

Revolution Stalled

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Revolution Stalled

THE POLITICAL LIMITS OF THE INTERNET
IN THE POST-SOVIET SPHERE

SARAH OATES

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Acknowledgments

This book was produced at a time of fundamental change in political communication. Not only was the internet transforming the information sphere, it was changing how people studied the information sphere as well. Thus, from a time when studying the Russian media meant huddling over VCRs in cold Moscow apartments and painstakingly gathering a handful of people for focus groups, the field has moved on to an embarrassment of research riches. Not only can one now watch (and record) Russian television online, the information sphere has widened out to the huge sprawl of the Russian internet. The lone scholar cannot hope to tame this information tide.

This book benefits from the work of a vast range of scholars and analysts, only some of whom I will be able to mention here. In-depth and interesting reports on the Russian internet from the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard, Internews, the *Digital Icons* online journal, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, and the Center for New Media and Society at the New Economic School in Moscow make a significant contribution to this book. In addition, I would like to thank individual scholars who have been helpful in collaboration, comments, answering endless questions, and helping me to keep up in the ever-changing sphere of internet studies (as well as Russian politics), including Luciano Floridi, Floriana Fossato, Sam Greene, Gillian McCormack, and Regina Smyth. Particular insight on contemporary Russian media was provided by faculty at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, including Anna Kachkaeva (who kindly provided the photo for the book's cover) and Sergey Davydov. Insights from academics at the Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg, including Olessia Koltseva, also were helpful in completing this book.

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a book and—the next thing you know—the region under study starts to have significant online protests. I do not think they can be held responsible for the Arab Spring or the Russian winter protests of 2011–12, but they are responsible for inspiring, coaxing, chivvying, encouraging, and generally bearing with the pangs of creating a book in a fast-moving, dynamic, and fascinating field.

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Introduction

In December 2011, the internet transformed a flawed Russian election into a massive protest movement, bringing huge street demonstrations, arrests, and clashes with police, and crystallizing online solidarity into a visible opposition to the Russian regime. In a matter of days, the expectations for routine, albeit rather unfair, elections were overturned and Russian leaders found themselves in uncharted political territory. Yet what seemed to be a wave of protest unleashed from the online sphere was, in fact, the result of several different factors within Russian politics and society that had been evolving over a number of years. The protests in the winter of 2011–12 were a manifestation of many forces, some of them grounded in the online sphere and some of them in traditional post-Soviet politics. This book seeks to define, explore, and analyze these factors. In doing this, not only can we understand the specific convergence of forces that created the Russian protests, but we also can apply comparative experience and theory to the Russian case. This can allow us to build a model for understanding how, why, and even when the online sphere becomes an overwhelming catalyst for protest and change in non-free states.

This “winter of discontent” in Russia took many by surprise, both inside and outside of the Russian Federation. Until December 2011, there was little compelling evidence that the internet had made a significant difference in Russian mainstream politics. The country remained a state in which there is relatively little opportunity for democratic movement and consolidation. While there are regular elections, a large media sphere, a parliament, and some debate in society, there is no consistent rule of law or widespread equality of political opportunity. Rather, Russia is an oligarchic regime with a market economy, relatively peaceful in the years of prosperity brought about by the booming world market for natural resources. The war in Chechnya continues—as do terrorist attacks on Russian soil—but there is little serious dissent or discussion about the war in Russian media or society. While Dmitri Medvedev was the first Russian president to launch a website and produce regular podcasts, they were top-down messages

from a Kremlin elite that continues to manipulate the media, elections, parliament, and the regions for its own interests.

Medvedev's podcasts and the Kremlin website itself are emblematic of the challenge of analyzing the role of the internet in democracy, repression, and possible revolution. Cyber-optimists point to the democratizing elements of the internet that empower the common citizen. After all, Medvedev and the Kremlin website offered far more information and opportunity for engagement than any other national Russian leader had in the past, as do myriad websites from levels of Russian governance ranging from the national to the local. Yet what difference does this information make for the citizens of Russia? They are free to read about their president online, and millions more Russians have become active online since Medvedev gave his first podcast in 2008. Russians are even free to send him an e-mail and, unlike on the U.S. White House website, they are not even limited to a mere 2,500 characters.¹ However, in a society that lacks free elections, a robust party system, or rule of law, what real change can Russian citizens hope to bring about through e-mail? They are free to complain, but at best they must wait to see if the leadership chooses to act on their complaints. On a more worrying note, any interaction with the presidential website could bring them to the attention of the security services.

While there might be the temptation to assume that a lack of democratic institutions and a tradition of oligarchic rule would render the internet little more than political communication window dressing, there are two critical additions to the political sphere offered by information communication technologies that challenge this view. On the one hand, the online sphere offers a new way of creating and delivering information that is in many ways fundamentally different from the traditional relationship between news producer and media consumer. In addition, the series of political revolts against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East in 2011 suggest that online communication can provide unprecedented speed and dexterity in information management to those who oppose repressive regimes. In particular, the Egyptian and Tunisian governments were clearly caught off guard and out-manuevered on both internal and external propaganda fronts by networked citizens. Thus, is online communication something that is particularly good at challenging—and even toppling—non-democratic regimes? This book will argue that online communication is not a “magic bullet” that can empower citizens and change regimes; rather, this study will present evidence at *how* and *when* the internet can influence political life in non-free states. Hence, the title of the book reflects the idea of a “stalled” revolution, recognizing both the potential and the barriers to the internet's ability to deliver democratization. Through this analysis, which includes a study of online content, networked communities, catalyzing events, state co-optation, and government control, there is the elucidation of factors that can allow social

scientists, policy-makers, citizens, and political leaders to understand how, when, why, and where the internet can play a significant role in political change in non-free states.

While this book uses the Russian political communication experience to build useful tools for understanding the relative role of the internet in political change, this work also emphasizes the need to understand the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within national contexts. Throughout this book, it is argued that while there are universal characteristics of online communication, they must be analyzed within the context of national political and media systems. Thus, online content and even online platforms—ranging from micro-blogging tools such as Twitter to social-networking sites to forums—do not have the same resonance in different national settings. Their use and popularity shifts and adapts over time and space. In addition, studies also often make the assumption that the internet audience, defined through uptake of ICTs as well as by measuring trust and attitude toward online communication, are essentially the same from country to country. In fact, usage patterns and attitudes toward the internet differ widely from country to country, as well as within national populations themselves. Even a cursory examination of the online space in different countries will reveal profound differences in taste and culture in the virtual sphere.

The third key point about this study is that it has sought—and found—political engagement in what at first would seem unlikely places in the Russian online sphere long before people took to the streets in Moscow and other Russian cities in 2011. The best evidence of political action on the part of Russian citizens is found not via political parties, candidates, or even in the lively world of political blogs on Russia's LiveJournal. You can find impassioned, angry Russian citizens who use the internet to aggregate and fight for their rights, but these rights are not generally defined in broad philosophical terms or even in terms that many people would consider "political." Rather, there is striking evidence that Russians will use the internet to aggregate interests when faced with difficult personal issues, particularly relating to health. Thus, while Lonkila (2008) found Russians used the internet to search for ways to avoid the military draft, they generally did not use it to aggregate interests against the draft in principle. Russian bloggers have enormous freedom of expression and will talk about a broad range of political ideals and principles (Etling et al., 2010; Fossato et al., 2009). However, there was little evidence that they were talking to anyone beyond a small circle of elites and virtually no evidence they were having a significant impact on the political agenda prior to the end of 2011.

While it would be hard to build a convincing argument that elite political forces—be they politicians, political parties, or even bloggers—were making a political impact via the internet prior to the end of 2011, there was promising evidence of online aggregation in Russia when one switched the focus from

elite to grassroots online activity. The best way to find it was to look for social flashpoints such as the closure of a Russian dialysis center or the denial of medication to critically ill children and watch small, online communities of Russians start to use the internet to campaign for their rights. While these rights were defined in relatively narrow ways, i.e., the right to specific health-care treatments as opposed to the broader notion of the human right of care, evidence from content analysis of Russian web forums showed the distinctive way in which Russian citizens aggregated online and took action offline to secure what they perceived as their rights. This can help to explain why Russians, who were neither broadly dissatisfied with their society nor organized around a specific opposition, took to the streets in large numbers after reports of election falsification in December 2011.

This book cannot answer the question of whether enough Russians will use the online sphere to become engaged citizens and effectively demand a more democratic society. However, the analysis in this book does establish a visible pattern of how to detect and measure online protest in non-free states. This does not necessarily take place via standard political institutions, such as parties and the legislature, because these do not effectively interact with Russian citizens in a democratic way. It is not necessarily linked to the elite blogging world in Russia, although it is almost always connected to traditional media and society in some way. Prior to the December 2011 protests, it tended to center around relatively small but passionate issues. It often challenged the Russian state's complacency about poor services and response to citizen protests, including in the regions. And, just as the final, conclusive wave of online activism in the Arab Spring could be traced to the public suicide of a street peddler enraged at his treatment by a petty bureaucrat, these online campaigns were typically launched by catalyzing events that angered and energized a preexisting online community. Finally, there would appear to be a critical role for online social entrepreneurs, those who are willing to both spend much time moderating online interchanges as well as often lead in the confrontation that will take place in the offline world through protests, demonstrations, or even civic disobedience.

The Russian Case and Internet Studies: Cyber-optimism, pessimism, and skepticism

The way in which a Russian presidential website both challenges and consolidates information policy in the former Soviet sphere is emblematic of the core questions of this book. For many years, there has been a debate between cyber-optimists, who see the communication tools of the internet as a way to foster democracy, and cyber-pessimists, who fear that the internet works more for the

consolidation of anti-state or dangerous forces (such as terrorism) within society. There are worries that unequal access to the internet (both between countries and within nations themselves) lead to what Norris dubbed the digital divide, a society of information haves and have-nots that further fosters worrying divisions in social capital (2001). Another grave concern is the often successful efforts of countries such as China to simultaneously censor web content as well as use the internet as a further means of identifying and punishing dissidents. As such, the internet becomes more a tool for repression than a beacon of democracy.

Much of the study of the internet as a political communication tool has examined the qualities of the medium that exist outside the normal ways in which we understand national media systems to function. The internet, by its ability to provide instant and simultaneous communication that blurs the line between news producers and consumers, fundamentally changes the way in which information is distributed. The extreme outcome of this conceptualization of the online sphere is the notion that this information can then rearrange power structures, taking control away from elites and spreading it amongst the masses in a more democratic manner. This is somewhat of an overstatement of cyber-optimism, in that those who study the internet seriously are cautious to test and measure the extent to which the internet has achieved these goals. However, many scholars do suggest that due to the particular features of the internet, the online sphere could deliver political change that has the potential—for better or worse—to transform or transcend national political institutions (Teubner, 2004). 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 within specific countries. Thus, assumptions about the availability of the internet are not enough to predict the role that the internet will play in the media sphere in a particular country. In addition to availability, key points to consider are the political environment and tolerance for free speech; the government's approach to internet regulation and surveillance; the type of content available online; and the perception of citizens about risks and rewards in engaging in the online world.

Christensen (2011) usefully identified a gap in the debate between what he termed “techno-utopians” and “techno-dystopians” (p. 239): “while techno-utopians overstate the affordances of new technologies (what these technologies can give us) and understate the material conditions of their use (e.g., how factors such as gender or economics can affect access), techno-dystopians do the reverse, misinterpreting a lack of results (such as the failure of the Iranian protesters to topple the Ahmadinejad regime) with the impotence of technology; and, also, forgetting how shifts within the realm of mediated political communication can be incremental rather than seismic in nature.” This book attempts to fill that

gap, weighing the global potential of the internet against factors at the national level in Russia that both shape and constrain that potential.

Both domestic and international factors are bringing the role of the internet in politics to the fore in Russia. Although extensive analysis of the events in the Middle East is still ongoing, it is clear that information communication technologies played a key part in both informing the public and organizing the protest on the ground. While Russia had taken a relatively relaxed approach toward overt policing of the internet (discussed in more depth in Chapter 4), the issue of internet surveillance and control moved up the agenda of all non-free states in 2011. In addition, there is compelling evidence (Deibert et al., 2010) that states such as Russia favor more effective, albeit less obvious, interventions in the online sphere in order to control its ability to inform the public and counter oppositional forces. This parallels the many ways in which the Russian state has constrained political and media openness in general in the past two decades.

At the same time, internet growth in Russia expanded with great rapidity from 2000 to 2010, as the country experienced the largest online growth of any major European country over the course of the decade. According to the measurement by the World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database, 43 percent of the Russian population was online by March 31, 2011, with an estimated 59.7 million users out of a population of 138.7 million.² The organization reported an increase in usage of 1,826 percent between 2000 and 2010. Russians made up the second-largest online population in Europe by mid-2011, trailing only Germany, and were on track to become the largest online population in the region. While various surveys reported slightly different penetration rates for Russian internet use, it is clear that the trend was toward very rapid growth, fueled by mobile internet access as well as by a Russian government policy to expand online access in general (discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4). There is a parallel here to the policy of Soviet glasnost in the 1980s, in which Soviet leaders wanted to encourage more interesting debate and wound up with central media outlets that were highly critical of the serving leaders (Mickiewicz, 1988; 1997). The media played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a lesson that all of the Russian leadership must still remember, if even from their childhood. Thus, the internet offers the Russian government a tool that not only has proven itself effective in challenging apparently stable, non-free regimes, but it is presented to a country in which internet usage has exploded in the past few years. While Russian elites would appear to believe that they can harness these informational tools and have rejected widespread, overt control, the history of the Soviet media would suggest that elites can overestimate their ability to “spin” a population indefinitely, particularly when distribution of information is undergoing a rapid shift.

As of 2011, Russia remained a state in which some free circulation of information had not sparked the growth of robust, citizen-centered political institutions such as parties and social-action networks. Despite the presence of the internet, Russia has remained a relatively authoritarian state in which political parties and grassroots organizations have had little role to play. How well can the Russian experience help us to understand the way in which national political systems constrain and shape the democratizing features of the internet? Overall, there is little comparative work on how national political, media, and social structures may influence the role of the internet in a society, although some has begun to emerge (Giacomello, 2008; Goggin and McLelland, 2008). Rather, the study of the internet in society tends to focus on how the internet could transform society rather than how the society itself might shape and constrain the online world. While television, print media, and radio all are acknowledged to have particular national or cultural forms, the same often is not assumed about the internet. Yet even cursory evidence—such as the relevance of U.S. blogs versus the relative dearth of independent political blogging in the United Kingdom—would suggest that there is as much indication for the internet to be transformed by society as vice versa.

What is missing from much of the debate is the discussion of the role of state power and communication strategy in understanding the function of the internet in the political sphere. While there are studies of how states seek to control the internet, there is little discussion of how states actively use the internet to expand their communicative power, although Deibert et al. (2010) and the work of the OpenNet Initiative have contributed a great deal to this debate. It is recognized that there are certain universal properties of the internet as communication provider, a social networking tool, and even as a virtual sphere for democratic debate (for a good overview, see Polat, 2005). However, these features manifest themselves in different ways in various societies. By the same token, ways of monitoring or controlling the internet vary across country boundaries as well, with China recognized as a clear example of how to balance the rapid growth of the internet for consumers while limiting its use as a political tool for citizens. However, there has been little direct investigation of how state power manifests itself in the online sphere, although interest in this is rising quickly, in the United States in particular (Nye, 2004).

While this study is concerned with the general role of the internet in the political sphere, the book also needs to establish the specific political and media environment in which the internet functions. As such, the book will consider the state of freedom of speech and information distribution in Russia in comparison to both Western models as well as to the former Soviet sphere. While this book will highlight particular regulations and laws relating to the online sphere in Russia, it also contrasts how the Russian internet has developed in comparison

with other countries. This study will make a direct analysis of how Russian state power is perpetuated online through a range of methodologies. This will include analysis of state policy, the content itself, the distribution of content, as well as audience consumption and engagement in the online sphere. This book approaches the examination of the online media and political sphere by emphasizing the study of political institutions and issues over the analysis of particular online sites. As such, while the project involves the study of web content, this is not limited to the scrutiny of a particular website or set of websites. Rather, the volume examines Russian political party websites as a way of comparing Russia with studies about parties online in the West. In addition, the book expands on web analysis techniques pioneered by Fossato et al. (2008) by tracing how issues critical to certain groups of citizens are discussed in the online sphere. This allows the project to examine how issues that are important to either particular segments of society (access to a particular hospital) or to all citizens (access to health care) are possibly affected by the online “virtual” sphere. It also allows the project to follow, as much as possible via word searches and web link analyses on the Russian internet, where there are issues of interest in the online sphere.

In order to carry out this analysis, the book provides an overview of the Russian online sphere, in the political, social, and media context of the country. It examines various levels of analysis and critical points of intersection of the online and offline world in a country defined both by its Soviet past and the failure of democratic institutions in the young Russian state. At the same time, the project is focused on exploring how state power and national politics shape and constrain the online sphere in a deliberate inversion of studies of how the internet affects national-level politics. Finally, this analysis is interested in advancing the field of internet studies by further developing and refining how to best isolate the role of the internet in the political sphere. In particular, this book will carry out this task by showing how citizens frame and talk about their rights in specific contexts in the online sphere. An additional chapter that analyzes the role of the internet in the 2011–12 protests will use both offline and online research to reflect on how the internet related to the protest. Overall, this book combines a range of methods, from the study of legal and media systems to internet content to the online audience and consumers themselves. Of particular interest is finding the critical synthesis between the online and offline worlds, so that it becomes possible to better model the democratizing potential of the internet within the constraints of national political systems.

On a final introductory note about methods, it must be said that technological advances in how to search, organize, and analyze online data have developed with great rapidity in recent years and even months. In fact, methods have changed so fast that a reviewer of an insightful book on American blogging (Davis, 2009) noted that while the book made an important intellectual

contribution to the field, it seemed “almost quaint” to use only 2,951 posts for an analysis when computerized retrieval and software options for content analysis were available (Margolis, 2010, p. 220). The point is that Davis, along with others who use human coding, embedded the content analysis within broader discussion and research about blogging and its relationship to traditional U.S. journalism. Although the book by Davis effectively presents an elegant and compelling argument that blogs have been incorporated into the American political discourse rather than challenging that discourse, a few years on from this publication it is important to make use, where appropriate, of online analytics in support of research design. As such, this book uses online freeware for web link analysis called IssueCrawler³ (where once web links would have been discussed, counted, or coded by hand) to provide the reader with an overview of how particular websites function within the broader information geography of the online world. In addition, this book has employed web analytics to triangulate websites and online platforms where political discourse and challenge to the Russian state is taking place. However, while this book reports on some useful and interesting computerized, semantic searches of the Russian online sphere, including work carried out by the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University and the Center for New Media and Society at the New Economic School (Moscow), it relied on human coding of web content to measure the nature of online engagement in specific case studies. The trade-offs between automatic web tools and human content analysis will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 6.

International Internet Models vs. National Media Models

Although cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism have pervaded much of the internet studies literature, it is now generally recognized that characterizing the internet as normatively good, bad, or perhaps indifferent is not that useful in terms of progressing 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, the discussion by Norris of the digital divide as well as her notion of the “virtuous circle” showing 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 (2001, 2000). 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; Jankowski et al., 2005; Foot et al., 2010). 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. Unsurprisingly, there has been a focus on probing for signs that the internet is a democratizing force in China. Even in this rather compelling example (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. From the evidence gathered in China, it is not clear whether the internet can be a significant tool for delivering democratization to a country (Hartford, 2000; Polumbaum, 2001; Abbott, 2001; Harwit and Clark, 2001; Reporters Without Borders, 2005; Taubman, 1998). Arguably, most of these studies predate the advent of Web 2.0 and its greater potential to personalize, popularize, and spread political messages through social networks. However, it would be expected that the Chinese authorities could continue to monitor the internet with their multilevel filtering regime, from the production of internet content, to routine searches for words such as “democracy” in the content, to tracing of users themselves both online and via monitoring in cybercafes (Open Net Initiative, April 14, 2005; for an updated discussion see Deibert et al., 2009).

This leaves us with the issue of how one can structure a model of the democratizing potential of the internet. Existing cyber-paradigms are simply too broad, but other studies have generally dealt with only particular aspects of the online sphere. This is logical, in that trying to construct a sort of international meta-theory of the internet’s democratizing 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 democratization. Newhagen (1997) highlights the importance of going beyond current political communication studies of broadcasting, in that the internet functions as not only an information provider in the sense of “traditional” media but an advanced social communication tool as well. Polat expands this definition, pointing out that in addition to information and communication, the internet offers the opportunity to create a “virtual sphere.” Davis makes the point that the introduction of a new media platform does not completely replace the audience for the previous media form—i.e., the introduction of television did not stop people from reading newspapers. He argues it is more useful to think of audiences as overlapping or augmented by a range of different media types (p. 190). In addition, aside from its interactive features, the internet has distinctive elements that make it different from traditional broadcast and print media. The internet also offers a low-cost (often virtually no-cost) ability to distribute information to a potentially limitless global audience. In addition, it allows for potential freedom from editorial filters and controls. Finally, the nature of the internet facilitates relative freedom from national media restraints as well as the ability to build an international audience.

How do these known elements of the internet map onto our understanding of the role of the media in the political sphere in terms of 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 and culture (Siebert et al., 1994; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Schudson, 1995) while others believe that it makes more sense to look at this as a power relationship that is not particularly tied to a specific national culture and structure (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Sparks, 2000). It is clear that the elements of the internet listed above would intersect differently if one were conceptualizing 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 *should* allow citizens to circumvent barriers via news cycles, news norms, ownership controls, access, editorial issues, censorship, and other filters in order to communicate more freely with one another. Interestingly, there was a long gap in case studies in which there was some compelling evidence of the role of the internet in challenging regimes. The classic case study was the Chiapas people in Mexico, who used Web 1.0 and links to a U.S. university to attract international support to their cause in the mid-1990s. Surprisingly, there remained relatively few compelling case studies of broad challenge to non-free regimes via the internet from the Chiapas revolt until the Iranian elections in 2009 (and evidence remains mixed about the efficacy of the internet’s role in the protest). However, by early 2011, there was significant evidence that the internet was being used as a key information conduit for anti-state protestors in the Middle East. What remains still in doubt is whether internet communication *followed* the protest or whether the internet *spurred* protest with rapid and critical information disbursement that was faster and more nimble than state propaganda efforts.

More ominously, Deibert et al. suggest that the internet can actually *impede* protest in non-free states, a conviction shared by Morozov (2011). They argue that the real asymmetry in power between repressive states and citizens lies in the ability of states to deploy the internet in a carefully choreographed manner that simultaneously promotes state interests through propaganda as well as discredits opponents via information campaigns or strategic takedowns of internet sites at critical political moments. At the same time, the state can use the internet to penetrate resistance organizations with ease, allowing them to selectively intimidate or arrest cyber-dissidents. The internet also allows repressive states to set up systems to coerce or encourage citizens to stay within national domains or particular types of websites in the online world, further promoting the distortion of information while they harvest online interactions to gain nuanced information on political actions and orientations of individual citizens. This raises the question about whether the potential of the internet to promote democratic protest is being subverted even before it can be effectively used by citizens (given the gap between the Chiapas uprising and the Arab Spring). All good social

scientists must consider the null hypothesis: Will there be a time when we must ask ourselves if there are *fewer* democratic protests against authoritarian regimes because of the presence of the internet?

Even without the overt threat of what Deibert et al. call third-generation controls of the internet, in which “the focus is less on *denying* access than successfully *competing* with potential threats through effective counter-information campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents” (p. 27, emphasis in original), there needs to be careful attention paid to how national political institutions and culture shape—and apparently tame—the potential of the internet. The notion that a nation can subvert the democratizing potential of an international communications tool might at first seem unlikely in states without an overt, repressive control of the online sphere and beyond. However, using the Russian case to examine how communication tools can promote undemocratic notions provides 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 (2004) or Siebert et al. (1963, reprinted in 1994). 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, as well as the audience. These factors are not linear or static; rather, they shift and interact with one another constantly. Another factor is the way in which different national audiences embrace the internet. For example, researchers are aware that levels of trust in the internet vary both between countries and within countries themselves, particularly in terms of audience variables such as age, education, and length of time since entering the online sphere. However, there needs to be more analysis of trust and media generally. To explore the nature of the relationship between the user and the internet, this book includes a study of how those who are routinely online in Russia vary in key political attitudes (Chapter 3).

The Paradox of the Russian Media

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, and 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; Becker, 2004). In Soviet times, the media served the interests of the ruling elite in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as described by the Soviet model of the press in Siebert et al. Even through the glasnost period of 1985 to 1991, the Soviet media failed to transform itself from a platform 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. As Becker notes, diversity is relatively well tolerated in some sectors (such as print), but not on key broadcast outlets. 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 for the interest of citizens (Pasti, 2005; Voltmer, 2000; Oates, 2007).

Analysts long persisted in calling Russia a “developing” democracy, but there is significant 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. Attempts 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 are not tolerated (Oates and McCormack, 2010). For example, the majority stockholder of the most prominent commercial television station was arrested in 2000 and majority ownership in the media group was transferred to forces friendly to the government (Oates, 2006). Russia has been labeled 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. It is not surprising that 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. There is a wealth of media, including national newspapers, local newspapers, state radio, and commercial radio, as well as satellite and cable television that has become quite widely available in recent years. However, 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 state-owned Rossiya-1. There has been steady growth in the television sphere, with the number of channels that half of the Russian nation could receive increasing 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.⁴ 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 reporters 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 many struggle financially.⁵ In addition, all prominent newspapers toe the Kremlin line. There is some radio news, including the relatively liberal Echo of Moscow radio station (for more on the traditional mass media audience, see Chapter 3).

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 character of internet content, control, and usage in Russia? Where does it fit in the media mix? Most importantly for this study, where does the Russian internet link into the political sphere? More than other types of media, the internet can be connected directly to political institutions (social action groups, NGOs, political parties, local governance, etc.) because of its low-cost ability to aggregate interests. Is there something distinctive about the Russian internet that is preventing it from becoming an effective tool for democratization and political mobilization? Is there something about the Russian 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, as an isolated element, 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? Does it result in effective political action or does it merely bring protestors unwelcome attention from security services? What has been the result of the protests in 2011–12?

The Russian Internet Audience

The general Russian media audience is particularly well-educated and attuned to political messages via the news (Oates, 2007). Connection to the internet, particularly the home-based broadband link that fosters in-depth online usage, was

relatively low in Russia for many years. However, growth exploded in the past few years. In 2011, the Russian government produced an in-depth report on the country's online audience, persuasively predicting that the online penetration rate would grow to almost 100 percent for those under 40 in the next five years (Russian Federal Agency on the Press and Mass Communication, 2011). While it might appear illogical that Russian internet growth would not stall in the same way as the U.S. or British audiences before reaching full penetration, the growth in the Russian internet audience has been extraordinary. It does not follow the same pattern in parallel to economic development as suggested by Cooper (2008). It has defied expectations and met the optimistic prediction of Medvedev to bring the internet penetration rate in Russia to 40 percent in a few short years (Cooper). Indeed, Russia has moved from relatively low internet usage for the former Soviet region to the second-largest group of Europeans online. As noted above, however, quantitative measures such as rates of penetration are not enough. This book is also concerned with whether participation in the online sphere is a transformative political experience. As Chapter 3 notes, there are distinctive political characteristics of those who go online regularly in Russia, suggesting that this group is more liberal and challenging to the state in general. Will this connection between online use and democratic values continue to grow along with the explosion in internet use in Russia?

Russian Internet Content

While there are well-known, professional websites that address Russian news and politics on the Russian internet (nicknamed Runet), many of them reflect the limited spread of news found in the mainstream media. This is not surprising, in that the web also is dominated by mainstream media sites in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. A project by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford (Fossato et al., 2008) examined three Russian social movements and blogs 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 were hosted on five platforms, with LiveJournal as the most popular blogging and social networking site. While there was evidence that the Russian blogosphere was 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

many Russian analysts of the Russian online sphere. Notably, Russian analysts felt that 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 relatively closed circles (Fossato et al., 2008).

The report by Fossato et al. provides evidence that Russia is shaping the internet, rather than Russian society being shaped by the internet (Rohozinski, 2000). This is a particularly clear and convincing image of how the internet is constrained by domestic, rather than international, political communication norms, or as Rohozinski phrases it, how “the ‘new dog’ of the Internet was adapted and used to perform the ‘old tricks’ inherent to the Soviet system” (p. 334). Although Rohozinski wrote this more than a decade ago, the idea still has resonance. The Reuters Institute report found that new communications technology did not appear to break down “well-established patterns of power” (p. 53). Rather, the state (rather than “netizens” or even citizens) remained the “main mobilising agent” (p. 53). 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 analyzed by the researchers found that “this information mobilizes mainly closed clusters of like-minded users who only on rare occasions are able and willing to cooperate with other groups” (p. 53). While this lack of mobilization was one part of the story—and there is arguably widespread lack of evidence of internet mobilization in Western Europe as well—the Reuters Institute report made an important insight into the nature of the internet, governance, and power by pointing out that the Russian internet was developing as another platform that the state used 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” (p. 53). Thus, Russians would appear to have been experiencing further political repression from the growth of online communication. At the same time, the Russian masses seemed to reap little to no benefit from the democratizing potential of the internet, while the state was successfully using the online world to further its non-democratic agenda of citizen compliance and control.

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 show that the mass media have been political players allied with political factions in Russia as opposed to media in service to the greater political good or even in the interest of relatively disinterested dissemination of information (Oates, 2006; European Institute for the Media, March 2000, August 2000; Voltmer, 2000; Pasti, 2005). The same relationship that existed among the media, the political elites, and the public in the traditional print and broadcast media would appear to have manifested itself in

the online world in Russia prior to the end of 2011. This raised the question of whether this was the case in other countries as well. Was Russia simply an extreme example of the ability of the government to conquer the “high ground” of the internet communication heights—or was there something about the Russian media sphere itself that seemed to make this inevitable? Was it the traditional relationship of a relatively passive Russian public that preferred “strong hands” over “more say” in governance (White, Miller, and Oates, 2003) that dictated 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 no widespread evidence of heavy-handed censorship through the Russian media sphere, both online and offline, prior to the protests in the end of 2011. Rather, the Russian elites effectively controlled the media messages through a strategy of inculcated self-censorship on the part of journalists, selective application of financial laws to shut down alternative voices, and the knowledge on the part of journalists that they could be killed in a relatively lawless state by those they might have angered 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 civic sphere. Part of the puzzle of post-Soviet Russia has been the widespread lack of civic organization and protest in general. In a way that has surprised many Western analysts, robust civic organizations have failed to materialize in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In particular, political parties have not become a legitimate democratizing 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; White, 2011). To summarize the arguments, there was significant political maneuvering on the part of elites to avoid the creation of 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 president and prime minister Vladimir Putin ruled the country and muzzled the powers of the parliament (for an overview, see White 2011). More worrying is the lack of an independent judiciary in Russia, which has left a disproportionately large amount of power in the hands of the Kremlin. The point is, however, that the failure to aggregate interests online is not isolated. Rather, it reflects a widespread attitude that permeates much of 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 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 asset.

These ideas about Russian political culture were challenged by the protests at the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012. To observers and analysts of Russian elections, it would appear that the widespread public protests to the reports of election falsification were quite surprising. There has been quite obvious electoral manipulation, notably biased television coverage as well as anomalous precinct results, in virtually all Russian elections. However, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, the internet was able to spur protest in several ways. One key way was the collection of video evidence of voter irregularity and fraud to post online, making it more difficult for the officials to refute or manipulate the information. The online sphere made the falsification visible to others, rendering it very hard to dismiss it as isolated. People could download and analyze the election results for themselves, as they were all posted online by the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. In addition, social-networking/blogging sites such as VKontakte and LiveJournal encouraged discussion of the issue and aggregation of interests, motivated and led by popular bloggers. Finally, the internet provided an excellent venue to subvert state media framing of the elections as orderly, as well as afforded a way in which to organize the protests themselves. Yet, were the winter of 2011–12 protests isolated events, specifically spurred by compelling evidence of electoral fraud? Or were they just the first manifestation of a rising political consciousness on the part of the Russian citizens who will no longer tolerate the gap between what their leaders say and what they do? This calls for an examination of the evidence at a range of levels of analysis, from patterns of internet use, to content analysis, to network analysis.

Internet Research Methodologies and the Russian Case

The case of the Russian internet illuminates some of the key challenges in the study of the online sphere. Some of the central work in the field has focused on the content analysis of web pages. This methodology provided a structured way to categorize, summarize, and analyze significant web content. The methodology has been applied to Russia, in particular by March (2006) to examine political party websites. While the Gibson and Ward (2000) web content analysis scheme offers some key basics in the field—i.e., one has to know what information is available online and how it is presented—there are two challenges to using this methodology to study the contemporary Russian political internet. The first one is a practical one, in that web content has now expanded so enormously that it is difficult to capture the relevant information. When Gibson and

Ward started their studies of parties online, their key findings were both how little information was available as well as the relatively static, non-dynamic nature of that data. Today, even minor political parties in most democracies have a huge amount of information online in formats ranging from video blogs to forums, making it significantly more difficult to perform a relevant content analysis. While some scholars approach this by filtering or word searches (such as the computerized filtering tools found in the Dark Web project that tracks potential terrorist groups, see Qin et al., 2007), the sheer volume is still overwhelming. A far greater challenge than quantity, however, is the changing qualitative nature of what takes place online. In particular, the challenges of Web 2.0—in which the internet has grown into a virtual information sphere with real and potential communities forming online—have not yet been met by internet scholars. There is a great deal of interest in the area, with vigorous debate and ideas launched at conferences and in journals, but a robust, valid, and reliable method of testing online social science phenomenon is still in its early stages. Interestingly, tools developed for marketing intelligence have developed far more rapidly, with companies and researchers offering a range of ways to “scrape” data from blog postings, Twitter, Facebook comments, and so on, and present summaries of data findings and trends. As discussed later in this book, however, the analysis of political content is more complex.

This book argues that online research tools must be integrated into a broader understanding of political institutions and communication within a particular society. This project builds on a body of work that has emerged to analyze the Russian web with a particular grounding in post-Soviet political communication (including Fossato et al., 2008; Rohozhinski, 2000; Semetko and Krasnoboka, 2003; Krasnoboka and Semetko, 2006; March, 2006; Schmidt, 2006; Lonkila, 2008). All of these works place the post-Soviet internet within its political context and the work seeks to find evidence that the internet has, in some way, enhanced civic life in countries such as Russia. All of these studies fail to find that the internet has enhanced civic life in Russia, although Krasnoboka and Semetko did find evidence that the internet has contributed in a significant way to freedom of speech in Ukraine. The methodology in the studies is similar, in that the researchers examine web content in order to find evidence of social network construction, alternative political viewpoints, or growth of social capital.

Work in *The Web That Failed* (Fossato et al., 2008) carried out innovative research in an attempt to understand the possible impact of the internet on Russian politics. The researchers limited their analysis to three social movements with blogs, each of which challenged the Kremlin elite on some level (as a nationalist movement, a liberal movement, and citizen group campaigning for fair treatment of motorists). What is elegant about the methodology in this relatively modest project is that the researchers developed two important research

innovations. First, they focused on the quality of web content in discussions linked to particular blogs rather than a larger, more unmanageable quantity of web content. While they found many postings quite routine, there were identifiable “firestorms” in the blogosphere in which relatively passive networks of individuals were galvanized into particular action in the offline world (such as after the unfair arrest of a civilian motorist to cover up the fact that a car driven at an unsafe speed by a state official had caused a fatal accident). The nature and spread of the online firestorms—and how they could be “extinguished” by authorities in the offline or online world—provide promise as a way to analyze the effect of Web 2.0 on the Russian political sphere. The researchers also used knowledge of Russian conversation and interchange to categorize the typologies of online exchange in general. They examined the blogs to characterize whether the nature of these conversations could be described as dialogues, monologues, or discussions. They further refined this by coding exchanges as emotional, appeals for calm, or calls to protest. In their research, they did not mention just the appearance of news (as the Gibson and Ward scheme does), but noted whether the news was in the form of an eyewitness report. In addition, did the website offer audio or video reports, either from the central blogger or the participants on the blog? Were people more likely to provide information or to offer opinion? All of these types of questions are important for understanding the nature of online interchange in Russia and beyond.

The work by Fossato et al. highlights the importance of understanding how politics and media work in Russia in studying the online sphere. In addition to web content analysis, the researchers interviewed the central bloggers themselves, which turned out to be critical in explaining why the motorists’ rights blog became far less political in the end of 2007. According to the blogger, he was asked by government officials to tone down the criticism on this blog—and he complied. This parallels the offline world, in which Russian journalists are particularly vulnerable to elite pressures. The report concluded that none of the blogs, despite being some of the more relevant and popular political blogs in Russia, had any real effect on the country’s December 2007 Duma elections or March 2008 presidential elections. While some of the lack of influence could be ascribed to relatively low internet penetration in the country at the time, it was clear that there was a different dynamic relating to the online political world in Russia than in developed democracies. Although political web content is a relatively small part of the online sphere even in the United States, it is still possible to identify important online components of political phenomenon in most Western countries, particularly during elections.

Building on analytical tools, reports, and previous studies of the Russian internet, this book will examine how online communication could foster political change in the country. Throughout the analysis, the attempt is made to balance

domestic factors with the global properties and potential of online communication. This book simultaneously considers the internet landscape in Russia, in particular by examining internet use, changes in this use, and attitudes of the online audience, as well as how government policy and laws may encourage or constrain online engagement. How does it fit within the Russian system of news production, news content, and audience? Russian online audience, attitudes, and policies are placed within the context of the post-Soviet sphere to examine how and why Russia's online audience and policy may have developed differently from other former Communist states. While making an overview of Runet content and activity, the project focuses on specific areas of the online sphere in an attempt to measure the intersection between political interest and online activity. One chapter is devoted to considering how political parties, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation as the only viable opposition party, attempt to use the online sphere to garner support. Another chapter considers case studies of advocacy groups for children with disabilities as well as action by dialysis patients in Rostov-on-Don that successfully fought to keep a life-saving service open. These cases are examined within the broader context of how citizens may find online spaces in which to express and campaign for their rights, even in a system that offers little in terms of traditional political institutions and aggregation. A final chapter looking at Russian web activity uses studies of people both offline and online to reflect on the role of the internet in the winter 2011–12 protests.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the political communication literature on how national political and media norms define and constrain global information flow. The objective of this chapter is to map the international, democratizing potential of the internet onto the national constraints of media systems. While this is quite relevant to the specific case study of Russia, it also addresses a key gap in the internet studies literature. Although media models are recognized as central to understanding information provision on a national level, there has been little study of the effect of the state on a national online sphere. This chapter seeks to build a model of how to understand and analyze the relative significance of the internet in the political sphere within a nation. In contrast to the mobilizing potential of the online sphere, the chapter considers how national media management and systems challenge this potential. In addition, the chapter considers ways in which the state can mobilize the internet for its own interests (rather than assuming the internet is naturally a tool for citizen interest and activism). While this phenomenon may be more directly observed in states such as

Russia, it is important to reflect that states in a range of regimes deploy the internet as a tool of the state rather than as a beacon of democracy for the masses.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of Runet content and community, with a discussion of popular websites and trends in the Russian online sphere. Of particular note is the way in which Russia has evolved one of the world's most active blogging platforms through LiveJournal, as well as the way in which Russia has developed strong national brands in the search engine Yandex and social-networking site VKontakte (In Contact) that dominate over foreign platforms such as Google and Facebook. In addition to information from several studies of the Russian online audience, this chapter includes an analysis of a 2010 survey of 2,017 Russians that explored attitudes about social issues, political issues, and media use. Audience analysis is often neglected in cross-national studies, but research has shown that audience usage, engagement, and trust of media outlets are particularly important ways of understanding the nature of national media systems (Oates, 2006; Oates, 2007). The survey provides a comparison of critical attitudes between the online and offline audience just as the online audience in Russia reached a significant percentage of the population. Of particular note is the way in which regular internet users in Russia appear to hold attitudes that are more challenging to an authoritarian regime. As the internet population grows, will these more liberal values spread as well? Or are these liberal values merely a correlation with preexisting beliefs, i.e., those who were more questioning were more likely to go online in the first place?

Chapter 4 focuses on the controls that shape what Russians see and do in the online sphere. While a fundamental element of the online sphere is understanding the audience and content as discussed in Chapter 3, government policy and investment also shape the access and functionality of the online sphere. In addition, once internet access and functionality have been created within a particular country, how does the government attempt to monitor and control the activity in the online sphere? This chapter analyzes the evolving controls of the online sphere in Russia. The picture that emerges is at first confusing—in that Russia has invested heavily in increasing online connectivity while simultaneously limiting free speech online—unless it is viewed within the broader approach of the Russian state to citizen information control. As with the traditional mass media, the Russian state is confident that it can use the means of mass communication to create more supportive citizens in a non-democratic environment. As a result, Russia serves as a model for what Deibert et al. have defined as third-generation internet control, in which the use of the internet is encouraged as a way to spread government propaganda and disinformation. This chapter analyzes the way in which laws and policies have been created that undermines the value of the internet as a democratizing tool for citizens. Of particular interest is an analysis of how Russian authorities have chosen to implement laws. While there is not a

persistent pattern of harassment and containment, which technically could be possible under Russian law, there is enough detection and pursuit of those labeled cyber-dissidents to create an atmosphere of repression for citizens wishing to mount a serious challenge to the Russian state. A lack of censorship does not indicate a dearth of control. Rather, Russia's online media management parallels its offline media controls, notably through norms of self-censorship and a fear of severe consequences (including assassination) for challenging elites on key issues such as the war in Chechnya. This chapter discusses the trajectory of internet freedom in Russia, with references to reports on internet freedom in neighboring post-Soviet countries.

With the key factors of internet content and control discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, Chapter 5 uses comparative studies and methods to examine how the internet may support political parties in Russia. This chapter draws on the extensive literature on the role of political parties in democratic development, and specifically in the Russian context (for example, White, Rose, and McAllister, 1996; Colton, 2000; Hutcheson, 2003; White, Wyman, and Oates, 1997; Rose and Munro, 2002; Smyth, 2006). Two decades after the end of Soviet rule, political parties appear to have done little to foster democracy in Russia. Indeed, successive Russian presidential administrations have used prime television networks to create and manipulate political images to the point that traditional political parties have essentially been replaced by shallow "broadcast parties" (Oates, 2006), parties that are promoted as champions of the people at elections but rarely work in the service of citizens. Rather, after extensive, positive campaign coverage and consistent positive framing on the influential television news, Russian parties serve as vehicles to carry out the will of a narrow, ruling elite. At the same time, gradually more restrictive laws on the formation and activity of opposition parties have limited the ability of grassroots political movements.

Chapter 5 considers to what degree the internet can serve as a way to redress this balance and to help political parties become vehicles for the aggregation of mass interest in Russia. The study focuses on the four political parties that held blocs of seats in the Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament) from 2007 to 2011: United Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, and A Just Russia. As Chapter 5 discusses, these were four distinctive parties that run the gamut from a Kremlin-backed powerhouse to a small center-left opposition party. The chapter analyzes how effective these Russian political parties were at providing information to citizens and potential voters. In addition, the chapter uses web analytics to consider how visible and connected the political party websites were within the political geography of Runet. Overall, it would appear that the internet tended to reflect, rather than challenge, offline political power and political

communication. However, there were features of various political party websites, notably news and citizen observations on smaller party websites, that provided unique viewpoints and information to citizens in Russia.

If there is significant evidence that central party websites are “preaching to the converted,” where should one look for relevant online engagement? The remainder of the book attempts to find this engagement in a different way from measurements related to information provision and engagement via particular web content linked to offline political actions. Chapter 6 examines the ability of the internet to spark action on specific issues across a range of different locations of the web in online “firestorms” (Fossato et al.). This chapter uses catalyzing events in the Russian online sphere, including a crisis in Rostov-on-Don over the closure of a dialysis center and anger over a newspaper columnist who suggested that disabled children could be killed at birth. What sorts of online exchanges do these events spark? More broadly, what types of government policies, incidents, reports, or experiences will motivate Russians to go online—to complain, to post information, to engage in dialogue, to disagree? In particular, this chapter considers how the online engagement through Russian organizations and forums relating to health issues reflect on political engagement. Although there would seem to be relatively little interest and engagement with formal political institutions, there is passion, persuasion, and evidence of political action through these causes. According to work by Turbine (2007a, 2007b), Russians often have a more practical approach to the nature of rights in their society, using rights-based approaches to resolve concrete problems. By searching for clues of internet activism in a more specific way that reflects the nature of engagement in Russia, this project will be able to provide a better analysis of the role of the online sphere in political engagement in the post-Soviet context.

The work in Chapter 6 includes a range of data collection in five distinct questions about the relationship between the issues and the online sphere: where is the information and discussion on the issue located online; who is talking about it via user-generated content; what is being said; why do the users feel moved to engage in online discussion; and how does the internet seem to have affected attitudes or even action? Chapter 6 also employs link analysis to examine where much of the discussion or information of these issues is disseminated on Runet. Both content analysis and user analysis will be employed to analyze who participates in discussions about particular debates on these issues. Overall, the study of Russian web content and user-generated comments provides a backdrop to discuss broader issues of the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the online sphere.

Chapter 7 examines what the winter protests in 2011–12 in Russia demonstrate about the role of the internet in Russian society and beyond. What were the protests about and how were they linked to the online sphere, both in terms

of information provision and mobilization? How did the Russian government's reaction to the rising power of the internet alleviate or exacerbate political tensions? Do these protests provide compelling evidence that the internet has become embedded in the political life of Russian citizens, signaling a new era in political communication for the Russian state? What does this suggest for the future of Russian citizens, Russian leaders, and Russian democracy? The analysis in this chapter unpacks a combination of factors that all contributed to the Russian "winter of discontent." Some of these factors had been evolving in Russian society for some time, including the failure of state "soft" controls that relied on traditions of self-censorship to contain the online sphere; an online sphere that is freer than traditional mass media; as well as an explosion in internet use. At the same time, other factors were pivotal to the way in which the internet contributed to the protest, including a lack of understanding about citizen attitudes and the online sphere on the part of the Kremlin; the rise of crowd-sourcing; the strength of online political networks; and the role of online social entrepreneurs. In conjunction with these factors, studies of Russian attitudes and elections suggest that reports of widespread electoral falsification would serve as a particularly emotive and powerful trigger for Russian citizens. In the identification and analysis of these factors, we can recognize a pattern of online political evolution in general.

Summary: A Theoretical Framework for the Study of the Online Sphere in Non-Free States

The details of the study of the Russian internet in the context of post-Soviet politics can be summarized into five levels of analysis for greater clarity: content, community, catalyst, control, and co-optation. In this five-step analytical framework, content is just one factor in a range of elements that could possibly better illuminate the political power of the internet. At each level, there are specific methods although some of them overlap. As difficult as it can be to systematically analyze the huge amount of content on the blogosphere or on forums, this content holds vital evidence as to the function of the internet as a political tool. Fortunately, methodologies for taming the information overload of the blogosphere, and internet content in general, are emerging (Kelly et al., 2012; Greene, 2012, Suvorov, 2012; Etling et al., 2010; Qin et al., 2007; Li and Walejko, 2008; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Turnšek and Jankowski, 2008). Yet, it is not only the content itself but a broader notion of community that is important. Why do some people find internet content or interaction particularly meaningful? How are these users finding and expanding a sense of community online? How are online and offline communities connected? Community is a concept that has

been linked to websites, but often not in any systematic way. It is important to consider both factors in the offline world that lead people to seek out online communities—and look more closely at the interaction among people via one-to-one, one-to-many, or even many-to-many online communication.

Much of what is understood about online/offline synergy comes about when there is a particular event that is a catalyst for an online community. In the report on the Russian blogosphere, anger over blatant attempts by the government to blame innocent drivers when government cars caused accidents was an important part of the dialogue on the motoring rights Free Choice website. Examples of the “power” of the internet are often cited through events or protests (such as Chiapas) that essentially only received significant attention due to online communication. However, firm examples of this interaction are relatively rare and almost always retrospective. By the same token, there is a need to “bring the state back in” to internet studies, in that there is significant variation in the use of the internet across country boundaries. While some of this is related to wealth and opportunity, the potential of the internet as a communication medium is significantly constrained in many countries by censorship and control. If we do not take this into account, we risk missing a significant element in understanding how the offline environment shapes online issues. In a world in which many people are jailed for what they post on the web in places such as China, we cannot pretend there is equal access and opportunity for social engagement online. Finally, a growing area of interest in comparative internet studies lies in conceptualizing how the internet can effectively be deployed by the powerful and/or the nefarious to consolidate information control. This can include the process of co-opting existing bloggers, websites, forums, and so on, and changing a democratic experience into propaganda.

The internet in the post-Soviet sphere shows us that while the online world offers essentially the same opportunities to different countries, national media and political systems themselves are key factors in shaping and constraining the internet within country borders. In particular, the Russian case proves that much of the democratizing potential of the internet may have been limited by the government’s almost complete control of the national information sphere, an ingrained sense of self-censorship on the part of Russian “netizens,” as well as a general lack of interest in the internet as an authoritative voice for citizens. Yet, this was not enough to stymie the ability of the internet to inculcate widespread protests in 2011–12. By reflecting on the developmental path of the internet across a range of post-Soviet countries, it is clear that it is not inevitable that the democratizing potential of the internet is tamed. In addition, examples from the Middle East suggest that the balance of power relating to the internet can shift very rapidly in certain situations, even when there has been scant hope for political change. Understanding how particular nations harness the power of the