

## Comrades Online?: How the Russian Case Challenges the Democratising Potential of the Internet

Sarah Oates, Politics Department, University of Glasgow G12 8RT Scotland UK

Email: [s.oates@lbs.gla.ac.uk](mailto:s.oates@lbs.gla.ac.uk)

Website: [www.media-politics.com](http://www.media-politics.com)

### **Paper prepared for**

### **Politics: Web 2.0: An International Conference**

New Political Communication Unit, Department of Politics and International Relations,  
Royal Holloway, University of London, April 17-18, 2008

#### *Abstract:*

When considering the rhetoric about the political potential of Web 2.0, it would appear that Russia is still mired in Web 0.0. Unlike some evidence from the West or even other post-Soviet states such as Ukraine, the internet does not provide a balance to the biased traditional media in Russia. What particular factors have led to a relative lack of political importance of the internet in Russia? Why is there little political discussion and debate on the Russian Web to make up for the lack of a lively political discourse in the traditional mass media? This paper discusses how the Russian case provides evidence for the notion that national media norms tend to overwhelm international models about the democratising potential of the internet. Without resorting to an elaborate censorship strategy as in China, the Russian government has been effective at maintaining an authoritative voice via the broadcast media while marginalising political news and discussion online. In addition, evidence from a recent study of Russian blogs by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford has found compelling reasons for why the internet isn't playing a role in Russian political life. The Russian case illuminates how national media norms can neutralise much of the democratizing potential of the internet, highlighting the need for the comparative study of the internet within national contexts.

There is a joke from the series of ‘changing the light bulb’ gags that goes like this: How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one – but the light bulb really has to *want* to change. This joke serves as an introduction to the notion in this paper, that we have focused too much on the universal qualities of the internet rather than on the political context in which the internet is deployed. Much of the study of the internet as a political communication tool has examined the qualities of the medium that sit outside the normal ways in which we understand our national media systems to function. The internet, by its ability to provide instant and simultaneous communication that blurs the line between news producer and consumers, can fundamentally change the way in which information is distributed. Fitting into this school of thought is the notion that this information can then re-arrange power structures, taking control away from elites and spreading it into the masses in a more democratic manner. I overstate slightly here, in that those who study the internet are cautious to test and measure the extent to which the internet has achieved these goals. However, I believe it is fair to suggest that there has been the expectation, based on the features of the internet, that the online sphere could deliver political change (for better or worse) that either transformed or transcended national political institutions. At the same time, there has been a relative neglect of trying to establish how existing media norms, particularly on the national level, have structured the use and influence of the internet. Much like recalcitrant light bulbs, it is not so much about whether the internet is available, but how citizens perceive the value of the use of the internet that would appear to be the critical impetus for change.

This paper will discuss this in the context of Russia, a country in which the internet appears to have relatively little political impact. This is quite intriguing, as many analysts of the post-Soviet political space have emphasized the importance of access to political information as key to growth of political institutions, particularly parties and social-action networks. However, despite the presence of the internet, Russia has remained a relatively authoritarian state in which political parties and grass-roots organisations have had little role to play. Can the Russian experience help us to understand the way in which national political systems constrain and shape the democratizing features of the internet? Part of the impetus for this paper come from a discussion I had a few months ago with a graduate student (Jack Gallagher), who is writing a dissertation on U.S. political blogs at the University of Glasgow. We were discussing the fact that there was little comparative work to be done with Britain, as Britain lacks the vibrant blogging culture that is found in the U.S. political sphere. This led us to a discussion of the possible reasons for this difference – including the structure of candidate-based rather than party-based elections in the United States; a more vibrant history of debate in British parties and parliament that rendered online debate less needful in Britain; a relative lack of interest in the internet on the part of Brits when compared with the internet-mad American middle class; or even culture differences that made overt campaigning online less attractive to British citizens. Whatever the reason, the evidence is clear – while there is compelling evidence of significant political activity online the United States, there is much less in the United Kingdom. What accounts for this marked difference? It would appear to be national characteristics rather than any particular feature of the internet. Thus, the internet offers essentially the same communication opportunity to citizens in the United States

and the United Kingdom, but Americans are using it measurably different way than Brits. As with the light bulb, is it about *wanting* change?

### International Internet Models vs. National Media Models

There are three central paradigms that encompass much of the internet studies literature. These are the cyber-optimist, cyber-pessimist and cyber-sceptic views. It is now generally recognised that characterising the internet as a) a force for good; b) a force for evil; or c) something in between is not useful in terms of social science inquiry. This is a bit of an unfair critique, as within these paradigms is some extremely useful research into the role of the internet in the political sphere. Notably, Pippa Norris' discussion of the digital divide as well as the notion of the 'virtuous circle' in that media use enhances citizenship are both examples of useful ways to contribute to the understanding of the internet and the role of the media in the political sphere more generally (Norris, 2000, 2001). In addition, the field has moved on to more specific hypothesis formation, including coding of how political parties use the Web (such as Gibson and Ward, 2000, Gibson, Resnick and Ward, 2003; Lusoli & Jankowski, 2005). In addition, much of the study of the internet focuses on how it may enhance existing political institutions within a particular country (such as Linaa Jensen 2006; Lusoli and Ward 2006, Wright, 2006). There is some study of how the internet might bring democracy into a country that is undemocratic in nature. In particular (and unsurprisingly), there has been a focus on probing for signs that the internet is a democratizing force in China. Even in this rather extreme example, in that China has a combination of burgeoning internet use, a growing market economy and repressive state laws to monitor the internet for spreading political dissent, there is no real agreement between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists. It would seem that, from the evidence gathered in China, it is not clear whether the internet can be a significant tool for delivering democratisation to a country (Hartford, 2000; Polunbaum 2001; Chadwick, 2006; Abbott 2001, Harwit and Clark, 2001; Reporters Without Borders, 2005; Taubman, 1998). Arguably, most of these studies pre-date the spread of Web 2.0 and its greater potential to personalise, popularise and spread political messages through social networks. However, it would be expected that the Chinese authorities could continue to monitor the internet with their multi-level filtering regime (from production to content to the internet users themselves).

This leaves us with the question of how we structure a 'model' of the democratising potential of the internet. The existing cyber-paradigms are simply too broad, but other studies have dealt with only particular aspects of the internet. This is logical, in that trying to construct a sort of international meta-theory of the internet's democratising ability would be a broad, difficult and probably fruitless task. We are left with the basic qualities of the internet that we know offer the potential for democratisation. I would summarise those as the following (Oates, 2008):

1. A low-cost (often virtually no-cost) ability to distribute information to a potentially limitless global audience;
2. Potential freedom from editorial filter and controls;

3. Relative freedom from national media control and an ability to build an international audience;
4. An interactive environment in which people can easily cross from being news consumers to news producers.

How do these known elements of the internet map onto our understanding of the role of the media in the political sphere via national media models? National media models are themselves rather contentious, in that some scholars feel that the relationship between the media and the state can be best understood via national models (Siebert et al., 1994; Hallin and Mancini, 2003) while others believe that it makes more sense to look at this as a power relationship that is not particularly tied to a national culture and structure (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Sparks, 2000). We can see that the elements of the internet listed above would intersect differently if one were conceptualising of the media via a national system or a power system. However, in both cases it would appear that the particular features of the internet would allow citizens to circumvent barriers via news cycles, news norms, ownership controls, access, editorial issues, censorship and other controls in order to communicate amongst one another. Yet, as I realised in the conversation with a graduate student, this isn't how it happens. Realistically speaking, the internet in a particular country is arguably better understood via the norms of the national media environment and system than through the four 'universal' potentials of the internet listed above. If these democratising elements of the media were indeed deployed more or less equally across national boundaries, then you would expect much more challenge to political elites and the status quo than currently exist. Yet, examples of this are relatively rare (as those who must prepare lectures or texts on internet and protest will realise). For example, the story of the Chiapas people in Mexico using the internet to attract international support to their cause is still routinely cited in textbooks (including my own), yet it happened 13 years ago. Where are the others revolts that follow the Chiapas model? Where is the challenge to the political status quo that it would appear the internet has the ability to deliver?

I would argue the answer lies in the way in which national political institutions and culture shape – and usually tame -- the potential of the internet. The notion that a nation can subvert the democratising potential of an international communications tool might at first seem unlikely. However, using the Russian case to examine how communication tools can promote undemocratic notions provide compelling evidence for this idea. There are a range of different levels of analysis to consider, some of which are not an explicit part of the media models suggested by Hallin and Mancini or Siebert et al. Those models tend to focus most closely on the relationship of the state to the media system. In fact, it is important to consider the different levels that define this relationship, from news production to the audience itself. In terms of research focus, it is key to consider the factors that shape the production of news within a country (such as political environment, media norms, media regulations, media ownership and the journalistic profession), the media content itself and the audience. What follows is not a systematic study of all of these elements; rather, it attempts to consider all of these issues.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One key point that is not considered in this paper is trust, particularly the level and depth of trust in the internet. This is a complicated area. Although researchers are aware that levels of trust in the internet vary

## The Russian Media and the Internet

From a distance, Russia provides a communications paradox in that there is so much information and so little democracy. The country has a wealth of media outlets and a range of opinions that are expressed in broadcast, print and internet outlets. The economic stability of the Russian media, in particular television, increased steadily as the Russian economy improved under Putin (Kachkaeva, Kiriya & Libergal, 2006). Yet, in some ways it would appear that the contemporary Russian media has more to do with the Soviet media than any Western model (Oates, 2007). In Soviet times, the media served the interests of the ruling elite in the Communist Party as described by the Soviet Model of the press in Siebert et al. Even through the glasnost period (1985-1991), the Soviet media appeared not to transform itself from a voice for political players to a voice of the citizens. Diversity of media did develop, yet the idea of the media as 'objective' or 'balanced' has never been widely adopted. All segments of Russian society, from politicians to the public to the journalists themselves, perceive the mass media as a political player rather than as a watchdog that can provide a check on political power (Pasti, 2005; Voltmer, 2000; Oates, 2007).

Analysts persist in calling Russia a 'developing democracy' (perhaps more out of hope than accuracy), but there is clear evidence that the country has not developed meaningful democratic institutions such as effective political parties, a strong legislature, an independent judiciary or a Fourth Estate in the media. There is the appearance of democratic institutions in *form*, including a range of media outlets with various types of ownership, elections, parliament, and a popularly elected president, but these institutions lack democratic *content*. The mass media generally echo a charade of democratic interaction, particularly on the influential state-run television channels. Attempt to challenge the government on key issues such as corruption at the top, the progress of war in Chechnya, bribery, or the unfairness of the leadership is not tolerated. For example, the majority stockholder of the most prominent commercial television station was arrested in 2001 and his station was then 'sold' to forces friendly to the government (Oates, 2006). Russia has been labelled by international media freedom organizations as particularly bad in terms of treatment of journalists, for whom there is a real fear of menace, physical threat, and even death. As a result, the media work virtually unanimously to support the policies of the central leaders in a disturbing echo of the Soviet model of the media.

If we are trying to see what part the internet can play in the Russian media sphere, what does the traditional media landscape in Russia look like? Russia has a mix of ownership across all levels of print and broadcasting. National newspapers are relatively expensive and many people simply cannot afford the luxury of a subscription. The same is true for satellite television, which is generally for well-off people in the urban centres. As a result, the central television stations in Russia retain a particular political influence that they now lack in the United States and the United Kingdom. The dominant networks (broadcast on Channels 1 and 2 on the television dial) are the state-run First Channel and

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both between countries and within countries themselves (particularly in terms of age and education), there needs to be more reflection on trust and media generally.

state-owned Russian Television and Radio (RTR). There has been steady growth in the television sphere, with the number of channels that half of the Russian nation could receive increased from five in 2004 to nine in 2006 (Kachkaeva, Kiriya and Libergal, 2006). Self-censorship is endemic in the journalism industry, with only a few examples of confrontation with the Kremlin 'line' on sensitive subjects such as Chechnya.<sup>2</sup> Employees of all media outlets are well aware of the limits of what can be said on air or in print. This parallels the Soviet experience of journalists, in which the action of a censor was rarely needed, as Soviet journalists understood the party 'line' and the way all stories should be formulated from their first day on the job. Even if there are certain topics that get little meaningful coverage, there is a lot of news in general. There are more than 400 newspaper titles (more than during the Soviet era), but most of them are quite small and struggle financially (BBC, February 21, 2007).<sup>3</sup> In addition, all prominent newspapers toe the Kremlin line. There is some radio news, including the relatively liberal Echo of Moscow radio station, but radio nationwide provides little serious alternative news.

So why can't the internet fill this gap? In order to address this query, it is important to consider the nature of the Russian internet. What is the state of the internet, including content, control and audience (internet usage) in Russia? Where does it fit in the media mix? Perhaps most significantly for this paper, where does the Russian internet link into the political sphere? More than other types of media, the internet is connected more directly to political institutions (social actions groups, NGOs, parties in some countries, local governance, etc.) than other types of media because of its ability to aggregate interests. Is there something distinct about the Russian internet that is preventing it from becoming an effective tool for democratization and political mobilization? Is there something about the media sphere in general? Or is the actual dearth of political outlets and opportunities for mobilization the relevant problem in blocking democratization? In other words, does the internet simply exist, like so many other political institutions in Russia, in an isolated sphere, unable to spark political change because aggregated interests have no ability to take action. On an even more worrying note, what happens in the (relatively rare) instance when interests are aggregated online? This is addressed through a recent study of Russian blogs by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The most prominent Russian opposition journalist, *Novaya Gazeta* reporter Anna Politkovskaya, was assassinated in October 2006 in the lift of her apartment building. No one has been convicted of her murder. The Committee to Protect Journalists has estimated that 29 journalists were killed in a decade in post-Soviet Russia. Many have died covering the wars in Chechnya, but the organization estimated that at least 11 (not including Politkovskaya) were murdered in contract-style killings in the four years after Putin came to power in 2000.

<sup>3</sup> As part of its remit, the BBC monitors media outlets from around the world. This report is available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4315129.stm>

<sup>4</sup> This information was collected for the project 'Mapping Russia's Internet for Civil and Uncivil Society' at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University. The study was funded by the Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation Network. A preliminary report, presented at a seminar at St Antony's College, Oxford in January 2008, was written by Valeria Ahmetieva, Floriana Fossato, John Lloyd and Alexander Verkhovsky. The group plan to post their final report on the Institute website at <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/>. I am very grateful to the report authors for their insights, which contributed to both the factual and conceptual notions in this paper.

### *Russian Internet Audience*

The Russian audience is particularly well-educated and attuned to political messages via the news (Oates, 2007). It is true that internet connection, and particularly home-based broadband connection that fosters in-depth online usage, seems to be relatively low in Russia. It is hard to tell, because reliable statistics are hard to come by, although a recent presentation by Julian Cooper (2008) provides an authoritative overview. Cooper cites data from the Russian International Telecommunications Union that shows 2,500 out of every 10,000 Russians were online by 2007. According to Cooper, New Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has announced a goal of raising that rate to every 4,000 out of 10,000 Russians by the end of this year (although how realistic this may be is debatable). While Russia has relatively high internet usage for the former Soviet region, it is low by Western European standards and only about half that of figures for usage in Britain (Cooper). Using economic indicators, Cooper calculates that internet usage in Russia is actually surprising low. There is also some question about the depth of the usage. For example, in some studies it is not clear how often people go online, the quality of their connection and the availability of the connection (e.g. it may be at a shared connection at work, school or in an internet café rather than a home connection). Cooper concludes that Russia is hitting below its weight given its level of economic development and is “to some extent underperforming in rate of diffusion of the internet” (perhaps explained by state of political and civic freedoms) (2008).

### *Russian Internet Content*

While there are well-known, professional websites that address Russian news and politics, many of them reflect the limited spread of news found in the mainstream media. This is not surprising, in that the Web is dominated by mainstream media sites in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. The recent project by the Reuters Institute examined three of the most popular blogs with political content in Russia in an attempt to understand the nature of Web 2.0 in Russia. What they found was a disturbing echo of the dynamics of the Russian traditional media and political elites.

In the Reuters Institute project, researchers examined both the general state of the internet in Russia as well as the Russian blogosphere. They found that 75 percent of Russian language blogs are hosted on five platforms, with Live Journal as the most popular blogging and social networking site. While there is evidence that the Russian blogosphere is growing at a modest pace (with an estimated 7,000 blogs created daily), the Reuters Institute report did not find evidence that Web 2.0 could launch any social change. The researchers noted that Western expectations about the internet’s ability to deploy ‘democratization mechanisms’ were not shared by some Russian analysts of the Russian online sphere. Notably, Russian analysts felt that the Russian political norms would be more likely to be replicated rather than challenged online, such as by being used by elites to discuss politics within a relatively closed circle. It would seem that Russia is *shaping* the internet, rather than Russian society being *shaped by* the internet. This is a particular clear and compelling image of the how the internet is constrained by domestic, rather than international, political communication norms.

The Reuters Institute report found that new communications technology didn't appear to break down 'well-established patterns of power'. Rather, the state (rather than 'netizens' or even citizens) remains the 'main mobilising agent'. Although the Russian internet is a 'powerful disseminator' of information, the Reuters Institute did not find evidence that this information mobilized the masses by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, the case studies analysed by the researchers found that 'this information mobilises mainly closed clusters of like-minded users who only on rare occasions are able and willing to cooperate with other groups'. While this lack of mobilisation is one part of the story – and there is arguably widespread lack of evidence of internet mobilisation in countries such as the United Kingdom – the Reuters Institute report makes a compelling insight into the nature of internet, governance and power by pointing out that the Russian internet is developing as 'another platform that the state uses increasingly successfully to consolidate its power, manipulate and spread messages of stability and unity among the growing number of Russians regularly accessing websites and blogs'. Thus, Russians would appear to be experiencing further political repression from the growth of online communication. In other words, while the state is using the online world to further its non-democratic agenda of citizen compliance and control, the Russians masses seem to have little benefit from the possibly democratizing potential of the internet.

To any serious observers of the Russian political and media sphere, this would not seem to be surprising. In particular, studies of Russian television and the journalism profession more broadly in Russia (Oates 2006; European Institute for the Media 2000a, 2000b, Voltmer 2000, Pasti, 2005) show that the mass media are political players allied with political factions in Russia – as opposed to media in service to the greater political good or even the notion of relatively disinterested dissemination of information. The same relationship that exists among the media, the political elites and the public in the 'traditional' mass media (broadcast and print) would appear to exist in the online world in Russia. This raises the question of whether this is true in other countries as well. In other words, is Russia simply an extreme example of ability of the government to conquer the 'high ground' of the internet communication heights – or is there something about the Russian media sphere itself that makes this inevitable? Is it the traditional relationship of the subservient Russian public that performs 'strong hands' over 'more say' in governance that dictates this role of the internet in the contemporary Russian infosphere? Or does the internet tend to be shaped by national political forces in any country? The Russian case is particularly intriguing in that there is not widespread evidence of heavy-handed censorship through the Russian media sphere (including broadcast and internet). Rather, the Russian *siloviki* (loosely translated as the 'empowered' ones) control the media messages through a strategy of inculcated self-censorship on the part of journalists, selective application of financial/tax laws to shut down alternative voices and the knowledge on the part of journalists that they can be killed in a relatively lawless state by those that they anger with their coverage.

It must be acknowledged, however, that theories about top-down control of the media only go so far in explaining the state of a national media. Part of the puzzle of post-Soviet Russia has been the widespread lack of civic organization and protest. In a way that surprised many Western analysts, robust civic organizations have failed to materialize in

Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In particular, political parties did not become a legitimate political force. There are a number of reasons for this, which have been explored in depth in the political science literature (e.g. see Smyth, 2006; Hutcheson, 2003). To summarise the argument, it would be fair to say that there was significant political manoeuvring on the part of elites to avoid robust civic institutions that would encourage the transfer of real political power outside of a narrow oligarchy. A wide range of public opinion surveys suggest that the Russian public were relatively comfortable with this type of rule – and very supportive in particular of the way in which former president Vladimir Putin ruled the country and muzzled the powers of the parliament. More worrying is the lack of an independent judiciary in Russia, which has left a staggering amount of power in the Kremlin oligarchy. The point is, however, that the failure to aggregate interests online is not isolated. Rather, it reflects a widespread attitude that permeates much Russian political culture. In addition, however, it also echoes a particular pragmatism in that generating political capital with no practical purpose is not worthwhile. If there are no effective political parties, social groups or even a meaningful national parliament, for what purpose does one generate social capital online? It is like amassing a currency that cannot be spent anywhere. Unsurprisingly, Russians do not appear to value this particular social ‘currency’.

#### *Russian Blogs and Elections*

The Reuters Institute project focussed on three Russian blogs, seeking to study those that might be active in the pre-electoral period in late 2007 (Russian Duma elections were held on 2 December 2007, with the presidential contest following in March 2008). In particular, the researchers were looking for evidence that these blogs in some way were able to cultivate political conversations; support the establishment of alliances; support mobilisation; and/or stimulate cross-cultural, political and social dialogue. The blogs that were studied were *Velikaya Rossiya* (Great Russia, political opposition/nationalists with a central blogger named Vladimir Tor/Vladlen Kralin; *Drugaya Rossiya* (Other Russia, political opposition/liberal, blogger Marina Litvinovich) and *Svoboda Vybora* (Free Choice, a motorists interest/support group with blogger Viacheslav Lysakov). Although the full findings have yet to be released,<sup>5</sup> in a presentation on the initial findings in a meeting at Oxford in January the researchers reported that there was substantial evidence that even these prominent blogs held little independent power from the government. This parallels the traditional media sphere in Russia. For example, although Viacheslav Lysakov had been vocal about problems on the Russian roads with accidents caused by speeding bureaucrats in special cars, he was notably less critical after meeting with the government about this issue. Nor did any of the blogs played a meaningful role in the December 2007 parliamentary elections. While some the lack of influence could be ascribed to relatively low internet penetration in Russia, the researchers were particularly concerned by the way in which the blogs failed to fulfil any of the four criteria listed above.

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<sup>5</sup> The findings will be released on the website of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford, see [http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/projects/overview/mapping\\_russias\\_internet\\_for\\_civil\\_and\\_uncivil\\_society.html](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/projects/overview/mapping_russias_internet_for_civil_and_uncivil_society.html)

A parallel finding of the Russian blog study through the Reuters Institute was an interesting development of coding in the blogosphere. The project, in keeping with the idea of the institute, drew on resources of both social science and journalism in trying to 'code' blogs. As those who work in Internet Studies are aware, coding even static webpages can be difficult and time consuming, while separating the possible wheat from the chaff on blogs seems almost impossible. The preliminary findings from the Reuters Institute project suggest that they have found some very promising angles of attack for analysing blogs. Their coding scheme contained the following elements:

- Form of exchange (dialogue/monologue/discussion)
- Type of exchange (emotional/calm call for action/protest)
- News (eyewitness report/video/audio)
- Information/opinion (rational/irrational)

In addition, the Reuters Institute project coded for some intriguing indices, such as an Aggression Index, Rationality Index and Dialogue Index, as well as tracing the number of readers, the number of comments made and the number of comments received. They monitored the central URLs used by the organisations daily in October, November and the first half of December 2007 (the Duma elections were held 2 December 2007). In September 2007, the researchers interviewed the 'gatekeepers' of the three blogs (listed above) and also interviewed 10 Russian internet and politics experts. It is interesting to note that the researchers reported that their interviews with the website gatekeepers were particularly illuminating and revealed that the communication tactics, strategy and goals could not merely be imputed from the web content. This suggests that talking to webmasters, etc., is an important part of research strategies when examining Web 2.0.

In welcome news for internet content analysis practitioners everywhere, the Reuters Institute researchers decided that reading and analysing all information on websites was not particularly useful. Instead, they coined the phrase of looking for 'traces of fires in the forest' in blogs. This means that the key points to study are evident when events and/or discussions create such a large number of postings that it is akin to 'seeing' a forest fire (p. 21). They also found critical and interesting differences in the blogs/websites, which they will present in their final report along with the full details of their methodology.

## Conclusions

Overall, the Reuters Institute study is a gem of its kind. It not only throws light on important features of the Russian blogosphere, but it pushes us to consider how the role of the internet in national politics is constrained by domestic politics. The Reuters Institute researchers found that national politics mattered enormously to the scope and efficacy of the attempts to fulfil their four criteria of online social engineering. This would seem, on the surface, a relatively obvious finding but it is rather important as it forces us to consider the relevance of existing internet *models*. The language about the internet and its role in civil society has tended to focus on the features of the online

sphere that could allow it to transcend 'politics as usual'. As stated above, the internet allows for the low-cost ability to distribute information to a potentially limitless global audience; freedom from editorial filter and controls; relative freedom from national media control and an ability to build an international audience; as well as (as emphasized by this Web 2.0 conference) an interactive environment in which people can easily cross from being news consumers to news producers. Yet, the Reuters Institute report found that these potential linkages are generally dead ends in Russia as information does not translate into political power. There is no mechanism for this to happen in Russia. In addition, there is relatively limited evidence that this even the central attempt of the Russian internet. Rather, there is more evidence that the Russian internet provides more 'business as usual' in the Russian media sphere, in which information is deployed in support of the elites as opposed for the true mobilization of the masses. While the debate over whether the audience can best be thought of as citizens or consumers continues in the West, in Russia the media audience can perhaps best be understand as still 'comrades' in the communist sense. Comrades in the offline media world, they would appear to remain comrades in the online world as well.

Where does this leave us? Unsurprisingly for a political science paper, I will say this leaves us needing more research. Specifically, I would say this leaves us with the need for careful, cross-national research that uses evidence from a range of countries to try to model the interaction between the democratizing potential of the internet (especially Web 2.0) and the constraints of national political systems.

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