Soviet', authoritarian, or 'neo-authoritarian' space, and focus mainly on the Kremlin's attempts to centralise control over it.³ The recent acceleration of Russia's

1 Peter Pomerantsev, 'The Kremlin's Information War', *Journal of Democracy* 26 № 4, October 2015, pp. 40–50; Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money', *The Interpreter*, Special Report (New York: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014); Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili, *Redefining Euro-Atlantic Values: Russia's Manipulative Techniques* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017).

2 For contributions to this body of literature see Maria Lipman, 'Rethinking Russia: Freedom of expression without freedom of the press', *Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 63, № 2 (2010): 153–69; Sarah Oates, *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Elena Leonidovna Vartanova and Sergei Smirnov, 'A Brief Review of the Condition of the Media Market in Russia: The General Situation' in E. Vartanova, Hannu Nieminen, and Minna-Mari Salminen (eds), *Perspectives to the Media in Russia: Western Interests and Russian Developments*, Aleksanteri Series 4 (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri Institute, 2009), pp. 117–44.

3 Jonathan Becker, 'Lessons from Russia: A Neo-Authoritarian Media System', *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 19, Issue 2, (2004): 139–63; Hedwig De Smaele, 'The Applicability of Western Media Models on the Russian Media System', *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (1999): 73–89; Sarah Oates, 'The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media', *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, № 8 (December 2007): 1279–97.

integration into the global information space through greater domestic Internet usage has received little scholarly attention. This prompts the question. How has the distribution of horizontal communication networks, facilitated by the rise of the Internet and social media, impacted the composition of the Russian information space?⁴

The aim of this article is to analyse the interplay between the vertical power structures the Russian state uses to control its domestic information space and the effects of Internet penetration on the state's ability to exercise this control. It will therefore examine how Russian scholars conceptualise the notion of 'information space', offering an alternative to the 'neo-Soviet' understanding.

Consequently, I argue that for all the Kremlin's success in shaping discourses broadcast by domestic mainstream media outlets, it has been less effective in its attempts to centralise control over discourses disseminated online. Vertical legal and economic structures have controlled mainstream media for over a decade, and continue to be a reliable tool of the state for managing the production and distribution of domestic content. Yet, such tools can not reach far enough to ensure full control of the online sphere, making it increasingly difficult for the Russian state to influence content carried by online platforms, or to regulate access to alternative sources of information.

The first section of this article examines conceptualisations of 'information space' offered by scholars of Russian institutions. The second addresses the Kremlin's view of Russia's information space, identifying vulnerabilities from the government's perspective. Section three examines the tools of control the government exploits to influence the information space domestically, and explores different forms of economic ownership that are shaping the country's media landscape. The final section focuses on the legal instruments the Russian government employs to increase control over the Internet inside Russia's territorial borders.

Conceptualising information space

The period following the end of the Cold War is commonly understood as an ambiguous interval of transition between different forms of society, not just in Russia, but in the wider world as well. Increased speed and volume of communication, proliferation of globalised economic networks, and greater global interconnectedness through digitisation, together have brought about

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⁴ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 135.

a number of important social, economic, and technological transformations. According to the sociologist Manuel Castells, they gave rise to the new ‘network society’ on both global and local scales.⁵ These developments, so the argument goes, have profoundly affected the nature and dynamics of the communication space, making it ever more open-ended and versatile, as well as encompassing new network-like modes of operation.⁶

While not many scholars of communication contest this point of view, few (especially in the West) choose to apply Castells’ insights when theorising the Russian information space. Instead they place greater emphasis on authoritarian tendencies and structures embedded in the traditional Russian media environment.⁷ Russian research, on the other hand, tends to incorporate perspectives highlighting the globalised and ever-evolving nature of Russia’s information environment, and draws on several semantic nuances and understandings of the term ‘information space’.

The Russian Perspective

The term ‘information space’ was first used by Russian scholars in 1992 in relation to the need to preserve the circulation of print media throughout the country during the devastating economic crisis of the early 1990s.⁸ In 1993–94, arguments in favour of preserving the idea were articulated by Russian information technology experts, who stressed the necessity of developing information and communication infrastructures throughout the country.⁹ This thinking, in turn, informed ‘The Concept of the Formation and Development of the Common Information Space of the Russian Federation and the Corresponding State Information Resources’, published by the government

5 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd edn, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture 1 (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 4.

6 Castells, *Communication Power*, p. 298.

7 Florian Toepfl, ‘Four facets of critical news literacy in a non-democratic regime: How young Russians navigate their news’, *European Journal of Communication* 29, Issue 1 (2014): 69; Becker, ‘Lessons from Russia’, Oates, ‘Neo-Soviet Model of the Media’, Vartanova et al, ‘Media Market in Russia’; On the Kremlin’s approaches to Internet governance see Sheena Chestnut Greitens, ‘Authoritarianism Online: What Can We Learn from Internet Data in Nondemocracies?’, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46, Issue 2 (2013): 262–70; Seva Gunitsky, ‘Corrupting the Cyber-commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability’, *Perspectives on Politics* 13, Issue 1 (March 2015): 42–54; Katy E. Pearce, ‘Democratizing Kompromat: The Affordances of Social Media for State-Sponsored Harassment’, *Information, Communication & Society* 18, № 10 (2015): 1158–74; Renz B and Sullivan J, ‘Making a connection in the provinces? Russia’s tweeting governors’, *East European Politics* 29(2)(2013): 135–51.

8 Margarita Vladimirovna Katkova, ‘Ponjatije “informacionnoe prostranstvo” v sovremennoj social’noj filosofii’ [The Concept of “Information Space” in Modern Social Philosophy], *Izvestija Saratovskogo universiteta*, Novaja serija—Serija Filosofija, Psixologija, Pedagogika, Volume 2 (2008): 23–26.

9 Iosif Mixajlovič Džjalošinskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo Rossii: Političeskaja Metafora ili Nauchnoe Ponjatije’ [Russian Information Space: Political Metaphor or Scientific Concept], *Pravo znal’: istorija, teorija, praktika*, № 7/8 (July–August 2001), pp. 56–57.

in 1995.¹⁰ In this paper, ‘information space’ is defined as ‘a collection of databases and data banks, the technologies for their maintenance and use, and information and telecommunication systems and networks, operating on the basis of common principles and general rules that guarantee the information interactions of organisations and citizens, as well as the satisfaction of their information needs’.¹¹

Rather than providing a vision of what Russian information space should be, the document served as an indication of the need for the mass dissemination of information and communication technologies, the distribution of adequate infrastructures, and the development of the media industry, as well as emphasising the importance of Russia’s integration into the global information space.¹² The years that followed were marked by an increased interest in the concept on the part of Russian scholars, who went on to develop a number of different interpretations of the term ‘information space’.¹³ Drawing on Russian scholarship, five conceptualisations, which Western analysts rarely engage, are described below.¹⁴ The plurality of ideas presented highlight the fact that the Russian state has primarily pursued a territorial approach in developing policy aimed at shaping the country’s information domain.

1. **The territorial approach**, in the broadest sense, defines information space as a specific territory where the main sources of information (e.g. the media), their potential audiences, and the infrastructure that ensures interactions between the two are physically located.¹⁵ This approach is geopolitical, as the sphere of communication (and influence) ends with the state’s zone of geopolitical influence.¹⁶

10 Russian Federation, ‘Konceptcija formirovanija i razvitiija informacionnogo prostranstva Rossii i sootvetstvujušix gosudarstvennyx informacionnyx resursov [The Concept of the Formation and Development of the Common Information Space of the Russian Federation and the Corresponding State Information Resource] (Novosibirsk: Sibirskoe otdelenie Rossijskoj akademija nauk, 1996).

11 Ibid.

12 Denis Vitol’dovič Čajkovskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo: Analiz Opredelenij’ [Information Space: Analysis of Definitions], *Bulletin of the Buryat State University*, Issue 14a: Philosophy, sociology, political science, culturology, (2010): p. 269.

13 Elena Evgen’evna Jusupova, *Informacionnoe prostranstvo SNG: Problemy, tendencii, i perspektivy*. [Information space of the CIS: problems, trends, perspectives]; PhD thesis, Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO), Moscow, 2003; Marina Konstantinovna Raskladkina, *Interneti kak sredstvo organizacii informacionno-političeskogo prostranstva Rossii* [The Internet as Means of Organising Information and Political Space in Russia], PhD thesis, Saint-Petersburg State University, 2006; Tat’jana Alekseevna Merkulova, *Social’no-informacionnoe prostranstvo sovremennoj Rossii i tendencii razvitiija* [Social and information space of modern Russia: specifics and development trends], PhD thesis, Moscow State University, 2005.

14 Čajkovskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo’, p. 269.

15 Iosif Mixajlovič Džialošinskij, ‘Integrativnyje processy v sovremennyx rossijskix media-sistemax, ili čto proisxodit v rossijskom informacionnom prostranstve’ [Integrative Processes in Modern Russian Media Systems, or What Happens in the Russian Information Space], in *My—sogruždane*, ed. by Lidija Ivanovna Semina, 2 vols (Moscow: Bonfi, 2002), p. 20.

16 Ibid.

Thus, the information space is defined as:

[...] the aggregate of information resources and infrastructures that ensure secure communication between and among the state, organisations, and citizens, with equal access to open sources of information, and with the fullest satisfaction of users' information needs within the state, while maintaining a balance of interests when engaging with the global information space and ensuring national informational sovereignty.¹⁷

In this territorial space, it is the state that acts as the arbiter of spatial informational relations.¹⁸ It strives to ensure integrity and exert control through legislation and ownership of media outlets in the domestic domain of information.¹⁹ Hence, the information space is perceived by the state as the most important strategic asset through which other spheres of public life can be controlled.

2. **The technological approach** defines information space as the 'structural coexistence and interaction of all possible systems and their components, in a strictly informational sense'.²⁰ Here we are faced with perhaps the most narrow and concrete definition, where everything that concerns information is localised in particular technological structures. In this discourse, emphasis is placed on the technological component of communication, and the phenomenon of information space is perceived as a combination of information resources, computers, and communications facilities.²¹ In other words, the information space is defined by the location of data banks and other means of creating, storing, processing, and transmitting data, in both physical and virtual spaces. Although the Russian scholars who adhere to this approach often refer to physical spaces, a number of them emphasise that in the technological understanding of the term, geographical locations play a diminishing role due to the rise of the Internet and its global virtual domain.²²

17 Jusupova, 'Information Space of the CIS', p. 65.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 66.

20 Eduard Pavlovič Semenjuk, *Razvitiie informacionnogo prostranstva i progress obščestva* [Development of the Information Space and of Societal Progress], *Naučno-tehničeskaja informacija* (Novosibirskij gosudarstvennyj tehničeskij universitet), Series 1 (Organizacija i metodika informacionnoj raboty), № 1 (1997): 1–12.

21 Čajkovskij, 'Informacionnoe Prostranstvo', p. 270.

22 Ibid.

3. **The social approach** conceptualises the notion of information space as one of social relationships. Information space is here defined as ‘a public domain in which individuals, professional communities, public administrators, and economic and political circles, communicate through information exchange and virtual spaces’.²³ In other words, it is seen as the aggregate of structures (individuals, groups, and organisations), connected by relations of collection, production, distribution, and consumption of information. Hence, in a way, information space represents a social structure established through a system of relations between producers and consumers of mass media and online content.²⁴ Influenced by the writings of Bourdieu, this approach sees information relations as an inseparable part of social relations.²⁵
4. **The evolutionary approach** defines information space as a set of representations and informational reflections (perceptions) that are constructed as a result of the interactions that take place between subjects of communication.²⁶ In other words, the information space is the sum total of the (evolving) mental (conceptual) models used when selecting and processing particular kinds of information.²⁷ As argued by Kalinina, ‘In the process of information transformation, subjects of information space perceive the environment by filtering and processing information through mental models that provide an understanding of the environment’.²⁸ The key feature of this approach is that a subject’s own conceptual model is transformed as a result of the interactions between subjects in space and time.²⁹ The evolutionary approach defines information space as a dynamic, reflexive, and constantly evolving phenomenon.

23 Vladimir Bronislavovič Veprintsev, ‘Informacija v prostranstvennyx i geopolitičeskix kategorijax’ [Information in Spatial and Geopolitical Spaces], *Trendy i upravlenie*, № 3 (2014): 303.

24 Iosif Mixajlovič Džalošinskij, ‘Mediaobrazovanie: rabota s tekstami ili umenie orientirovat’sja v mediaprostranstve?’ [Media Education: Working with Texts or the Ability to Navigate in the Media space?] in *Mediaobrazovanie 2013: Sbornik Trudov Meždunarodnogo Foruma Konferencij. 31 oktjabrja – 2 nojabrja 2013 g.* [Media Education 2013: Collection of Publications from the International Forum of Conferences 31 October – 2 November 2013], (Moscow: Sholokhov State University of Humanities, 2013), p. 11.

25 Feliks Izosimovič Šarkov, *Osnovy teorii komunikacij* [Fundamentals of the Theory of Communication] (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo torgovaja korporacija ‘Daškov i K^o’, 2010); Elena Nikolaevna Judina, *Mediaprostranstvo kak kul’turnaja i social’naja sistema* [Media Space as a Cultural and Social System] (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Prometej, 2005).

26 Vladimir Sergeevič Ignatov and Dina Vladimirovna Pimenova, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo: Struktura i Funkcii’ [Information Space: Structure and Functions] (*Izvestija vyšnix učebnyx zavedenij, Povolžskij region, obščestvennye nauki, Sociologija*, № 3, 2007), p. 5.

27 Ibid.

28 Alla Eduardovna Kalinina, ‘Osnovnye teoretičeskije položenija razvitija informacionnogo prostranstva xozjajstvennoj sistem’ [Main Theoretical Provisions for the Development of the Information Space of Economic Systems] (Volgograd: Volgograd State University, 2005), p. 12.

29 Ibid., p. 14.

5. **The noöspheric approach** is derived from the academic heritage of V.I. Vernadsky, particularly his concept of ‘noosphere’,³⁰ which in recent years has influenced many Russian scholars who theorise about the information space.³¹ According to Vernadsky, the noosphere represents a new global super-system that combines three powerful subsystems: ‘human beings’, ‘production’, and ‘nature’, all of which are interrelated.³² Interactions between these subsystems are understood to be synergetic and non-linear relationships that inevitably bring about a model of social life based on the coevolution of the biosphere and the mind (noösociogenesis).³³ In other words, this model is driven by the ability of the human intellect to interact effectively and harmoniously with the biosphere. This stands in contrast to the ‘technogenic’ model, which is based on the idea of humans in opposition to nature.³⁴ According to the concept of noosphere the human is perceived as the sole owner of knowledge in the Universe, who thus shapes the dialogue (polylogue) between people of various cultures, nations, religions, ages, and genders.³⁵ In the words of the Russian scholar Valentina Voronkova, the ‘noöspheric approach establishes a belief that at the peak of development the human being will be able to create a world that would harmoniously coexist in parallel with nature; not destroying the created world but favoring the harmonious interaction of all spheres of life’.³⁶

Nowadays the noosphere is increasingly associated with the dissemination of global information networks and technologies. Therefore, many have been trying to identify the first signs of the emerging noosphere in the global Internet network. Typically, the

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30 The term ‘noosphere’ itself does not belong to Vernadsky, who was cautious about abusing the literature with ‘unnecessary terms’. It was first used in the articles of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Édouard LeRoy, who were heavily influenced by Vernadsky’s thinking, especially by his lectures on the problems of geochemistry and biogeochemistry delivered in Sorbonne in 1922–1923.

31 See Nikita Nikolaevič Moiseev, *Universum. Informacija. Obščestvo* [Universe. Information. Society]. (Moscow: Ustojčivyj mir, 2001); Arkadij Dmitrievič Ursul, *Peresod Rossii k ustojčivomu razvitiu. Noosfernaja strategija* [Russia’s Transition to Sustainable Development. The Noosphere Strategy] (Moscow: Noosfera, 1998); Arkadij Dmitrievič Ursul and Ta’ana Al’bertovna Ursul, ‘Globalizacija, ustojčivoje razvitie, noosferogenez: informacionnye aspekty’ [Globalization, Sustainable Development, Noöspherogenesis: Information Aspects], Novosibirsk Technological Institute. *Naučno-techničeskaja informacija*, Series 2: *Informacionnye processy i sistemy*, Volume 1, № 4 (2005).

32 Vladimir Ivanovič Vernadsky, *Naučnaja mysl’ kak planetnoje javlenie* [Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon] (Moscow: Nauka, 1991). Also available in English: *Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon* (Moscow: Nongovernmental Ecological V.I. Vernadsky Foundation, 1997): 67.

33 Valentina Grigorovna Voronkova (Valentyna Hryhorivna), *Philosophy of Modern Society: Theoretical and Methodological Context*; Monograph, (Zaporizžja: RVV ZDIA, 2012), p. 180.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

emergence of an information society is viewed as the initial stage of the formation of the noösphere.³⁷ Building on Vernadsky's ideas, modern Russian scholars consider the presence of a certain 'Collective Intelligence' or 'Noöspheric Intelligence' as the most important feature of the emerging noösphere.³⁸ As Moiseev noted, the information society cannot emerge and exist without Collective Intelligence on a planetary scale: 'I suppose it is possible to call the planetary society informational', he writes, 'if and only if the Collective Intelligence emerges, which would be able to play a similar role in planetary society to the one that the mind plays in a human body'.³⁹ The emergence of such an Intelligence, in turn, requires the development of an adequate means of accumulation, transmission, and analysis of information.⁴⁰ Thus, the noöspheric approach presupposes the emergence of a new information cloak that 'envelops' the Earth and generates a new state of global being—the planetary noöspheric mind.⁴¹

In this framework, media space is understood as an integral part of the noösphere. It has conditional boundaries created by participants in media processes, whose relationships determine the metric of that media space.⁴² In this context, space is not physical but virtual. All relations in it are 'perfectly symbolic in their nature'.⁴³ The noöspheric approach, as opposed to all others, does not discuss the role of the state in shaping the noösphere. Agency is located at the level of the individual where the 'intelligence of each individual aided by new information technology based on artificial intelligence will join the collective, or integral, intellect of mankind, which will create the basis for global decision-making'.⁴⁴

The variety of semantic nuances that Russian scholars draw upon when theorising the concept of information space highlights the sophistication of the Russian approach to understanding this complex phenomenon. Yet, it is evident that in Russia policy lags behind theory. As the following analysis will demonstrate, Russian authorities predominantly work from the assumption of physical

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37 Ursul, 'Noosphere Strategy', p. 12.

38 Ibid., p. 14.

39 Moiseev, *Universum. Informacija. Obščestvo*, p. 183.

40 Ibid.

41 Čajkovskij, 'Informacionnoe Prostranstvo', p. 272.

42 Dzyalošinskij, 'Media Education', p. 7.

43 Ibid.

44 Ursul and Ursul, 'Globalizacija, ustojčivoe razvitie, noosferogenez', p.13.

territoriality when making policy decisions that affect the processes and networks shaping the Russian information domain.

Upon becoming President in early 2000, Vladimir Putin introduced ‘The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation’, which aimed to ‘safeguard the national interests of the Russian Federation in the sphere of information’ and defined ‘sources of threat to the information security of the Russian Federation’. This attached the concept of sovereignty to Russia’s information space, which could be challenged by both domestic and foreign actors.⁴⁵ Such a localised view, underpinned by the principle of non-intervention, has been maintained ever since, with the latest version of the Doctrine calling for ‘strengthening the vertical management system and centralising information security forces at the federal, inter-regional, regional, and municipal levels’.⁴⁶

Moscow’s ambition to centralise control over communications is rooted in the Kremlin’s belief that foreign actors (mainly the US and NATO) are seeking to challenge the status quo in ‘countries where the opposition is too weak to mobilise protests’ by using the Internet and other tools of influence.⁴⁷ This view became particularly prominent among Russia’s political and military leadership following the protests of 2011–12, which heightened the fear that the ‘colour revolutions’ could be duplicated in Russia.⁴⁸ Thus, while being concerned with the potential influence of foreign actors in the domestic information space, the Kremlin sees this space as a virtual territory with clearly defined borders that correspond to the physical borders of the Russian state, and (in some cases) to the borders of what the Kremlin perceives to be its strategic ‘spheres of influence’.

The Dangers of the Global Information Space

Not all Russian scholars agree with the government’s view of the domestic information space. Some argue that reducing the idea to purely territorial categories—the geographical borders of a state or the boundaries of territories covered by communication channels—inevitably overlooks the possible influences of global connectivity on local information spaces.⁴⁹ While some elaborate on the benefits of widespread digitisation, others, in line with the

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⁴⁵ Russian Federation, [The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#), Approved by President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation on 9 September 2000.

⁴⁶ Russian Federation, [The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#), 5 December 2016.

⁴⁷ Julian Nocetti, ‘Contest and Conquest: Russia and Global Internet Governance’, *International Affairs* 91, Issue 1 (January 2015): 114.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁴⁹ Čajkovskij, ‘Informacionnoe Prostranstvo’, p. 273.

Kremlin, point out that ever-increasing Internet penetration has generated ‘complex problems in the fields of information and national security’.⁵⁰

For instance, some Russian scholars argue that along with expanding the freedom of information exchange, Russia’s entry into the global information space also provided its citizens with free access to a variety of alternative sources of information, some of which are deemed dangerous because of potential ‘targeted’ impact on public opinion and behaviour.⁵¹ ‘Colour revolutions’ in Russia’s geopolitical backyard and recent civil unrest in Ukraine feature in Russian discourse as prime examples of information warfare waged by the United States and European Union against Russia and its allies, with the aim of installing puppet governments in the region.⁵² US policy initiatives, such as democracy promotion and the Internet Freedom Agenda, are thus perceived as the propagation of political agendas beneficial to the US at the expense of Russia’s interests.⁵³ Therefore, Russia’s greater integration into the global information space supposedly creates opportunities for foreign actors to shape Russia’s public discourses in ways unfavourable to the Russian state, while preserving their anonymity in the vast, uncontrollable, and unregulated online domain.⁵⁴

Consequently, certain Russian researchers consider the Internet an increasingly popular alternative to mainstream media among the domestic population. Thus, the Internet represents a threat due to mounting ‘opportunities for the development of an alternative public sphere in Russia’.⁵⁵ With television and print media heavily dominated by state interests, Runet is seen as ‘the only platform for free political discussion’—a virtual space with the potential to reproduce the ‘historic tradition of systemic opposition to the Russian state using Western

50 Aleksandr Mixajlovič Starostin, Sergej Ivanovič Samygin, and Anna Vladimirovna Verešagina, ‘Evol’ucija vojny i mnogoobrazie ee form v uslovijax krizisa nacional’noj identičnosti i dinamiki ugroz informacionnoj bezopasnosti sovremennoj obščestva’ [Evolution of the War and Diversity of its Forms in the Context of the Crisis of National Identity and the Dynamics of Threats to Information Security of Modern Society], *Socium i nast’* № 5 (61) (2016): 52.

51 Aleksandr Alekseevič Vilkov, Sergej Fëdorovič Nekrasov, and Andrej Vladimirovič Rossošanskij, *Političeskaja funkcional’naja sovremennyx Rossijskix SMP* [Political Functionality of Modern Russian Media], (Saratov: Izdatel’skij Centr ‘Nauka’, 2011), p. 34.

52 See Georgij Jur’evič Filimonov and Nikita Sergeevič Danjuk, *Informacionnyj terror: Taktika i strategija informacionnoj vojny* [Information Terror: Tactics and Strategy of Information War] (Moscow: Knižnyj Mir, 2017); Julia Belikova, Aleksander Korol’ov, and Aleksander Kriukov, *Setevye tehnologii v informacionnyx operacijax NATO i zarubežnyx nepravitel’svennyx organizacij v sode cretnyx revolucij i voennyx konfliktov* [Network Technologies in the Information Operations of NATO and Foreign Non-governmental Organisations During Colour Revolutions and Military Conflicts] (Moscow: Akademia Federal’noj služby ohrany Rossijskoj Federacii, 2012).

53 Nocetti, ‘Russia and Global Internet Governance’.

54 Vilkov et al., *Političeskaja funkcional’naja sovremennyx Rossijskix SMP*, p. 36.

55 Aleksandr Gennađ’evič Kuz’min, ‘“Pravij” Internet v Rossii: Specifika razvitija i problemy protivodejstvija’ [“Right-wing” Internet in Russia: The Specifics of Development and the Problems of Counteraction], *Politeks* № 3, (2008), pp. 74–96.

liberal ideas, which is typical for the Russian intelligentsia'.⁵⁶ Vilkov, Nekrasov, and Rossoshansky are concerned that 'the most active and informed part of the audience will fall out from the sphere of mainstream media controlled by the state', and that eventually the process by which domestic audiences receive news will be split into two parallel domains—the mainstream media for passive consumers of news, and the Internet for 'active audiences'.⁵⁷ The authors conclude that 'the nature and direction of protest energy concentrated in the Internet space can be socially dangerous'.⁵⁸

A further concern for Russian scholars is the integrity and security of Russia's national identity and values in the information confrontation with the West.⁵⁹ While Russian discourse has long been marked by ideas celebrating Russia's cultural and ideological exceptionalism, ultraconservative narratives portraying Russia as a stronghold of traditionalist values besieged by the 'morally corrupt' West have become more prevalent during Putin's most recent presidential term (2012–18).⁶⁰ Adopting a law prohibiting LGBTI propaganda and introducing amendments to anti-terrorism legislation (where the authorities are portrayed as the protectors of the Russian population, while Europe is being torn apart by terrorist attacks) played effectively to these narratives.⁶¹ Some Russian scholars, however, insist it is necessary to strengthen the national media system and ensure its openness to the outside world, while at the same time upholding and promoting the principles of Russia's national culture and identity.⁶² Meanwhile it is deemed necessary to strengthen the presence of Russian media in the international arena, as 'in the modern competitive world victory depends on one's ability to effectively influence the minds of foreign populations'.⁶³ Regarding Russia's effective disinformation activities, Starostin, Samygin, and Vereshchagina conclude, contrary to some Western scholars and policy-makers, that Russia is actually losing the 'war of the words' for dominance in the information space. Worse still, that it is now almost impossible to reverse the destructive consequences of lost 'information battles'.⁶⁴

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56 Anna Davidovna Traxtenberg, 'Runet kak "publičnaja sfera": Xabermasiankij ideal i realnost' [Runet as a Public Sphere: The Habermasian Ideal and Reality], *Politeks* № 2, (2006): 167.

57 Vilkov et al., *Političeskaja funkcional'naja sovermennyx rssijskix SMP*, p. 35.

58 Ibid.

59 Starostin et al., 'Evol'ucija vojny', p. 51.

60 Alexey Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts: The Kremlin's Proxy War on Independent Journalism* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015), p. 9.

61 Olga Smirnova, *Russian TV: Contesting European Values*, Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2016), p. 6.

62 Starostin et al., 'Evol'ucija vojny', p. 53.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., p. 54.

As the following analysis will demonstrate, the Kremlin's view of the domestic information space and its perceived vulnerabilities is closer to that of Russian scholars who argue for the protection of national informational sovereignty than to those who foresee the eventual formation of the noosphere. Recent state policies on Internet governance reveal the government's attempts to strengthen its positions in the context of Russia's real or imagined 'information confrontation'.⁶⁵ The aim is to ensure domestic stability while countering foreign information threats. Most notably, attempts have been made in recent months to 'lock down' the Russian segment of the Internet (Runet) and concentrate the ability to throw a 'kill switch' in the hands of government.

Safeguarding the virtual borders of Runet

Unlike China, Russia does not typically use infrastructural and economic barriers, shutdowns, and application-level blocking. Rather, it resorts to censorship and intimidation.⁶⁶ Yet, in recent years, a number of proposals from government officials suggest creating a 'kill switch' for the Russian segment of the Internet. This would allow the government to disconnect Runet from the global network 'in case of crisis'. Legislation fails to specify what such a 'crisis' might look like beyond vague references to Runet being shut off from abroad.⁶⁷ Network shutdowns, either complete or specific to certain protocols and applications, are widely used by governments such as Iran, Kenya, and Turkey to manage information flows during politically resonant events, such as popular protests or elections.⁶⁸ In Russia's case, significant efforts have recently been made by lawmakers to 'protect' Runet from foreign interference and develop mechanisms of restricting access to Runet from abroad.

On 15 August 2017 the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications released a set of amendments to the *Law On Communications* designed to increase the government's control over Internet infrastructure and traffic in Russia.⁶⁹ The amendments were aimed at transferring control of the national domain zones

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65 Information confrontation is commonly understood in Russian discourse as 'a complex of relations between the subjects of the global community or a political system of society in which certain actors seek to acquire superiority in political, economic and social realms of other entities by actively influencing their information space' in Dmitriy Borisovič Frolov, *Informacionnaja Voina: Evolucija form, sredstv i metodov* [Information War: Evolution of Forms, Means and Methods], *Sociologija Vlasti* [Sociology of Power] № 5, 2005, p. 121.

66 Nathalie Maréchal, 'Networked Authoritarianism and the Geopolitics of Information: Understanding Russian Internet Policy', *Media and Communication* 5, Issue 1, (2017): 31.

67 Natalie Duffy, 'Internet Freedom in Vladimir Putin's Russia: The Noose Tightens', *American Enterprise Institute*, 12 January 2015; Nocetti, 'Russia and Global Internet Governance'.

68 Maréchal, 'Networked Authoritarianism', p. 32; Laura DeNardis, *The Global War for Internet Governance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), p.13.

69 Russian Federation, The Russian Federation Law 'O vnesenii izmenenij v Federal'nyj zakon "O svjazi"' [Federal Law On Amendments to the Federal Law "On Communications"], 2017.

.ru and .рф and the entire system of traffic exchange points to the government. They also sought to expand the operation of the National Information System for Ensuring the Integrity, Stability, and Security of Runet (GIS).⁷⁰ Such changes to the law would increase the autonomy of Runet and concentrate power over it into the hands of the state.⁷¹ The explanatory note to the bill states that such measures are necessary because Runet is supposedly faced with the threat of interference in its infrastructure from abroad.⁷² It goes on to underline the absence of ‘management or control over Internet traffic in the territory of the Russian Federation’, which entails ‘negative effects such as fragmentation and isolation of the online network’.⁷³ Further amendments propose limiting foreign ownership of traffic exchange points to 20%, mirroring the laws on foreign ownership for audiovisual services and mass media.

These proposed changes build on earlier pieces of legislation initiated by the Ministry in 2014, namely, on the amendments to the State Programme ‘Information Society’, which aim to contain 99% of Russian Internet traffic within Russian borders by 2020.; contrast this with 70% in 2014.⁷⁴ A federal official explains that as long as ‘the traffic between Russian systems passes through external points of exchange, there is no way to guarantee their trouble-free operation’. Nor will the proposed plans provide a working system of monitoring Internet traffic, thus ensuring the overall stability of the network.⁷⁵ While many consider such measures a step towards establishing a Chinese Firewall model, Russian experts claim that gaining full control of traffic is an almost impracticable task: it would require substantial financial and technological resources to achieve. Alexey Platonov, head of the Technical Center of the Internet, which provides technical support for Russia’s domain infrastructure, suggests that isolating Runet would have minimal impact given the thousands of new domains put into circulation in the global system each year. So ‘switching Russia off’ from the global web completely would be very difficult, albeit not impossible.⁷⁶

70 Ibid.

71 Roskomsvoboda, ‘“Kitaizacija” Runet vxodit v aktivnuju fazu načičnjsja s toček obmena trafikom’ [The ‘China-isation’ of Runet Enters Its Active Phase and Will Start From the Traffic Exchange Points], 18 August 2017.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Russian Federation, ‘State Programme: Information Society, 2011–2020’, 20 October 2012.

75 Roskomsvoboda, ‘“Kitaizacija” Runet’.

76 RBC, ‘“Nameki na Kitaj”: možno li otključit’ Rossiju ot global’nogo interneta?’ [“Hints from China”: Is it Possible to Disconnect Russia from the Global Internet?], 11 February 2016.

The policies of the Ministry of Communications might produce the opposite effect, argues one Russian observer, and lead to greater risks in the field of information security due to the state's aspiration to concentrate in its own hands complete control over the national segment of the Internet infrastructure.⁷⁷ In the event of a purposeful and successful attack, the argument goes, the consequences for national security might be irreparable.⁷⁸ Besides the fact that such policies undermine the constitutional right of free access to information, these changes would inevitably lead to the development of new monopolies. These, in turn, are unlikely to have a positive impact on the development of the Russian information space.⁷⁹

Ultimately, it is evident that the transnational, horizontal, and networked nature of free information flows disseminated through the Internet appears to threaten the Kremlin profoundly because of its potential to empower domestic activism and spread supra- and trans-national influences throughout the domestic political and media space.⁸⁰ US President Barack Obama observed in 2009 that 'the great irony of the information age' is that 'those states that have most successfully adopted and exploited the opportunities afforded by the Internet are also the most vulnerable to a range of threats that accompany it'.⁸¹ This holds true for Russia's government. Its putative success in manipulating audiences through the Internet internationally is matched by observable limitations to full control over the information domain at home.⁸²

How far has the Russian state been able to exert influence over platforms and discourses in the domestic information space? The answer lies partly in key economic and legal instruments employed by the government to effectively manage the domestic sphere of information.

Media Ownership Structures as a Tool of Control

In December 2016, a poll conducted by the Levada Center, an independent Russian sociological research company, found that 91% of the Russian population watches its news on TV 'at least once a week' or more frequently.⁸³ Almost half

77 Roskomsvoboda, '“Kitaizacija” Runet'.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Maréchal, 'Networked Authoritarianism', p. 38.

81 Madeline Carr, *US Power and the Internet in International Relations: The Irony of the Information Age* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 2.

82 While Russia's outward-looking, military conceptualisations of information space are undoubtedly important in the context of this discussion, the current inquiry focuses exclusively on domestic concerns.

83 Denis Aleksandrovič Volkov and Stepan Vladimirovič Gončarov, *Kossijskij media-landšaft, televidenie, pressa, internet* [Russian Media Landscape: Television, Press, Internet] (Moscow: Levada Centre, June 2014), p. 105.

(46%) reads the news on the Internet with the same regularity.⁸⁴ Others get their news from radio (34%) and newspapers (36%).⁸⁵ Hence, most Russians who follow social and political events base their views predominantly on discourses provided by television content, despite the recent growing prominence of web publications.⁸⁶ Television, therefore, continues to be an important strategic asset for the government and its main instrument of political influence in the domestic information space.

State Ownership

Four federal television channels—Pervij Kanal [the First Channel], Rossiya-1, NTV, and Rossiya 24 provide the main sources of news for the majority of the population, with the First Channel reaching 98.8% of audiences across the country.⁸⁷ The state’s micromanagement of political coverage from these outlets and their regional affiliates is extensive, and is achieved primarily through direct economic control of the networks.⁸⁸ This great concentration of influential media outlets in the hands of the state not only provides privileges in terms of airtime and access to the top government officials, but also gives the state an opportunity to influence the distribution of financial resources within the domestic media system.⁸⁹ The three main national channels enjoy substantial state subsidies and successfully compete for advertising income.⁹⁰ The result is better entertainment content, which attracts more viewers who, some studies say, don’t touch the remote control once the news comes on, possibly attracting even more advertisers.⁹¹ This makes it difficult for independent media sources to compete with state-owned outlets. Even worse, Freedom House reports that Russian businesses are reluctant to place advertisements with outlets that are not loyal to the government, so as to avoid complicating their relationships with the state.⁹²

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84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., p. 106.

86 Katja Lehtisaari, ‘Market and Political Factors and the Russian Media’, Working paper, (University of Oxford, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015), p. 7.

87 RIA Novosti, ‘Komu prinadležat osnovnye SMI v Rossii’ [Who Owns the Main Media Outlets in Russia], 27 January 2012.

88 Nikolaj Petrov, Maria Lipman, and Henry E. Hale, ‘Three Dilemmas of Hybrid Regime Governance: Russia from Putin to Putin’, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30 № 1 (January 2014), p.7.

89 Ibid., p. 8.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Freedom House, ‘Russia’, in *Freedom of the Press 2016* (New York, NY: Freedom House, 2016).

Mixed Ownership

Discussing mixed ownership structures, scholars point to the lack of transparency in the Russian media market as well as to the increasing ambiguity associated with informal patronage networks loyal to the government. Russian communications scholar Vilen Egorov explains that the ‘distinctive problem of the Russian mass media is the ambiguity around its economic viability and the transparency of its activities. Is it possible to say with certainty to whom in fact this or that radio channel or periodical belongs? We do not have such information.’⁹³ Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between independent voices and state-controlled outlets, given the strong prominence of figures inside Putin’s inner circle in the Russian media market.

To give just one example, 51% of the First Channel, Russia’s most popular TV channel and news source, is owned by the state. The remaining 49% of shares are split between ORT-KB, owned by oligarch Roman Abramovitch (24%), and the National Media Group (25%), the main shareholder of which is businessman Yuri Kovalchuk, famous for his personal ties to President Putin.⁹⁴ A major stakeholder in the Rossiya Bank, which controls a number of companies holding a substantial portfolio of shares in the Russian media industry, Kovalchuk also owns 46.92% of the influential Gazprom Media Holding.⁹⁵ The holding owned jointly by Kovalchuk and the Gazprom Bank operates a wide-ranging collection of news and entertainment television channels, radio, and press outlets, online resources, and advertising companies.⁹⁶ It incorporates seven broadcast TV channels (NTV, TNT, Friday!, TV-3, TNT4, Match TV, and 2x2), the satellite television network NTV-PLUS, ten radio stations, and considerable assets in the Internet segment (Ruform, and the online platforms NOW.ru and Zoomby), publishing houses (Seven Days and Media Press), and film production and distribution outlets (Central Partnership, KIT Film Studio, Comedy Club Production, and Good Story Media).⁹⁷

Much of the ambiguity surrounding the mixed ownership of media outlets is rooted in a number of platforms, considered relatively independent by international observers and by the Russian public; in fact they are controlled

93 Viljonar Vasil’evič Egorov, ‘Na Puti k Informacionnomu Obščestvu’ [Towards an Information Society], (Moscow: Institut Povyšeniia Kvalifikacii Rabotnikov Televideniia I Radioveščaniia, 2006), p. 140.

94 Petrov, Lipman, and Hale, ‘Three Dilemmas’, p. 9.

95 Radio Svoboda, ‘U Naval’nogo rasskazali o druge Putina, kotoryj vladeet ‘vsemi’ SMI’ [Navalny was Told about a Friend of Putin’s Who Owns ‘All’ the Media], 25 May 2017.

96 Gazprom Media website, ‘About Gazprom Media’, 2017.

97 Kseniia Boleckaja, ‘“Gazprom-media” Kupil 7,5% akciij “Nacional’noj Media Gruppy”’ [“Gazprom-Media” Bought 7.5% of Shares in “National Media Group”], *Vedomosti*, 31 March 2016.

by companies and individuals loyal to the state, or by government figures themselves. The Russian-language version of the Euronews channel, often seen as an alternative news source, is owned by VGTRK.⁹⁸ The Ekho Moskvy radio station, which is perceived as ‘relatively independent’ by the authoritative pollster Levada Center, is a member of Gazprom Media Holding. And the seemingly ‘alternative’ REN-TV channel is part of the Russian Media Group.⁹⁹ Some observers rightly point to the fact that ownership of seemingly alternative news outlets gives the state an opportunity to create the impression of diversity of opinions in the media space while retaining operational control over the outlets. Others emphasise that a change in ownership does not necessarily mean a change in editorial policies.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, according to Alexey Venediktov, editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy, despite the station being bought by a holding loyal to Putin, it retains its status as an ‘oppositional’ media source.¹⁰¹ Yet, Venediktov admits that some economic pressure is still being applied through measures like downsizing the advertising department, a move that led to a plunge in advertising budgets, diminishing the financial autonomy of the outlet.¹⁰²

Private Ownership

In the Russian context it is also difficult to say which privately owned media structures are truly independent from state influence. The relationship between the owners of media companies and Putin’s inner circle is often uncertain. This is certainly the case for the media empire of Russian businessman Alisher Usmanov, for the online news platforms and radio stations owned by millionaires Vladimir Potanin and Alexander Mamut, for the shares of TV stations and print publications held by energy companies, and in other instances where the shadow nature of the Russian media market economy makes it impossible to differentiate between independent voices and those loyal to the state.¹⁰³ As pointed out by one Russian analyst, ‘Now big media in Russia can be in the hands only of strategic players who support the party line. It is not a business, it is a party task.’¹⁰⁴

98 VGTRK (2017) Vserossijskaja gosudarstvennaja televizionnaja i radioveščat’naja kompanija. [All-Russia State Television and Radio], ‘About: Structure of the Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company’.

99 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, p. 8.

100 Lehtisaari, ‘Market and Political Factors’, p. 8; Timothy Heritage, ‘Independent Media Battle On in Putin’s Russia’ *Reuters*, 30 July 2015.

101 Heritage, ‘Independent Media Battle’.

102 Ibid.

103 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, pp. 12–14.

104 Boleckaja, ‘“Gazprom-media” Kupil 7,5%’.

Indeed, the line between the media as a market and the media as a mouthpiece of the state is becoming increasingly blurred in modern Russia. This not only constrains economic and media freedoms domestically, but also leads to the deterioration of public trust in media institutions. Recent research conducted by the Levada Center suggests that many Russians still consider television the most reliable source of information. But only 50 per cent of those getting their news from television trust what they hear.¹⁰⁵ A quarter place their trust in sources available on social media, and 35 per cent turn to the press for reliable news.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, Russians tend to be skeptical about information disseminated by state-controlled channels; only 10 per cent. of respondents admit they entirely trust what they hear.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is evident that government's attempts to set a media agenda has led to a weakening of trust in information provided by state media. It has also led to public disillusionment in television as a medium, especially among younger Russians.

As a consequence of strong state control of mainstream media outlets, independent/oppositional platforms are not particularly prominent in the Russian media environment, and exist mostly online and as parts of satellite networks.¹⁰⁸ The growing accessibility of such platforms undoubtedly concerns state authorities, who seek to minimise the influence of independent media coverage in Russia. A scandal of several years ago involving the news website Lenta.ru is illustrative of this tendency. In March 2014, its owner replaced the entire editorial team, fearing that events unfolding in Ukraine were being covered in a way favourable to the new Ukrainian government.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, the amount of content critical of the Russian government's actions substantially decreased.¹¹⁰ Former editor-in-chief Galina Timchenko and a number of the journalists fired from Lenta.ru, set up a new site, Meduza.io, and continued their work guided by the core principles of independent journalism. To make this possible, Timchenko and her team moved to Latvia, out of reach of legislative and economic pressures exerted by the Russian state.¹¹¹ The scandal did not produce any substantial increase in the platform's readership. Yet the ability

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105 Volkov and Gončarov, *So stola sociologov: Empiričeskie issledovanija. Rossijskij medialandsaft, osnovnye tendencii ispol'zovanija SMI* [From the Sociologists' Table: Empirical Studies. Russian Media Landscape: Main Trends in Media Consumption] Levada Center, *Vestnik obščestvennogo mneija*, № 1/2 (124) January–June 2017, p. 123.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 The television channels RBK-TV, Dožd', radio stations Radio Liberty and BBC Russian, newspapers *Vedomosti* and *Novaya Gazeta* are considered the primary independent media outlets in Russia. See Petrov, Lipman, and Hale, 'Three Dilemmas', p. 7.

109 Ibid., p. 292.

110 BBC, 'Russia Lenta.ru Editor Timchenko Fired in Ukraine Row', 12 March 2014.

111 Ibid.

of such outlets to survive and preserve an independent voice illustrates that the Kremlin does not exercise total economic control over the domestic media landscape. Opportunities remain for those who wish to get their news from independent sources.¹¹²

Still, it is clear that the state retains control of most mainstream platforms, exerting a substantial influence over the messages and narratives they disseminate. Niche websites, newspapers, and radio stations remain relatively free, but they represent an insignificant threat to the government's authority and serve as convenient examples of a plurality of voices and ownership. This benefits the state, mitigating the widespread criticism of limitations on freedom of press and expression in Russia.

Foreign Ownership

Since the economic downturn of 2014, the authorities have been particularly cautious of foreign interference in Russian political and media spaces.¹¹³ The government's main concern has long been with 'colour revolutions'. They are widely perceived by the state as models of regime change used by Western actors to install puppet governments in countries of interest.¹¹⁴ To address this issue, in 2015 the State Duma passed a bill limiting foreign ownership of media companies to 20% of total shares.¹¹⁵ The bill echoed the infamous 'foreign agent law', which placed considerable restraints on the activities of non-governmental organisations funded from abroad that are involved in 'political activity'.¹¹⁶ Ultimately, this piece of legislation forced Germany's Axel Springer group to sell the Russian edition of *Forbes*, and Finland's Sanoma to sell 100% of its shares of the influential Russian daily *Vedomosti*, as well as the English-language platform *The Moscow Times*.¹¹⁷ As a Freedom House report states, '*The Moscow Times* subsequently switched from a daily to a weekly publication, and its chief editor resigned due to conflicts with the new owner. The new publisher of *Forbes* said that the magazine would carry fewer stories on politics and focus on business and economics'.¹¹⁸

112 Volkov and Gončarov, '*So stola sociologov*', p. 125.

113 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, p. 9.

114 Svetlana Ivanovna Kuzina and Dmitrij Aleksandrovič Mjakinčenko, 'Informacionnoe Nasilie: Aspekty Nacional'noj Bezopasnosti' [Information Violence: Aspects of National Security], *Gosudarstvennoe i municipal'noe upravlenie. Učebnye zapiski SKAGS*, № 3 (2015): 205.

115 Lehtisaari, 'Market and Political Factors', p. 9.

116 Eremenko, *Weeding Out the Upstarts*, p. 9.

117 Freedom House, 'Russia', in *Freedom of the Press 2016*.

118 Ibid.

Such tendencies highlight the continued persistence of the Russian state in containing the information space within state borders by restricting economic opportunities for foreign companies wishing to invest in the Russian media industry. Apart from rare initiatives, such as that of Galina Timchenko, there is no great diversity of opinions in the mainstream media, because of economic pressure from the state. Hence, the government remains the most active player in Russia's media space. Its considerable resources allow it to programme operations and shape discourses in the domestic media environment.¹¹⁹

Still, given waning trust in dominant narratives from state-controlled outlets, as well as the growing prominence of the Internet as a medium of communication and news consumption, media sources and online platforms located beyond the reach of state ownership policies are gaining greater influence in Russia. The Levada Center's research shows that such platforms have been most popular among the young, educated, urban middle class.¹²⁰ Observing this development, the Kremlin has turned to legal instruments to establish greater control over online spaces, and to silence expressions of political dissent. The following section turns to the analysis of recent legislation governing communications in general and Runet in particular.

Legal Instruments as Tools of Control

Until December 1991, there was no regulation of media and information in Russia, as all information channels were controlled by the Soviet government. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a non-governmental realm of media came into being, and became the subject of the Russian Federation Law on the Mass Media,¹²¹ the first legal document outlining the basic rules and principles governing information activities in the country.¹²² Freedom of speech and inadmissibility of censorship became the most influential principles incorporated into the law, which remains the primary piece of legislation governing mass communications in Russia.¹²³ These principles were later reflected in the

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119 Valentina Venjaminovna Kixtan, 'Sovremennaja Rossija v zerkale mass-media' [Contemporary Russia in the Mirror of the Mass Media], *Contemporary Problems of Social and Human Sciences* № 1 (2015): 2.

120 Volkov and Gončarov, *So stola sociologov*, p. 123.

121 The law defines 'mass media' as 'printed, audio and audio-visual and other messages and materials intended for an unlimited range of persons'.

122 Andrej Vladimirovič Rossošansky, 'Evol'ucija političeskoj funkcional'nosti rossijskix SMP' [The Evolution of the Political Functionality of Russian Media], *Izvestija Saratovskogo universiteta, Serija Sociologija i Politologija*, N.S.12, № 1 (January 2012), p. 86.

123 Marina Il'inišna Alekseeva, Ljudmila Dem'janovna Bolotova, Elena Leonidovna Vartanova, et al., *Sredstva massonij informacii Rossii: Učebnoe posobie dlja studentov vuzov* [Russian Mass Media: A Manual for University Students] ed. by Iasen Nikolaevič Zasukšij, (Moscow: Aspect Press, 2006), pp. 62–63; Russian Federation, *The Russian Federation Law on Mass Media*, 27 December 1991, p. 2.

Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, which guarantees freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom from censorship, and the right to privacy.¹²⁴ Provisions related to the independence of agents of communication are reflected in Article 29, which states that ‘everyone has the right to freely seek, receive, transmit, produce, and disseminate information by any lawful means. [...] Freedom of the mass media is guaranteed. Censorship is prohibited’.¹²⁵

It is evident that any consolidation of such norms in the country’s core legislation reflects not only the willingness of the new Russian government to develop constitutional principles in communications domestically, but also its motivation to portray Russia as a global player that shares international norms with the rest of the global community.¹²⁶ At the time of its introduction, the *Law on Mass Media* was one of the most liberal media laws in the world. As a group of Russian theorists points out, the principles intrinsic to the first pieces of media legislation were designed to correspond to international standards set forth in many international documents, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and the *Council of Europe’s Special Declaration on the Media and Human Rights* (1970), which ‘in many ways became the guidelines of the legal policy on the information sphere in Russia’.¹²⁷ Yet, these norms, for all their democratic nature, failed to become an effective legal watchdog over freedom of information, mainly because of the lack of detail concerning the mechanisms through which constitutional rights to information and transparency should be implemented.¹²⁸

The experience of the First Chechen War revealed the negative political effects that an independent media system can produce for state legitimacy, and underlined the government’s inability to control the news cycle. While these developments prompted the state to centralise control of the mainstream media outlets using economic instruments, legal regulation of the information sphere remained rather loose throughout 2000s.¹²⁹ But following a rapid acceleration in Internet penetration and the subsequent expansion of audiences of online

124 Russian Federation, *The Constitution of the Russian Federation* (Garant-Internet, 1993).

125 Ibid.

126 Vilkov et al., *Političeskaja funkcional'naja sovermennyx rossijskix SMP*, p. 48.

127 Ibid.

128 Igor’ Ivanovič Lukašuk, *Sredstva massovoj informacii, gosudarstvo, pravo* [Mass Media, State, Law] (Moscow: Stolnyj grad, 2007), p. 34.

129 The only exceptions may be the Federal Law ‘On Countering Extremist Activity’ (25 July 2002) that prohibits the abuse of ‘freedom of mass information’, the Federal Law ‘On Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection’ (27 July 2006), and the Federal Law ‘On Providing Access to Information on the Activities of State Bodies and Local Self-government Bodies’ (9 February 2009).

news platforms, the necessity to assert greater control over the Internet domain became more acute for the Russian authorities.¹³⁰

Digitisation and Alternative Media

Beneath the monolithic discourses of state-run television there has been a considerable increase in the diversity of both media platforms available to the wider Russian public and the views that such outlets present. Along with the liberal newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and the satellite TV channel *Dozhd*, the early 2010s saw a proliferation of such influential independent online platforms as lenta.ru (no longer independent) and snob.ru, as well as blogs written by political activists such as Alexey Navalny, which altered the dynamics of the Russian information space by providing alternative voices and news sources.¹³¹ The significance of such platforms became apparent to the government following a wave of popular protests ‘For Fair Elections’ in 2011–12, when audiences of *Dozhd* and lenta.ru rose substantially.¹³²

Fearing a domestic uprising (especially in the light of the events of 2014 in neighbouring Ukraine), the authorities resorted to active legal measures aimed at regulating the wider information space beyond the domain of the mainstream media. During Putin’s previous presidential term (2012–18), new legislation had been introduced to protect the public from extremism and terrorism. Yet, as numerous international observers pointed out, the laws have done more to undermine freedom of expression and the right to privacy in Russia than to protect the public from external and domestic threats.¹³³ This can be explained by the government’s apparent willingness to extend its powers of online surveillance and censorship domestically, and by the judiciary’s inclination to side with the executive authorities in the vast majority of cases, refusing to apply constitutional provisions protecting the basic rights of journalists and Internet users.¹³⁴

Driven by insecurity among political elites in the face of civil unrest in Russia, the new legislation provided the government with a ‘series of repressive, vaguely

130 Maria Kravčenko and Aleksandr Verxovskij, ‘[Neppravomernoe primenenie antiĕkstremistskogo zakonodatel’sva v Rossii v 2015 godu](#)’ [Illegal Application of Anti-extremism Legislation in Russia in 2015], Sova Center, 2 March 2016.

131 Regina Smyth and Sarah Oates, ‘Mind the Gaps: Media Use and Mass Action in Russia’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, Issue 2 (2015): 289.

132 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

133 Freedom House, ‘[Russia](#)’, in *Freedom of the Press 2016* (New York, NY: Freedom House, 2016); Reporters Without Borders, ‘[World Press Freedom Index. Russia](#)’, 2017.

134 Freedom House, ‘[Russia](#)’, in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 7.

worded measures that significantly expanded the array of regulatory tools available to stifle legitimate news reporting on politically embarrassing issues and limit the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on media matters'.¹³⁵ The most influential of these measures were an increase in powers of enforcement for several state communications agencies, the introduction of a controversial array of laws aimed at countering extremist activities, and a dramatic increase in detentions and prosecutions of online activists.

State Authorities and Online Censorship

Since early 2003, when Russia's Internet penetration across the country was below 10 per cent, the number of people with access to the worldwide web has significantly expanded to over 70 per cent in March 2017.¹³⁶ According to the Public Opinion Foundation, this figure represents about 82.4 million Russians who go online at least once a month.¹³⁷ The average monthly cost of Internet access is approximately 1 per cent of an average salary, which indicates the relative affordability of access to the worldwide web for the majority of Russia's population.¹³⁸ Another report *On the Runet Economy 2014–2015* conducted by the Higher School of Economics suggests that only 4 per cent of Russians cannot afford to access the Internet.¹³⁹ Like elsewhere in the world, the report suggests, rapid expansion in the number of Internet users coupled with increased speed and volume of communication resulted in fundamental changes in the very nature of communication practices, making them more personal and interactive.¹⁴⁰

These developments prompted the Russian government to significantly expand the powers of the main state body working in the field of mass media and communications—the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).¹⁴¹ Established to register media content and issue licences for activities related to television broadcasting, in July 2012 Roskomnadzor was granted the power to block

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135 Freedom House, 'Russia', in *Freedom of the Press 2012*.

136 FOM (Fond Obščestvennoe Mnenie) Public Opinion Foundation, 'Internet v Rosii: dinamika pronikinovenija', [The Internet in Russia: Dynamics of Penetration], Spring 2017.

137 Ibid.

138 Freedom House, 'Russia', in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 3.

139 Sergej Gennad'evič Davydov and Karen Aleksandrovič Kazar'jan (eds.), *Èkonomika Runeta. Èkonomika ryнков internet-servisov i kontenta v Rossii 2014–2015* [The Economics of Runet: The Economics of Internet Services and Content Markets in Russia 2014–2015], (Moscow: Associacija èlektronnyx kommunikacii and Nacionaľnnyj issledovatel'skij universitet 'Vyššaja škola èkonomiki', 2016), p. 5.

140 Ibid.

141 Sergej Karpukhin, *Media Regulation in Russia: A Landscape Analysis of Laws and Trends*, (Reuters, DLA Piper Rus Limited, 2016), p. 13.

access to Internet sites that refuse to remove certain kinds of information and to demand that journalists disclose their sources when writing on particular issues.¹⁴² These measures apply primarily to information about suicide, drug propaganda, child pornography, materials that violate copyright, as well as content calling for ‘participation in extremist activities’ or ‘unsanctioned public protests’.¹⁴³ The wording of the amendment to the law that introduced these changes is strikingly vague, enabling Roskomnadzor to pressure and block politically undesirable providers, and thus ridding Russia’s information space of alternative points of view on the political, economic, social, and cultural processes taking place in the country.¹⁴⁴

The independent non-profit organisation Roskomsvoboda (‘Rus-com-freedom’) promotes ideas of freedom of information and constantly monitors blocked content. It observes that 7,954,722 websites have been blocked since the introduction of the law in 2012, 97 per cent of them illegally.¹⁴⁵ Along with Roskomnadzor, the powers of filtering and blocking content were also granted to the Ministry of Interior, the Prosecutor General’s Office, the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor), and the Federal Drug Control Service.¹⁴⁶ Online content associated with Crimea and political activism continue to be areas of particular concern for such bodies.

For instance, a number of Ukrainian news websites, such as liga.net and correspondent.net, were blocked in Russia and Crimea for posting quotations from the head of the Crimean Tatar movement in Ukraine, who vocally opposes Russia’s annexation of the peninsula.¹⁴⁷ Also, in May 2016 Roskomnadzor unilaterally blocked a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty project ‘Crimea. Realities’, which reported on the state of affairs in Crimea, on the grounds of extremism and incitement of inter-ethnic hatred.¹⁴⁸ The decision was taken jointly with the Russian Federal Security Service of the Republic of Crimea to open a criminal case against ‘Crimea.Realities’ based on Part 2 of Article 280.1 of the Criminal Code (public calls aimed at violation of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, committed with the use of the media or the

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142 Ibid., p. 15.

143 Ibid.

144 Freedom House, ‘Russia’, in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 5; Roskomsvoboda, *Zakonoproekt o novyx polnomočijax Roskomnadzora* [Legislation on the New Powers of Rospotrebnadzor], 16 January 2017.

145 Roskomsvoboda, *Raspredelenie blokirikov sajtov po vedomostvam* [The Distribution of Blocked Sites across Departments], 2017.

146 Freedom House, ‘Russia’, in *Freedom of the Net 2016*, p. 5.

147 SOVA, ‘Xronika filtracii Runeta № 02’ [Chronology of Runet Filtration № 02], Moscow, 29 February 2016.

148 TASS, ‘Sajt internet-izdanija “Krym Reali” zablokirovan v Rossii’ [The Website of the Internet Publication ‘Crimea. Realities’ is Blocked in Russia], 12 May 2016.

Internet). Openly silencing alternative platforms and opinions, these measures met with fierce criticism from users of Runet, who then created and shared detailed guidelines on how to bypass filtering and blocking restrictions imposed by the state.¹⁴⁹

Even more public resonance resulted from government attempts to censor online content on domestic political activism.¹⁵⁰ To date, the famous Russian political activist Alexey Navalny has been the most effective member of the opposition in gaining political capital through new media platforms and raising his profile through scandals associated with restrictions of basic freedoms of expression. In 2017, the politician and members of his Fight Against Corruption Foundation conducted an investigation into Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The results were published in a fifty-minute-long video on YouTube. Since 2 March 2017 the video has been viewed over 24 million times. It has produced widespread outrage in Russia, inspiring popular anti-corruption protests across the country in March 2017 following the refusal of the Prosecutor General's Office to conduct any investigation into what the video claimed to be 'Medvedev's personal empire worth 70bn rubles'.¹⁵¹ The Moscow Court, in turn, recognised the shared information as false and intended to discredit the honour, dignity, and reputation of the top state official. The Court obliged Navalny to retract the facts presented in the video and to remove the website, film, and other videos covered by the investigation from the Internet.¹⁵² Yet, despite numerous requests from Roskomnadzor, to both Navalny and YouTube asking that access to the video be blocked, no action has followed.¹⁵³

Ultimately, this episode reveals the state's inability to completely silence independent voices contradicting the Kremlin's official narrative and exposing infractions of law by high profile officials. Notably, during the protests in Spring 2017, opposition groups led by Navalny used Facebook to coordinate their actions effectively, attracting more than 25,000 participants in Moscow, and many more in urban centres across Russia.¹⁵⁴ While the protests did not lead to the development of a lasting social movement, they showed that social

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149 Krymr.com, 'Kak obojti blokirovku Krym. Reali' [How to Bypass the Blocking of Crimea. Realities], 2017.

150 Steve Gutterman, 'Russia Blocks Internet Sites of Putin Critics', *Reuters*, 13 March 2014.

151 BBC, 'Genprokuratura otkazalas' proverjat' fil'm "On vam ne Dimon" ' [The Prosecutor General's Office Refused to Check the Film "He's not Dimon"]', 23 June 2017.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

154 BBC, 'Miting v Moskve obernulsja rekordnym kolicestvom zaderzani' [The Rally in Moscow Turned into a Record Number of Detentions], 27 March 2017.

mobilisation in Russia (at least on such a modest scale) is not impossible.¹⁵⁵ Comprising mainly Russians under the age of thirty-five, the protests not only highlighted the growing significance of the Internet as a medium of exchange and communication in Russia, but also demonstrated its resistance to hierarchies imposed by the government.

Yarovaya Laws

The introduction of the Federal laws 374-FZ and 375-FZ on counterterrorism in July 2016 (widely known as the ‘Yarovaya Laws’ after their key author Irina Yarovaya) represent another decisive attempt by the Russian state to increase government control over Runet. The laws introduced an increase in the mandatory data retention period from twelve hours to six months for content (recordings of calls, messages, and Internet traffic of Russian citizens) and from one to three years for metadata (dates, times, and places where calls or messages occurred).¹⁵⁶ Providers and Internet platforms included in the ‘register of information dissemination bodies on the Internet’ were also called on to store all user traffic for at least six months and make all necessary data available to security and law enforcement agencies upon request.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, Internet and telecommunications companies are now mandated to decipher requested information as well as keep cryptographic backdoors in all messaging applications.¹⁵⁸

Such measures are deemed necessary by the Russian government in order to ‘defend the Russian population against the global terrorist threat’ and combat extremism at home.¹⁵⁹ However, telecommunications companies, civil society groups, and the wider Russian public strictly oppose the laws, calling them ‘expensive, unrealistic, and unconstitutional’.¹⁶⁰ Most observers tend to agree with the latter and point to the fact that successful implementation of regulations associated with storage and encryption of data as prescribed by the law is virtually impossible for a number of reasons.

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155 Andrej Alekseevič Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia’s Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).

156 Tanya Lokshina, ‘Draconian Law Rammed through Russian Parliament: Outrageous Provisions to Curb Speech, Privacy, Freedom of Conscience’, *Human Rights Watch*, 23 June 2016.

157 *Meduza*, ‘“Paket Jarovoj” priijat bol’she polugoda nazad. Kak on rabotaet?’ [The ‘Yarovaya Package’ was Adopted More than Six Months Ago: How is it Working?], 12 February 2017.

158 *Ibid.*

159 Roskomsvoboda, ‘Mnenie graždan, podpisavšix peticiju ob otmene “paketa Jarovoj”, vlastjam neinteresno (tekst rezoljucii i otzvyvy gosvedomstv)’ [The Opinion of Citizens who Signed the Petition to Cancel the “Yarovaya Package” is Not Interesting for the Authorities (Text of the Resolution and the Responses of State Agencies)], 19 January 2017.

160 *Meduza*, ‘“Paket Jarovoj” ubivaet internet-kompanii i pokušaetsja na častuju žizn’. I vot počemu’ [The ‘Yarovaya package’ Kills Internet Companies and Violates Privacy. This is Why], 24 June 2016.

First, according to some estimates, in order to store all data transmitted by Russian users, the world's biggest producers of data centres would have to focus exclusively on the Russian market for seven years in order to create enough infrastructure for storing and processing such huge amount of information.¹⁶¹

Second, according to Russia's Association of Electronic Communications, there is simply not enough electricity in the central part of the country to power data centres that have not even been built yet.¹⁶² Also, such an infrastructure, which would cost telecommunications companies more than 5 trillion roubles, is not currently being produced in Russia and would have to be imported from abroad.¹⁶³ The law does not allow for any state subsidies for developing domestic infrastructure, thus burdening telecommunications companies with colossal expenses that might eventually bankrupt them.

Third, considering the diversity of encryption methods available both in Russia and abroad, successful enforcement of this law would require new methods of encryption that would somehow work with all of the existing ones, as foreign companies will not support domestic technologies.¹⁶⁴ Even if development of a storage center for all encryption keys were possible, the entire system would be rendered extremely vulnerable to hacking, making it possible to decipher any Russian message.¹⁶⁵

And finally, the new laws violate the right of Russian citizens to the secrecy of correspondence guaranteed by the Constitution. This right can be violated only by a court decision; but Yarovaya's legislation requires law enforcement agencies to have access to all data without court authorisation. Currently most messengers use encryption—an important competitive advantage—as users are interested in safeguarding their correspondence. Such threats to the security and inviolability of the private lives of Russian citizens provoked many public organisations, such as the Russian Electronic Communications Association (RAEC) and the Regional Public Center for Internet Technologies (ROCIT), to speak out against the adoption of this legislation, inspiring a petition against the application of the law. The petition was signed by over 100,000 people, but was nevertheless ignored by the authorities.¹⁶⁶

161 Roskomsvobosda, 'V Gosdume primajut zakonoproekt o total'noj slezke. IT-otrasl' i obščestvo konsolirovano vystipajut protiv' [The State Duma Adopts a Bill on Total Surveillance. The IT Industry and Society are Against It], 26 June 2016.

162 Meduza, '“Paket Jarovoj” ubivaet internet-kompanii'.

163 Ibid.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid.

166 Roskomsvobosda, 'Mnenie graždan'.

It is evident that democratic principles initially introduced in the Russian Constitution are not being upheld in the current political environment. With the majority of independent communications and public activity taking place online, an attempt to control the Runet domain has become a subject of prime importance for Russian policy-makers, especially following the public protests in 2011 and 2017 and the annexation of Crimea. Government attempts to expand control over the online information space represent a considerable milestone on this path. But this also produced intense debates and disillusionment domestically, which provoked more protests and greater scrutiny on the part of international institutions regarding breaches of constitutional freedoms by the proposed legislation.

Ultimately, blacklisting websites promoting ‘unsanctioned public gatherings’ and ‘extremism’, and likewise the Yarovaya Laws, have proven to be of limited efficacy in regulating the virtual domain of the Russian information space. This is due to the fact that such laws cannot reach far enough (e.g. failure to pressure YouTube to delete a video compromising a high profile official) and the fact that they set unrealistic expectations, which are very difficult to achieve in practice. While the mainstream media is more susceptible to controls imposed by the government, so far attempts to regulate the Internet have been rather limited. Still, this remains a matter of prime significance to some Russian policy-makers and scholars, who consistently emphasise the dangers that open, networked information media on the Internet present to Russia, both domestically and internationally.

Conclusion

There are numerous approaches to conceptualising information space in Russian scholarship, from the increasingly networked planetary informational society of the noosphere to purely territorial understandings of zones of geopolitical informational influence. Within this wide range, however, arguments emphasising the prominence of ever-increasing global connectivity through the proliferation of horizontal, open-ended communication networks have been clearly overshadowed by territorial approaches in Russia’s policy discourse. This is mostly due to the Kremlin’s reliance on notions of sovereignty and non-intervention in the information sphere, rooted in the premise that Western countries and organisations, especially the US and NATO, use media and Internet networks as foreign policy tools aimed at provoking civil unrest in Russia.

This article has described the Kremlin's approach to controlling the domestic information domain, arguing that the government has not been able to establish complete control over Russia's information space. While it has undoubtedly secured the ability to shape discourses in the mainstream media, it has clearly enjoyed only limited success in the new, increasingly Internet-dominated media spaces, where state-controlled television and oppositional online platforms are separated by a mouse-click. Even though television remains the major news source for the majority of Russians, recent acts of political and social activism organised through online platforms and triggered by state policies of greater surveillance and censorship of Runet, clearly point to the ever-growing importance of the Internet as a medium of communication in Russia. Moreover, as the above analysis suggests, the delocalised and highly networked nature of this medium of communication makes it less vulnerable in the face of economic and legal pressures imposed by the government, as opposed to the hierarchically organised structures of the mainstream media.

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