New Media, Political Information, and Opposition Views in Russia

A CAUTIONARY NOTE BASED ON SURVEY EVIDENCE

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Access to the internet has grown at an exponential rate in Russia during the last four years, and many commentators have ascribed a mobilizing role to the new media in the waves of discontent and protest surrounding the December 2011 parliamentary and March 2012 presidential elections. A series of surveys conducted during the 2011-2012 election season provides evidence for testing one key mechanism by which new media purportedly encourages opposition to authoritarian regimes: by providing easy access to a wide variety of politically relevant information in contexts marked by moderate to severe government control over conventional media. The surveys contained extensive measures of different forms of both new and conventional media use and of a wide range of political attitudes.

This data demonstrates that the use of new media for political communication—that is, the active exchange of political views on the internet—is indeed moderately associated with more critical (though not necessarily more democratic or progressive) views. However, passive use of the internet as a source of political information is unrelated to political views. The same holds for the use of social network sites. Use of traditional media sources is, as expected, related to more support for the government and its policies. The lack of a consistent relationship between web-based political information-seeking and political attitudes suggests that individuals who use the web for political communication are more critically-minded to begin with: in other words, the apparent positive "effect" of the internet on oppositional orientation is more likely due to self-selection into the group of those who use the web for political communication rather than due to a causal effect of web engagement on political views. These findings imply that policymakers should not assume that promoting internet freedom in Russia and elsewhere will increase the level of opposition attitudes. There

are, however, other mechanisms by which the spread of new media might facilitate anti-incumbent mobilization.

New Media as a Source of Alternative Critical Political Information?
The 2009 protests in Iran and the Arab Spring events of 2010-11 helped create a widespread impression that the internet and other new forms of communication such as text messaging and Twitter can play an important role in mobilizing opposition to dictatorial regimes. The U.S. government officially embraces the notion that the web can serve as a tool for spreading democracy, bolstering human rights, and countering authoritarian leaders. This notion is clearly behind then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's much-cited January 2010 "internet freedom" speech and other statements that year and since, as well as tens of millions of dollars earmarked annually for programs to support internet freedom abroad.

One potential mechanism by which new media might play a democratizing role is by expanding access to information about political issues in contexts of moderate to severe government controls over conventional media sources. Proponents of the view that the internet can drive anti-authoritarian mobilization argue that by giving populations access to a wider spectrum of politically relevant information the internet helps expose them to alternatives to the official view, provides the knowledge base necessary to hold authorities accountable for misdeeds, and gives opposition leaders the ability to stir up grievances against incumbent leaders.

The potential role of new media in spreading independent information that is unfavorable toward the government may be particularly pronounced in Russia in light of the fairly pervasive (though hardly universal) control authorities have exerted over traditional media outlets. Yet skeptics have challenged the notion that new media and social media inherently promote democracy, either in Russia or more generally, and there is little or no empirical evidence on this question from non-democratic societies.

Three questions need to be addressed empirically in order to assess the view that new media use fosters the spread of opposition and/or pro-democratic views in semi-authoritarian contexts like Russia. First, what are the distinctive patterns of new (and old) media use? Often, discussions of the internet and new media are fuzzy with respect to what specific forms of media use they have in mind. It may be helpful, for example, to distinguish between internet use for political and non-political purposes, use of social network sites, and use of email, texting, and Twitter, as these different modalities of new media use may have varying relationships to politics. Moreover, any study of new media use and politics should take into account the use of traditional media sources, as they might in principle either substitute for new media or supplement new media, with different implications for their political consequences.

Second, what characteristics are related to the use of different types of new and traditional media? The potential political relevance of any form of media use would be magnified to the extent that it is disproportionately concentrated among strategically important groups, such as the well-educated, high-earners, capital dwellers, and young

adults (who in many societies are more likely to take up political activity against authorities).

Third, is there a relationship between different forms of media use and political views, controlling for variables that are likely to be associated with both sets of variables? By bringing empirical data from Russia to bear on these questions, we can begin to assess the popular notion that the internet can help undermine dictatorships by promoting opposition orientations.

Data

The Russian election surveys were sponsored by Democracy International, a Washington, D.C. consulting firm, and they were implemented by the Levada Center, the leading academic survey research firm in Russia. There were four waves of data collection, all using a standard multi-stage cluster sampling approach to produce a probability sample of respondents aged 18 and over: 1202 respondents were surveyed prior to the parliamentary election (November 17-30); another 1201 were interviewed afterwards (December 9-22); 1401 respondents were surveyed prior to the presidential election (February 17-29); and 1401 following the election (March 16-April 2). The response rates in all four waves were in the range of 36-38 percent, which is standard for surveys conducted in Russia. In total, the election surveys were conducted in 135 settlements (42 regional centers, 54 towns, and 39 rural regions), belonging to 46 regions of the Russian Federation. The latter two surveys included a Moscow oversample, and I use weights to adjust the sample distribution by education, age, gender, and locality to match national parameters.

Dimensions of New and Old Media Use

The survey included 26 questions measuring the frequency with which respondents use new and old media and divided into four blocks:

- Overall use of different communication/information technologies and media.
- Use of different sources for information about political events.
- Use of the internet for specific purposes.
- Seven specific uses of the internet and text messaging for political and non-political purposes.

I performed an exploratory factor analysis to determine how many distinct dimensions underlie these 26 specific measures. The optimal factor analysis solution includes five factors (**Table 1**). This solution performs quite well, explaining over half the variances of all 26 individual survey items (i.e., every unique variance is under .50 of the total variance for the item). Based on the rotated solution, we constructed five separate additive scales:

1) The *web-based political information scale* measures the extent to which respondents use the internet and other new media as a source of news. It is based on the mean

score on frequency of using Russian websites, foreign websites, and blogs to obtain news about current events, using the internet to obtain information about local, national, and foreign events, and reading blogs on political and non-political topics.

2) The *web-based political communication scale* captures ways of using new media to exchange political views. This scale represents more active political communication as opposed to the passive receipt of information captured by the web-based political information scale. It is computed as the mean score on frequency of using the web to find people with similar political views and to exchange political views, of posting political and non-political commentaries, taking part in a political chat/discussion, and contacting using the web and text messages.

3) The *general social networking scale* represents using the web for the purpose of making social contacts. It includes text messaging, email, the two most popular Russian domestic social networking sites, other websites, and using the internet to find friends.

4) The *Facebook/LiveJournal scale* measures use of these two specific social networking sites, which represents a distinct factor from general social networking.

5) A *traditional news source usage scale* is the mean score on frequency of using television, radio, and newspapers for information about current events. It is worth noting that these three sources all load on the same factor (they all measure the same underlying media consumption trait rather than different traits), even though it is often noted that Russian government controls are tighter over television news reporting than they are over radio.

These results show that in Russia it is misleading to speak of new media use as a single unitary phenomenon: in fact, there are four distinct forms of new media use. Individuals may regularly engage in more than one of these forms, but they represent distinct activities that should be analyzed separately. It is also worth noting that traditional news consumption is positively (but weakly) correlated with both web-based political information-seeking and web-based political communication: apparently, those who engage with the internet for news are also slightly more likely to consume news from old media sources.

Correlates of the Dimensions of New and Old Media Use
I used multiple regression models to determine how demographic, socioeconomic, and residential characteristics relate to each dimension of media usage (results available upon request). Not surprisingly, young people are more likely to engage in all four new media forms. Given their relatively low level of interest in politics (evident from other questions in the survey), this clearly reflects their higher levels of familiarity with web

and mobile phone technology. Consistent with this interpretation, they are significantly less likely to seek information from traditional news sources. Education has strong, consistent, and predictable effects on all five measures, probably reflecting a combination of both greater interest in politics and greater access to the internet among the highly educated. Residents of Moscow exhibit higher levels of all five forms of media usage, notwithstanding Muscovites' avowedly lower level of interest in politics. St. Petersburg residents use three of the five types of media more frequently (not web-based political communication or traditional news sources). Social network use and web-based news source use are less common in rural villages. Women use both traditional and web-based news sources less than men. All five forms of usage grew more frequent after the parliamentary elections, most likely reflecting widespread interest in the ensuing protests and presidential campaign. Overall, there are empirical grounds for concluding that web-based political information and political discussions are reaching strategically important groups in the population (the highly educated, Muscovites, high-earners, and young adults.)

New and Old Media Use and Political Views
To ascertain whether each of the five forms of media use are related to particular political views, I included the five scales in a series of regression models for a range of dependent variables pertaining to political attitudes. The models controlled for age, gender, education, place of residence, income, survey wave, and ethnicity. The type of model used varied depending on the level of measurement of the dependent variable. The results regarding the associations between the five media use scales and political views are displayed in **Tables 2** and **3**.

Web-based political communication and consumption of traditional news sources have much more political significance than the other three forms. Web-based political communicators are generally more opposition-minded, although not consistently more "progressive." They are less likely to support United Russia, President Vladimir Putin, the mass media, and other government institutions; to agree that Russia is on the right course; and to view foreign influence in general and the United States in particular in hostile terms. They are also more supportive of several opposition parties (including both liberal and nationalist ones), critical of the elections, and supportive of the protest movement. A nationalist streak can be detected in their elevated support for the slogan, "Russia for Russians" and for Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and the National Bolshevik Party. Traditional news consumption is linked to higher levels of support for the current government (both Putin and United Russia), nostalgia for the Soviet Union and Stalin, and suspicion of foreign influences and both "eastern" minority groups (Azeris, Chechens, gypsies, Muslims, and Tajiks) and "western" ones (Americans, Jews, and Swedes).

In contrast, web-based information seeking shows few significant associations with political views, and no consistent pattern among them. The same holds for both indexes of social network usage. The null findings regarding these three forms of new media use are noteworthy, because they run counter to the widespread view that new

media use in general fosters more opposition views. Altogether, the results show that only the active communication about political issues via the web exhibits such a relationship: passive consumption of news on the web does not, nor do other uses of the web (for communication with friends via social networks, for example).

Conclusions

The lack of any association between web-based political information-seeking and political attitudes contradicts the view that Russians are being influenced politically in one direction or another by what they read on the internet. The fact that web-based political communication is the main form of electronic political engagement linked to critical political views, while political information-seeking via the web has no relationship to orientations, would seem to contradict the idea that electronic political engagement plays an independent causal role in stimulating opposition views in Russia. Given the active nature of web-based communication, it is more likely that its association with criticism reflects self-selection: critically-minded Russians turn to the web to share their views with others. If the web had an independent effect in the direction of encouraging opposition attitudes, we would expect to find those who seek information on the web to be more critically-minded.

This does not, of course, mean that political blogs, discussions, and websites play no independent role in Russian politics: after all, web-based communication can help critically-minded Russians find one another and learn that their critical views are shared via the web, leading to the type of opinion cascades that can drive collective action. They can also use the web to coordinate protest activities. But the findings reported here do suggest policymakers and pundits should refrain from touting the web as a source of alternative information that can turn opinion against a regime that exerts control over traditional news sources. New media may play such a role in other countries, but the Russian case suggests that more research on this topic is required before determining whether the U.S. government's financial and rhetorical investment in internet freedom as a source of anti-authoritarianism is justified.

TABLE 1. Factor Analysis of Measures of Electronic Political Engagement, Duma Election survey

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Use: SMS on a mobile phone	-.059	-.058	**.809**	-.035	.131
Use: E-mail	.285	-.114	**.661**	.102	-.017
Use: Facebook	-.001	.091	.191	**.687**	.033
Use: Zhivoi Journal	-.045	.178	.071	**.757**	.040
Use: V Kontakte	.024	-.018	**.718**	.189	-.062
Use: Odnoklassniki	-.046	.036	**.828**	.051	-.014
Use: Other websites (not email)	.219	-.063	**.599**	.167	-.093
Use for news: Television	.022	-.059	.026	-.136	**.710**
Use for news: Radio	-.082	.050	.100	.119	**.740**
Use for news: Newpapers	.103	.017	-.148	.102	**.726**
Use for news: Russian news websites	**.788**	-.144	.161	.115	.033
Use for news: Foreign news websites	**.607**	.036	-.066	.365	.025
Use for news: Blogs on the internet	**.547**	.016	.047	.389	.028
Use net for: Get info about political events in your city/town	**.934**	.015	.004	-.082	.019
Use net for: Get info about political events elsewhere in Russia	**.980**	-.040	.025	-.080	.002
Use net for: Get info about political events in other countries	**.952**	.019	.010	-.103	.008
Use net for: Find people who share your political views	.306	**.657**	.012	-.164	.043
Use net for: find new friends	.135	.410	**.519**	-.286	-.003
Use net for: Exchange views on political topics with other people	.357	**.620**	.049	-.179	.007
Frequency: Posted about a political topic on a web site	.022	**.824**	-.054	.142	-.008
Frequency: Read a blog about a political theme	**.676**	.215	-.111	.154	-.025
Frequency: Participated in an on-line discussion/chat about politics	-.024	**.856**	-.039	.119	-.018
Frequency: Posted about a non-political topic on a web site	.018	**.670**	.042	.210	-.059
Frequency: Read a blog about a non-political theme	**.565**	.145	.098	.124	-.065
Frequency: Used the internet to contact authorities	-.086	**.905**	-.017	.025	.029
Frequency: Used SMS to contact authorities	-.156	**.858**	-.038	.113	.016

	Political info	Political communication	Social network	Facebook /Live journal	Traditional news
Additive Scale Label					
Scale mean	.844	.279	1.077	.347	3.252
Standard Deviation	1.309	.745	1.076	.851	1.206
Range	0 to 5	0 to 5	0 to 4	0 to 4	0 to 5

TABLE 2. Associations of media use scales with support for parties and institutions
Age, education, gender, locality, income, survey wave, and Russian ethnicity are controlled using regression.

Support for specific political parties and organizations

	United Russia	KPRF	LDPR	Yabloko	Right Forces	National Bolshevik Party	PARNAS
Webpolcom	-	0	+	+	0	+	0
Webnews	0	0	-	0	0	-	0
Tradnews	0	+	0	0	-	0	-
Socnet	0	0	+	0	0	+	0
Fablive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Voted for…	United Russia	KPRF	LDPR	Yabloko	Did not vote (abstain)	Putin	Ziuganov
Webpolcom	-	+	+	+	-	-	0
Webnews	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tradnews	+	+	0	0	-	+	+
Socnet	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fablive	0	-	0	0	0	0	0

Confidence in institutions and leaders

	Political parties	*Police*	*Local gov't*	*PM Putin*	*Mass media*
Webpolcom	0	0	-	-	-
Webnews	0	0	0	0	0
Tradnews	+	+	+	+	0
Socnet	0	0	0	+	0
Fablive	0	0	0	0	0

	Pres Med-vedev	*The Duma*	*The Army*	*The courts*
Webpolcom	-	0	-	-
Webnews	0	0	0	+
Tradnews	+	+	+	+
Socnet	0	+	0	0
Fablive	0	0	+	0

TABLE 3. Associations of media use scales on attitudes toward political issues

Age, education, gender, locality, income, survey wave, and Russian ethnicity are controlled using regression.

	Protests are good for Russia	Russia is on the right course	Soviet collapse = catastrophe	Pro-Stalin scale	Agree with "Russia for Russians"
Webpolcom	+	-	0	-	+
Webnews	+	0	+	+	-
Tradnews	+	0	+	+	+
Socnet	0	0	-	0	0
Fablive	0	+	0	0	+

	Agree with "Stop feeding the Caucasus"	Scale of suspicion of foreign influence	US is enemy or rival	Anti-eastern groups scale	Anti-western groups scale
Webpolcom	0	-	-	0	0
Webnews	0	0	+	0	0
Tradnews	0	+	0	+	+
Socnet	0	0	0	0	0
Fablive	+	0	0	0	0

	Agree there were violations in Duma election	Level of dissatisfaction with Duma elections	Sympathize with protestors (yes or no)	Scale of support for protests	Likelihood that R would join a protest in his/her town
Webpolcom	+	+	+	+	+
Webnews	0	0	0	0	0
Tradnews	-	0	0	0	+
Socnet	0	-	0	-	0
Fablive	0	0	0	0	0