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Taming Online Political Engagement in Russia: Disempowered Publics, Empowered State, and Challenges of the Fully Functioning Society

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This article examines the particularities of online political engagement in Russia and assesses social media potential for facilitating and empowering social movements in Russia through an examination of the political protests in 2011–2012. The case study illustrates effective mobilization and coalition building via social media during the political protests of 2011–2012, but the growing control of the Internet and online public sphere affects the publics' ability to do so in the future. This study argues that the successes of the protest movement initiated a government crackdown on the Russian Internet and social media, with the Russian government actively seeking to tame and control communicative processes online through an increased presence of government and progovernment forces. The analysis suggests that the extensive and covert control of the online public sphere disempowers publics, making social media less capable of enabling a fully functioning society.

Keywords: social media, political engagement, Russia, fully functioning society, public relations

The recent political and social movements in the Arab countries, Ukraine, China, and Russia, among others, have demonstrated how the state-centric view on exercising power is being increasingly challenged by the rise of social networks and social media (Jaitner, 2013). Social media have been described as empowering, yet threatening, to the existing social and political order (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). The realization of social media's empowerment capabilities turned the attention of many national governments toward it. To offset the threat emanating from social media, the Russian government has taken steps to extend its power online and to re-create the state through cyberspace by encouraging sovereign Internet, frequently using public relations techniques to establish forged dialogue and to encourage citizens to stay within the established framework (Asmolov, 2010). Paraphrasing a famous saying, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated, "Internet is like a knife in the hand of a criminal or a surgeon. In one case it kills, in the other it heals" ("Putin Prizivaet," 2012, para. 3).

Through the lenses of the fully functioning society theory, this article examines the particularities of online political engagement in Russia. Specifically, using the example of the "White Revolution," a wide political uprising in response to the 2011 fraudulent parliamentary elections in Russia, this article

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examines how political engagement through social media occurs and assesses its potential for facilitating and empowering social movements and enabling a fully functioning society in Russia. I argue that, due to sophisticated and extensive, yet covert and indirect, government control of the Internet, the empowering capabilities of social media in Russia are rather limited and constrained. Such dynamics force one to reconsider conceptions of engagement on social media essential for a fully functioning society, specifically political engagement. The increasing control over the patterns of political engagement on social media makes Russian society less functional and, thus, presents a considerable challenge to achieving a fully functioning society. Understanding the extent of control on the Internet and social media provides an insight into the difficulty of grasping engagement via public relations online and achieving a fully functioning society in Russia.

This article begins with a brief discussion of intersections among public relations, social media, and a fully functioning society by examining the specifics of Russian political engagement online. Using the example of the protest movement against the fraudulent elections in 2011–2012, I describe the idiosyncrasy of political engagement through social media in Russia. Particularly, I examine the utility and the role of social media during the political rallies in 2011–2012 as used by both the protesters and the state, as well as by pro-Putin supporters. I argue that the successes of the White Revolution enabled increased government control over the public sphere, thus hampering opportunities for a fully functioning society.

Public Relations, Social Media, and a Fully Functioning Society

The practice of public relations cannot be completely understood without consideration of the impact it leaves on society and the question of how public relations contributes to a fully functioning society. Heath (2006) described a fully functioning society as a social arrangement in which organizational entities (including government institutions) legitimize their existence by using public relations to contribute to society, enable dialogue and a sense of community, participate in a cocreation of meaning, and align their interests with those of their publics. The role of public relations and social media in a fully functioning society rests on a foundational consideration that society relies on a fully functioning public sphere to fully function (Sommerfeldt, 2013). Public relations help build a fully functioning society by enabling a fully functioning public sphere through its applied practices, including communication, relationship building, and dialogue (Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor, 2010). Particularly, social media can be vital in facilitating a fully functioning society when used to sell ideas rather than products and services (Taylor & Kent, 2014b).

A fully functioning society embraces the ideas of stakeholder participation and deliberative democracy; therefore, an open and accessible public sphere that enables rational debates is essential for a society to fully function (Heath, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Public relations influences the processes of public discussion by empowering publics to choose and affect issues that are publicly considered within the public sphere, thus enabling a more fully functioning public sphere (Heath, 2006; Raaz & Wehmeier, 2015). By extension, engagement on social media is equally important to a fully functioning society because it contributes to the public sphere debates and discussions by attracting attention to diverse issues and messages.

As Durham and Kellner (2009) explained, when organizations (such as governments and corporations) monopolize and control the public sphere with their agenda, issues, and messages, they "transform it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity" (p. 5). As a result, the rational consensus emerging from the public is replaced by managed discussion and fake dialogue. Such control over the public sphere creates *distorted communication*, when hidden interests are not communicated and procedures and policies are taken at face value and not questioned (Deetz, 1995). The lack of rational consensus and emergence of managed discussion may alienate stakeholders and create false consciousness, making the achievement of a fully functioning society less likely (Boyd & Waymer, 2011).

With the rise of social media and the Internet, these manipulations of the public sphere debates take on a different form, when government and progovernment actors permeate and dominate the online public sphere. This makes the society less functional because civil society actors are not able to affect critical publicity and penetrate the dominant public sphere. The control, however subtle and covert, of online communication also prevents publics from effective mobilization and coalition building, an essential function/ability of publics in a fully functioning society (Sommerfeldt, 2013).

Today, the presence on social media is as essential for an organization's survival as the communication itself: An organization without social media presence faces the threat of nonexistence in the minds of stakeholders. As Merkelsen, Möllerström, and von Platen (2015) explained, "being invisible on social media means being invisible in reality" (p. 21). There are, however, both benefits and dangers of social media presence. The benefits include participation, dialogue, transparency, empowerment, and civic engagement; yet, there are significant dangers of engagement and empowerment of "wrong" publics on social media (Merkelsen et al., 2015). This is particularly true for political engagement and empowerment of activist publics as seen from the perspective of many national governments, Russia for example. Realizing that political dissent is grounded in social communicative processes built on information, communication, and relationship (Taylor, 2010), the Russian government, as demonstrated in this article, actively seeks to tame and control the political engagement through the increased presence of government and progovernment forces online to counterbalance the empowerment of "wrong" publics. In so doing, it disempowers publics, which affects the ability of the Russian society to fully function.

Political Engagement and Social Media in Russia

The concepts of political engagement and social media have been subject to a range of interpretations. Here, *social media* is defined as a "variety of internet-based tools that users engage with by maintaining an individual profile and interacting with others based on a network of connections" (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014, p. 152). As a communication platform, social media encourage users to remain active by offering interactive and networking features and allowing them to contribute to the platform's content, what Bruns (2007) called *produsage*—a fusion of passive consumption and active production. Another central feature of social media, essential for online political engagement and a fully functioning society, is its broadcasting function, because communication on social media is "driven by getting attention for the information that is posted . . . users want their messages to spread online, to go viral" (Svensson, 2014, p. 349).

Engagement here is treated as an explicit expression of interaction; specifically, engagement on social media represents social media-enabled communication between and among publics (Taylor & Kent, 2014a). Political engagement online is often likened to political participation, ranging from mobilizing and crowdfunding to spreading the message online (Svensson, 2014). Sommerfeldt (2013) argued that engagement is a fundamental part of civil society that helps promote democracy, and public relations creates conditions that facilitate engagement. Engagement is also important to a fully functioning society because it contributes to a fully functioning public sphere.

Recent research confirms a robust relationship between social media use and political engagement, opening up the potential of social media for social change (Bode, 2012; Xenos et al., 2014). Bimber and Copeland (2013) found that social media use predicts traditional acts of political participation; however, specific engagement activities (e.g., participation in online groups or organizations and production of user-generated content) are a more informative consideration than is the frequency of use. Supplying and creating engaging content are two public relations functions in a fully functioning society.

According to Svensson (2014), social media favor active users. In other words, the level of online political engagement depends on how engaged publics are with social media (Xenos et al., 2014). The interdependence between social media engagement and online political engagement is quite logical when one considers how social media work. Social media facilitate mobilization and political engagement by connecting individuals' online political identities that are expressed through their social media profiles to political issues of interest to them (Svensson, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). Facebook's algorithm, for example, enables users to see primarily information from their networks that fits their online identity based on their online behavior. As a result of this connectedness, the information flows toward individuals online, not only enabling mobilization, but also disciplining participation (Svensson, 2014). Furthermore, the history of the users' interactions on social media and the habitual viewing of news feeds create opportunities for unintentional exposure of users to political information that has not been actively sought (Xenos et al., 2014). Therefore, regular incidental exposure to political issues and events on social media potentially results in a greater political engagement with these issues online via commenting, liking, and sharing. This becomes only possible when social media engagement is organic and uncontrolled.

In the context of the ever-shrinking fully functioning public sphere and suppressed media freedoms in Russia, the opportunities for the active public relations role in building a fully functioning society become lackluster. Today, the Russian public sphere is largely controlled and, to some extent, artificially constructed (e.g., online via trolls). Until recently, however, the Internet and social media played an important role in enabling political participation and engagement in Russia, fulfilling an important societal role of facilitating engagement, mobilization, and coalition building, and contributing to the discussions within the Russian public sphere. For many years, the Russian Web, collectively known as Runet, has been largely unregulated, and, for this reason, online activism was integral to the emergence of the protest movement in Russia in 2011–2012.

According to online Internet statistics database Statista (2015), Russia has the highest Internet penetration rate in Europe (61.3%), the third highest share of population in Eastern Europe using mobile broadband Internet (53%), and ranks as one of the top-10 countries in the world by Internet users (87.3

million). Statistics on social media usage are equally impressive. About 69.2 million Russians are social media users, which constitute approximately 47% of Russian population (146 million people) or 79.3% of all Internet users.

One of the major characteristics of Runet is a variety of social media through which Russians not only communicate, but also gain information on what is happening in the country and in the world. Russians are avid social media consumers: 93% of all Internet users own a social network account and about 73% of them are active users (Statista, 2015).

Online political engagement in Russia is preconditioned by the existing social media landscape, a variety of social network platforms that are either uniquely Russian or Western: (1) Vkontakte.ru, a Russian imitation of Facebook with 46.6 million users; (2) Odnoklassniki.ru, a social networking website that connects classmates and colleagues with 31.5 million users; (3) MoiMir, a Russian-language photo-sharing and social platform with 16.6 million users; (4) Russian-language Facebook with 21.7 million users; (5) Russian-language blogging platform LiveJournal with 15.2 million users; and (6) Russian-language Twitter with 7.7 million users ("Socialnie Seti Rossii," 2016; see Table 1). According to Reuter and Szakonyi (2015), Western and Russian social media have different impacts on political engagement because the former are more politicized by Russian political elites.

Although Russian Internet users are some of the most active in the world (Statista, 2015), the patterns of social media use have been gradually changing over the past three years since the mass protests of 2011–2012. As evident from Table 1, use of both Russian-based and U.S.-based social media platforms has decreased, with fewer people engaging with content. Although Russian activists have refocused their social media strategies onto the Western social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LiveJournal, in recent years, overall activity by Russian users on these platforms has been slowly decreasing. For example, Facebook user activity and engagement remain relatively low and Twitter activity has dropped significantly ("Socialnie Seti Rossii," 2016; see Table 1).

Table 1. Social Media Usage Trends in Russia (2013–2015).

	Average number of visitors per month (millions)			Average active authors per month (millions)		
Platform	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015
Vkontakte.ru	52.1	53.6	46.6	18.1	21.5	18.8
Odnoklassniki.ru	40.8	38.7	31.5	2.5	1.4	1.12
Facebook	23.4	24.5	21.7	2.3	1.12	1.5
MoiMir.ru	25.9	23.7	16.6	1.1	1.02	1.05
LiveJournal	18.3	16.4	15.2	0.18	0.13	0.11
Twitter	8.3	7.4	7.7	1.7	1.6	0.83

Note. Aggregated data from "Socialnie Seti Rossii" (2016).

Due to significant differences in use and member characteristics of different social media platforms, all of them played a different role in the social uprising that led to the protest movements of 2011–2012. The next section examines the case of the White Revolution, the protest movement preceding the presidential elections of 2012, and discusses the role of social media in it.

White Revolution: A Case Study

In 2011, after serving four years as a prime minister, Vladimir Putin announced that he would run for the presidency once again in 2012. Given the changes made to the Russian constitution in 2008 that extended a presidential term from four to six years, this announcement caused a wave of discontent among the Russian elite and the growing middle class (Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015). The discontent and mounting dissatisfaction with Putin's policies were partially preconditioned by the prominent anticorruption blogger and opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who had been actively campaigning against Putin's government, which was dominated by the United Russia party, and who used a variety of public relations and social media techniques to attract attention to his cause (Orttung & Walker, 2013). Thanks to his prominent online presence and a catchy slogan for the anticorruption campaign, "United Russia party is the party of crooks and thieves," Navalny was able to earn notoriety and online celebrity status (Balmforth, 2011).

On December 4, 2011, Putin's United Russia party took 49.3% of the votes in the parliamentary elections, an outcome that surprised many observers who expected the party to easily win the elections (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). The results were immediately marred with accusations of electoral fraud, when dozens of videos of tampering with the ballot boxes surfaced on the Internet (Meredith, 2013). Electoral violations ranged from ballot stuffing to "carousel voting," in which the same United Russia supporter would vote multiple times (Balmforth, 2011). According to Enikolopov, Korovkin, Petrova, Sonin, and Zakharov (2013), the estimated ballot fraud accounted for about 11% of United Russia's results.

Allegations of electoral fraud ignited one of the biggest protest movements in post-Soviet Russia. These political protests were significant for a number of reasons, one of which was that the protests happened in the context of Putin's tremendous popularity and second that much of the mobilization for these protests was done via social media (Meredith, 2013). According to the activist Aleksandr Morozov, videos of ballot box manipulations played a significant role in awakening the burgeoning Russian Internet and bringing people from behind their computers onto the streets:

> Social networks have played an enormous role in demonstrating just how the elections took place. Thanks to social networks, election observers for the first time were able to speak widely about the violations and disgraces that they saw at polling stations. (Balmforth, 2011, para. 16)

The first spontaneous rally against fraudulent elections occurred on December 5, 2011, after the United Russia party had officially declared a victory. Mobilized through Navalny's Twitter (135,750 followers in 2011; 1.62 million followers in 2016) and LiveJournal (61,184 followers in 2011; the blog has

moved since), approximately 5,000 protesters gathered in Moscow to demand cancelation of the election results. Consequently, Navalny was arrested for organizing an unsanctioned protest and was sentenced to 15 days in prison, an act that transformed him from an online leader to an offline one (Barry, 2011b). In fact, prior to the December 2011 protests, Navalny was mainly known within the context of Russian blogosphere (Barry, 2011b). Mainstream Russian media did not feature Navalny in any of the stories on protests until September 2012, when Navalny was charged with organizing a massive riot (Orttung & Walker, 2013).

Russian mainstream media attempted to ignore or disregard the movement; however, in the immediate aftermath of the parliamentary elections and in competition with alternative Internet sources of information, national television channels demonstrated some effort to present a believable picture of what had transpired. The protests had been happening every day in more than 100 cities across Russia starting December 4, 2011, yet the state television had been noticeably quiet, airing the images of protesters for the first time only on December 8, 2011 (Balmforth, 2011; Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015). During this time, opposition leader and blogger Navalny was able to communicate and mobilize his supporters mainly via social media platforms such as Twitter and LiveJournal.

On December 10, 2011, protesters were able to obtain a permit for a peaceful demonstration on Bolotnaya Square in Moscow, attracting almost 50,000 participants (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). Activist Ilya Klishin is credited with creation of the first Facebook event page issuing an initial call for demonstration on Facebook. The event page quickly became popular, receiving more than 30,000 "accepts" in two days (Meredith, 2013).

A similar page on Vkontake.ru attracted approximately 7,000 followers who pledged to show up. As a result, massive and peaceful protests against fraudulent elections were held across Russia, with an estimated 50,000 people gathered in Moscow and 10,000 in Saint Petersburg, and ended with about 1,000 arrests (Batty, 2011). Starting with the December 10 rally, protesters had formulated their demands, ranging from the resignation of the head of the Russian Central Election Commission to annulment of the election results to freedom of political prisoners (Batty, 2011).

As momentum was growing, the protest on December 24, 2011, attracted an estimated attendance ranging from 30,000 to 120,000 people, considering the constant flow of the crowd (Bratersky & Krainova, 2011). The December 24 protest also attracted major oppositional politicians and activists, including anticorruption blogger Alexei Navalny, former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, activist and former world chess champion Garry Kasparov, and oppositional politicians Boris Nemtsov and Ilya Yashin.

Disrupting Social Media Use

Although the protests were largely peaceful, attempts at disrupting them were made by the government and pro-government supporters. Journalists covering the events reported that 3G Internet was blocked on the square, preventing people from sharing updates of protests on social media (Batty, 2011). In addition, prior to and on the election day, distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks were reported. According to Roberts and Etling (2011), leading Russian independent media, election

monitoring, and blogging sites experienced DDoS attacks. The attacks, directed to websites publicizing submissions on elections violations, were interpreted as a coordinated effort to inhibit publications about violations. Among the affected platforms were the LiveJournal blogging platform, election-monitoring group Golos (golos.org), Echo of Moscow radio station, *Kommersant* newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, and Slon.ru.

Alexanyan (2013) argued that attacks were politically motivated and their purpose was to cripple online dialogue and mobilization. Other observers suggested that the goal of the attacks was to desensitize online audiences against such attacks and to demonstrate that these sources are not reliable ahead of the presidential elections in March 2012 (Roberts & Etling, 2011). Kerr (2011) similarly observed that the goal of the attacks on LiveJournal was to fragment the "dense political discourse network" (para. 9). These attacks were also an attempt to prevent the Russian society from achieving a rational consensus on the issue of elections and contributing to debates in the fully functioning public sphere.

Experts estimate that the DDoS attacks were partially responsible for forcing Russian activists, independent Russian media, and publics to explore alternative platforms with Western-based servers, such as Facebook, Twitter, and even Google Docs (Roberts & Etling, 2011). Many activists and media created mirror accounts on social media to ensure the flow of information, despite some of the disadvantages of these platforms, for example, character limit on Twitter, limited space for extended posts on Facebook, and Google's requirement to post under real names. Alexanyan (2013) argued that thanks to the DDoS attacks, activists and independent media were prepared to switch to alternative accounts during the protests in case their main platforms got blocked. According to Orttung and Walker (2013), ensuring that information was shared online generated massive response within the Russian blogger community and further contributed to the mobilization call, highlighting the important role of social media in a fully functioning society.

Social Media-Enabled Innovations in Political Engagement and Mobilization

The protest movement continued well into 2012 in anticipation of the March presidential elections, yet with innovative public relations strategies for mobilization and coordination afforded by social media-enabled crowd sourcing and information sharing (Alexanyan, 2013). Asmolov (2012) observed several innovations related to political engagement through social media in Russia during the 2011–2012 protest movement. Among the most inventive was the creation of online platforms for political coordination such as the League of Voters website (Ligaizbirateley.ru) and event-specific websites such as Dec24.ru and Feb.26.ru, none of which exists any more. There was also a concerted effort to produce and distribute opposition symbols and content, such as white ribbons, because of which the movement was later labeled the "White Revolution" (Bulay, 2012).

New forms of protests also emerged, the most notable among them were car-based rallies and one-person protests. Due to Russia's restrictive law on mass demonstrations, the protesters were forced to get creative. For example, in January and February 2012, using online technologies, activists organized a car-based protest in which cars marked with white ribbons circulated a specific area of town, which were agreed on using social media platforms dedicated to protests, such as Facebook and Vkontakte pages.

These protests mobilized thousands of cars ranging from luxury to old Soviet models and were greeted by pedestrians on sidewalks also wearing white ribbons (Bulay, 2012). Such creativity allowed the circumvention of restrictions on mass demonstrations and made the enforcement of restrictions difficult (Alexanyan, 2013).

Furthermore, Russian law does not require permission for a one-person protest. On January 15, 2012, civil activist Olesya Shmagun stood alone across from Putin's office with a poster that read "Putin, come on, come out and take part in public debates" (Shmagun, 2012). She was questioned by police and was asked to move to the side, but was never arrested. Many in the offline world did not see her silent and sole protest, but her LiveJournal blog entry about the protest received significant traction online and was widely shared on social media and by media outlets (Asmolov, 2012). Such a unique strategy to bypass laws on mass demonstrations led to the creation of the Big White Circle Action flash mob, which was organized, facilitated, managed, and publicized online using social media, and the specially developed online tool Feb26.ru, which does not exist any more. The idea behind the flash mob was to cover a circular road around Moscow, known as the Garden Ring, with a multitude of one-person protests on February 26, 2012. The website, designed specifically to coordinate the protest, allowed activists to check in on their protest locations to see what locations were already occupied (Asmolov, 2012). The White Circle protest received significant coverage by international and online media, yet the main federal channels remained silent and did not broadcast any images of these protests (Khokhlova, 2012).

Social media and other online technologies equipped activists with several instruments for political engagement and empowered many grassroots political initiatives, such as election-monitoring activism and an alternative system of election monitoring in Russia. Many people volunteered to monitor elections and to report violations online via dedicated websites such as the Map of Violations (Alexanyan, 2013). Another innovation of political engagement afforded by social media was an attempt by opposition leaders to be transparent and to engage public in the decision-making processes concerning protest organization. For example, Facebook and SurveyMonkey were used to poll protesters regarding their preferences on rally speakers. In addition, protest organizers were moderately successful in crowdfunding some of the events via online fundraising tools (Asmolov, 2012). These successes demonstrated the importance and utility of social media and public relations in fulfilling its societal function to contribute to a fully functioning society by enabling political engagement both online and offline via mobilization, coalition building, and ensuring a fully functioning public sphere.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2012, oppositional leaders were able to regularly attract crowds for rallies "For Fair Elections" across Russia. Putin's re-election on March 5 attracted a significant crowd of 25,000 people. The protesters were also able to obtain a permit to demonstrate on March 10, gathering between 10,000 and 25,000 people. Two smaller unsanctioned protests took place on March 18 and April 8 in Moscow. In addition, the protest movement attracted supporters around the world, when similar rallies were held in Germany, Israel, and the United States (Kostyukova, 2012).

The protest movement culminated on May 6–7, 2012, during the presidential inauguration festivities, when approximately 20,000 people took to the streets, resulting in violent clashes with the police. The demonstration began as a peaceful march known as the "March of Millions," but turned chaotic

when protesters tried to reach the Bolotnaya Square, which was sanctioned by authorities for the protest. The square along the Moscow River was sheltered by a column of riot police officers in full riot gear, preventing the crowd from entering it and causing a prolonged confrontation (Parfitt, 2012). Barry and Schwirtz (2012) reported that 400 protesters were detained (including Navalny) and 80 were injured. This protest became a turning point in the protest movement as enthusiasm had been waning in view of the limited achievements of the movement and from the shock of sudden violence (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). This was the beginning of an official government crackdown on the prodemocratic protest movement, free Internet, and fully functioning society.

How the Success of the White Revolution Doomed Runet

The relatively unregulated nature of the Russian Internet in 2011–2012 had created many opportunities for civil actors to mobilize resources, build coalitions of political forces, exert social influence, and promote social change. Social networks and the Internet allowed the protest movement, a critical element of a fully functioning society, to expand and solidify its networks offline and to create convergent forms of online collective actions. The political protests in Russia against fraudulent elections in 2011–2012 demonstrated that the Internet and social media empower a fully functioning society, fostering social change. However, opportunities for political engagement and mobilization afforded by social media could not go unnoticed by the concerned Russian government. As a result, the accomplishments of the 2011–2012 protest movement encouraged the government crackdown on Internet, restraining the empowering capabilities of social media in Russia.

The successes of the White Revolution condemned the freedom of the Russian Internet, affecting a fully functioning public sphere in several ways. First, the Russian government developed and introduced a set of laws to inhibit political engagement online, including mobilization and coalition building. Second, the government has attempted to re-create the state through cyberspace, fostering self-censorship and disempowering publics. Third, the activities of progovernment forces online crippled and forged online dialogue, creating distorted communication within the Russian public sphere.

Legal Constrains for Political Engagement on the Russian Internet

Since the 2011–2012 protests against fraudulent elections, much of which mobilization had been done via social media, the Russian government has equipped itself with a legal arsenal, allowing it to block unwanted content and curtailing online participation and mobilization. According to Freedom House (2014), Russia's legal media environment had been considered favorably up until 2006, when Russian authorities began enacting the Law Against Extremist Activities. This law regulates the dissemination of information related to extremism and extremist activities, which are broadly defined in the document, making the law "open to abuse and arbitrary application," according to media lawyer Andrei Richter (as cited in Amos, 2015, para. 4). Under this law, three warnings would result in shutting down a media outlet.

Importantly, the three Russian-based social networks have been forced to comply with this law, which presents challenges for the development of the Russian public sphere, political dissent, and political

mobilization; Russian activists generally avoid them because of the fear of persecution (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). According to the bill, introduced in August 2014, a mandatory verification for social network users is now required ("Publishing Private Information," 2014). For example, to create an account on Vkontake.ru, users must verify their identity via text message to a cell phone number, which is sold in Russia only with passport information. This makes Russian-based social networks undesirable for political opposition, expression of political opinion, and even political mobilization (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015).

With the onset of the protest movement, the Russian government also has been actively discussing ways to bring the Western social media platforms under control (Englund, 2011). Among the legislation initiated in the aftermath of the White Revolution, three major laws stand out: (1) The law on "gay propaganda" bans content that promotes nontraditional sexual relationships to minors; (2) the information security law covers data localization requirements as well as sets rules for bloggers (bloggers whose daily readership reaches 3,000 people must register as media); and (3) the law on foreign media ownership limits foreign media ownership to no more than 20% of the assets.

These laws significantly impact Internet freedom and online political engagement. The law on gay propaganda and the information security law allow Russian authorities to filter the Web and to create a blacklist of sites that could be blocked on Russian territory. The legislation intentionally uses vague wording, leaving many loopholes for the government to shut down websites that mention "prohibited" topics indirectly or in passing. In addition, Russian communications regulator Roskomnadzor was charged with creating and administering a register of blacklisted websites that disseminated information in violation of the appropriate legal procedures. Since the enactment of the law, 806,635 domains have been blacklisted, and 4,640 websites have been blocked on the grounds of extremist, offensive, and pornographic content, 96% of which were blocked illegally ("Roskomsvoboda," 2015).

The information security law also allows the government to block social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LiveJournal on Russian territory if these websites do not comply with legal requirements to operate in Russia ("Russia Enacts," 2014). Such requirements include the provision of access to the users' data for Roskomnadzor, maintaining metadata archives on servers located in Russia, and storing all online traffic for a period of six months (Milashina, 2014). On September 24, 2014, Roskomnadzor officially demanded that Facebook, Twitter, and Google obey this law and have Russian-based servers by September 2015. According to Schenchner and White (2014), all social media companies have been largely complying with the law. Google, eBay, and Apple have agreed to store personal data of Russians on servers that are located on Russian territory and have already outsourced data storages to fulfill requirements of the law ("Google and eBay Bow," 2015).

Talking about the Russian law requiring Facebook, Twitter, and Google to comply with Russia's law on extremist activities and to fulfill block orders from Roskomnadzor, Russian parliamentarian Mikhail Degtyaryov said, "We know what happens to countries that don't limit extremist activity online—that's the 'Arab Spring' . . . Russia doesn't need that" (Schenchner & White, 2014, para. 16). As of May 2, 2015, fines for inciting extremism have increased 10-fold from 100,000 rubles to 1 million rubles, adding to mounting pressure on independent media (Amos, 2015).

The compliance with the data localization requirements by major Internet services and social networks significantly affects online political engagement and the ability of society to fully function. It produces covert control because local servers will be under Russian jurisdiction, allowing the Russian government to obtain the information in a much easier way, even though a proper court order is still required (Kozlovsky, 2015). This creates additional vulnerabilities to Internet users in Russia, forcing them to self-guard and self-censor, which makes it an ideal form of government control.

Disempowered Publics and Empowered State

Although officially the Russian Internet is largely unregulated and uncensored, through a complex set of laws, the Russian government is able to exert significant control over the Internet. In addition, advances in technologies have allowed the Russian government to develop covert and more effective instruments of monitoring and control of the Russian Web, significantly limiting the Russian Web's empowering capabilities (Soldatov & Borogan, 2011). For many Russians, control of the Internet is not visible and, therefore, insignificant because the government does not openly censor or block large portions of Runet (Meredith, 2013). Rohozinski and Deibert (2010) argued that open censorship of the Internet was never a strategy of the Russian government. Instead, the main approach to controlling Runet was "designed to shape and affect how information is received by users rather than denying access outright" (Rohozinski & Deibert, 2010, p. 16).

Given the legal arsenal with which the Russian government has equipped itself, Asmolov (2010) argued that Russia tries to develop a sovereign Internet with the goal that is

> more far reaching than controlling the flow of information. Actually, the model recognizes the lack of ability to manage this type of control . . . this model aims at recreating the state through cyberspace and encouraging citizens to stay within this framework. (para. 4)

This reflects today's reality: With the first documented lawsuits and fines of social media users for commenting, sharing, and liking content on social media, many have become wary of getting tagged, joining groups, and sharing content on social media sites in Russia (Bogrand, 2014). In many ways, the success of Russian authorities in gaining control over the Internet, social media, and online political engagement depends on fostering self-censorship among Russian social media users to behave online within the legal framework. Such self-censorship disempowers publics by controlling their individual online communicative behavior and, thus, political engagement in general.

Whereas social media have empowered political opposition and facilitated online political engagement in Russia, particularly during the protests of 2011–2012, the Russian government also benefited from social media and the activists' voluntary sharing of information. Russian government agencies have been increasingly using the Internet and social media to collect intelligence on the opposition's movements, which has allowed them to anticipate and potentially obstruct their actions. This has created significant challenges for political dissent and freedom of expression in Russia because the

notion of openness and accessibility of social media and Internet are what make them both a tool of empowerment and oppression (Meredith, 2013).

Distorted Communication: Managing Political Engagement Online

Whereas the start of the protest movement was celebrated and attributed to the liberating powers of the Internet and social media, its windup brought the bitter realization that "social media in Russia is being increasingly penetrated by the Russian state and prostate forces, and that these forces are adapting their strategies to exploit the social media fetishism of Russian civil society activists" (Meredith, 2013, p. 96). The progovernment actors were able to monopolize and control the public sphere with their issues and messages, eliminating rational debate and thus limiting the fully functioning public sphere essential for a fully functioning society.

The Russian progovernment forces and Russian nationalists were prepared to adopt Internet technology to promote their position from the start. For example, in December 2011, the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi (means "ours") began organizing pro-Putin protests to counter the opposition's effort to mobilize protesters via Facebook and other social media. According to Barry (2011a), to offset the influence of the protesters, thousands of pro-Putin supporters had been mobilized and were bused in from other regions to attend progovernment rallies on Red Square. Meredith (2013) argued that pro-Putin supporters developed an early cognizance regarding the potential of social media to transform online support into a real-life support. Nashi, with the support of the government, attempted to influence social media, including setting up fake social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Vkontakte, bribing bloggers, and paying people to participate in pro-Putin rallies (Sidorenko, 2012). Similar to protest organizers, Nashi set up a page on Vkontakte to mobilize supporters and to take advantage of the organizational and logistical benefits of social media. Multiple event pages on Vkontakte and Facebook for "Anti-Orange Rallies" (a reference to the Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" of 2004) had been created, attracting a number of supporters. The recruitment for rallies was additionally conducted via the casting website massovki.ru, offering various forms of financial compensation for participating in political events ("Politicheskie Massovki," 2012).

The domination of the online public sphere by progovernment actors created an additional "front" that needed to be fought by activists and civil society leaders. As Morozov (2011) explained, "those who care about promoting freedom and democracy in Russia now have to fight not just the state but also various nonstate actors" (p. 253) who either directly or indirectly support Putin's regime and its main postulates (Nashi, for example). The savvy use and abuse of social media by progovernment actors allowed "the nonstate enemies of democracy" (Morozov, 2011, p. 256) to be empowered by social media to a greater extent than the state itself was disempowered by social networks.

The escalating penetration of state and prostate forces on Russian social media and the Internet has generated an unhealthy environment and has artificially constructed the public sphere, in which genuine opinion and self-expression sink in the sea of fake, prepackaged messages, realizing Castells's (2001) prediction that Internet can "free the powerful to oppress the uninformed" (p. 275). By distorting

information and forging online dialogue, the Russian government has attempted to extend its power online, indirectly control freedom of expression, and thus manage political engagement on the Internet.

Conclusion

The 2011–2012 protest movement in Russia was a turning point for the sociopolitical situation in Russia. Widely celebrated as a rebirth of civil society in Russia, the movement has been called the "White Revolution," "Facebook revolution," and even "social media revolution" (Jaitner, 2013; Meredith, 2013). There is no doubt that social media were logistically useful for mobilization and organization of protests, but the idea that the Internet and social media have transformed Russian civil society must be approached with caution. The notion that the Internet and social media are inherently free and prodemocratic, effectively fostering a fully functioning public sphere and building a fully functioning society, may not be valid in the Russian context.

This study has illustrated how the successes of the protest movement initiated a government crackdown on the Russian Internet and social media, with the Russian government actively seeking to tame and control communicative processes online through a set of laws regulating online activity, increasing the presence of government and progovernment forces online, and fostering self-censorship. The analysis suggests that the extensive and covert control of the online public sphere may disempower publics, making social media less capable of enabling a fully functioning society. The case illustrates effective mobilization and coalition building via social media during the political protests of 2011–2012; however, the growing control of the Internet and online public sphere may affect the publics' ability to do so in the future, thus making Russian society less functional.

According to Sommerfeldt (2013), society relies on a fully functioning public sphere to build a fully functioning society. This case study has demonstrated the dangers of the government and progovernment elements monopolizing the public sphere with their agenda, which replaces rational consensus with managed discussion and fake dialogue. The growing control over the online public sphere in Russia creates distorted communication and limits the fully functioning public sphere. Such a state of affairs may prevent effective mobilization and coalition building in the future, an essential function of publics in a fully functioning society.

Furthermore, the control of the Internet and social media creates barriers for publics' engagement and participation. Online political engagement plays an important role in the public sphere because of its function of attracting attention to diverse issues using public relations and social media. Public relations, in turn, creates conditions that facilitate engagement by empowering publics (activist publics in this case) and providing publics with tools of communication and relationship building to choose and affect issues that are publicly considered within the sphere, hence enabling a fully functioning society. Svensson (2014) argued that online political engagement depends on how engaged users are on social media. Yet, in Russia, since the protests, political engagement on social media has been gradually decreasing both on Russian-based and Western-based social networks ("Socialnie Seti Rossii," 2016).

Consequently, without the fully functioning public sphere, public relations cannot fulfill its societal role in helping to achieve a fully functioning society. With forged dialogue, paid trolls, commentators, and bloggers, social media in Russia may not always serve as a conduit for dialogue and transparency.

The sophisticated and covert control of Russian Internet constrains empowering capabilities of social media and, thus, extends government influence over online political engagement in Russia, making public relations less effective and Russian society less functional. In other words, social media and the Internet empower Russian state and progovernment elements to the same or to a greater degree as oppositional political activists, neutralizing online political engagement. For this reason, social media in Russia may not possess the same empowering capabilities that enable a fully functioning society. Because a fully functioning society emphasizes the importance of ideas and meaning in collective decision making and problem solving (Heath, 2006), freedom of the Internet and freedom of expression are essential.

There are many reasons why the protest movement has died, but they are all united by the same goal of taming and managing political engagement to the benefit of the state. First, the government and progovernment supporters quickly learned from the protesters and successfully co-opted and used the same Internet and social media strategies for mobilization and information dissemination. Second, the particularities of online political engagement in Russia created circumstances in which protesters valued the experience of mobilization more than the advancement of any specific political agenda or cause. In addition, recent laws significantly impact Internet freedom, the last bastions of free expression in Russia, and effectively put social media under government control.

Despite the covert control, social networks may still play a significant role in empowering and fostering political will of the active and engaged social media users in Russia. According to Alexanyan (2013), civil participation in Russia has its roots in interpersonal social networks that serve not only as an independent source of information, but more so as a conduit for interpersonal communication, potentially liberating its users and fostering free expression. Future studies must examine and explore opportunities for empowering and enabling a fully functioning society in an environment where social media and political engagement are constrained. The arguments from this study may also be expanded and refined by examining other countries, such as China, which also strives to extend its influence online by developing a sovereign Internet.

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