



Selected Papers of #AoIR2018:  
The 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Montréal, Canada / 10-13 October 2018

## **POLITICS, ACTIVISM AND TROLLING ON THE RUSSIAN INTERNET**

### Panel description

In the years that have passed since the social media powered protest movement of 2011-2012 (Lonkila 2017), the Russian government has dramatically expanded its restrictions on the Internet, while simultaneously consolidating its grip on traditional media (Hutchings & Tolz 2015; Nocetti 2015; Vendil Pallin 2017). The Internet, which long provided a space for alternative media and free speech to blossom, is becoming increasingly restricted by a growing corpus of legislation and expanding state surveillance. With legally ill-defined prohibitions on, e.g., offending the feelings of religious believers, propagating 'non-traditional family values' and disseminating 'extremism' in place, online freedom of speech in Russia is at threat. Indeed, according to a 2017 Human Rights Watch report, "[s]tate intrusion in media affairs has reached a level not seen in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union" (2017: 1). Meanwhile, the Russian state continues to refine its skills in covertly manipulating online discourses, as it has quite successfully practiced it since the 2000s (Stähle & Wijermars 2014; Zvereva 2016).

At the same time, because of its transnational configuration, the Internet continues to evade comprehensive state control and offers ever new opportunities for disseminating and consuming dissenting opinions. The Russian new mediasphere develops rapidly, bringing forth innovative forms of publication and participation from the (g)local to the national level. Developments over the past two years, including the series of anti-corruption mass protests organised by opposition leader Aleksei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, have demonstrated how online challenges to the status-quo are still able to gather momentum and create 'real world' political turbulence. The panel presents a multifaceted investigation of how the Russian-language segment of the Internet, often dubbed Runet, is shaped by and gives shape to online politics and activism. How should we understand the particular complexities of these contestations between an increasingly authoritarian state and its citizens? How are these processes facilitated or hampered by the infrastructural conditions created by national and global media industries and internet companies?

The first two papers examine the leading voices of political opposition and activism in Russia: Aleksei Navalny and Ksenia Sobchak. Whereas presidential candidate Sobchak has been granted access to traditional media, unparalleled in recent memory for an

'opposition' candidate, social media play a central role in her presidential campaign. Yet it is also on social media where the fiercest attacks on her credibility are launched. Navalny, on the other hand, has been banned from running for president and is shunned by state-loyal media. Using Youtube as its main platform, his recent campaign against state corruption has been extremely successful in achieving political mobilisation. An important aspect of the politicization of Runet, is its transnational impact. The third paper, examining the politics of Wikipedia in the context of nationbuilding in Belarus, sheds light onto how these tensions play out in those regions where Russian-language and national language online spheres overlap and compete. In the case of Belarus, the question of language tends to be interpreted in a directly political sense: challenging the dominance of Russian at the expense of Belarusian is read as an act of challenging Russia's influence in Belarusian affairs.

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# IS A WOMAN'S PLACE IN THE KITCHEN? INTERNET MEMES AND KSENIA SOBCHAK'S PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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This paper explores online responses to Ksenia Sobchak's presidential campaign since her announcement of officially running for Russian presidency in 2018. Sobchak (also known as the Russian Paris Hilton) is one of the key female celebrity figures in Russia. She gained her status both due to her entrepreneurship as a TV celebrity and her social capital as the daughter of the late mayor of St Petersburg and 'mentor' to current president Vladimir Putin, Anatoly Sobchak. From a scandalous hostess of a reality TV show in 2004, Ksenia gradually transitioned to the role of celebrity socialite and, increasingly, a political journalist and activist. The paper focuses on online reactions to Sobchak's presidential campaign (October 2017 - March 2018) and includes a complimentary analysis of Sobchak's own use of online resources as a structural part of her official campaign under the motto 'Against everyone'.

Despite an overall negative stance towards feminism in Russia, the number of women in politics has increased over the past 10 years (Johnson 2016). At the same time, the combination of deeply-rooted patriarchal gender norms and the use of sexualization as a tool for political legitimation in Putin's Russia (Sperling 2014) leaves 'virtually no opportunities to advocate for women's interests' (Johnson 2016: 643). A survey conducted by independent pollster Levada Center (2017) indeed showed that around 53 percent of the population in Russia do not envisage a female president in the next 10-15 years. In a society with deeply-rooted patriarchal gender norms, the appetite for women's issues and gender equality thus remains minimal. Sobchak's own, at times contradictory, attempts to navigate these circumstances, oscillating between serving as the embodiment of the feminisation of resistance (e.g., her participation in the 2011-2012 anti-presidential protest movement and her current presidential campaign) and contributing to the trivialisation of emancipatory politics, for instance, while interviewing Pussy Riot (Borenstein, 2013) complicate the inquiry further. Analysing images from Sobchak's presidential campaign and the online reactions to her candidacy, the paper will shed light on the peculiarities of women's political engagement in Russia.

From the very beginning of her campaign, Sobchak has skilfully used social media to add immediacy to her campaign and target those demographics groups with new media consumption patterns (in particular, younger generation of voters). For instance, Sobchak released her candidacy announcement via a YouTube video (Ruptly, 2017). The clip was filmed in the kitchen, perhaps, alluding to both the well-established stereotype of a woman's place in Russian society (the kitchen) and a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky, that states that 'every female cook can be taught how to manage a state'. Famous Russian TV presenter Ivan Urgant, host of the Russian counterpart to American late-night shows (Vechernii Urgant, 2017), has produced a parody of the clip (using similar settings, attire and a blond wig). Still images from both videos were immediately turned into an internet meme.

While other oppositional candidates, in particular Aleksei Navalny, have been banned access to traditional media, Sobchak was given access to a broad spectrum of key state

media outlets to articulate her positions and campaign message. She appeared on numerous TV shows, including popular talk shows presented by Andrei Malakhov and Vladimir Solov'ev on leading TV channel Rossiia 1 and Vladimir Pozner's show on Channel One, and she was interviewed by RT. Sobchak used her prime-time appearances to dispel various allegations against her, such as that she is a tool of the Kremlin (namely, that she made a deal with president Putin and her candidacy serves only to allow him to claim Russian elections embrace free speech and genuine competition) or that she is part of liberal wealthy elite detached from the masses.

Rather than analysing Sobchak's appearances in traditional media, the paper concentrates on the online dimension of the campaign and the responses it has solicited. The Internet memes triggered by Sobchak's campaign and her own official campaign's posters and images are explored with the help of semiotic analysis (Berger, 2018). Examining the images and captions, the paper decodes the meanings produced and interprets them within the Russian socio-cultural context. The material is explored predominantly in regard to the gender dimension. The preliminary analysis of internet memes related to Sobchak's campaign demonstrates the prevalence of pronouncedly negative publicity that includes allusions to her reality TV career and socialite status, her looks, recent motherhood and her assertive communication style (which contradicts traditional models of femininity and tests the limits of patriarchal culture in Russia).

Then, there is a play on the fact that she is the daughter of Putin's former friend, that frames Sobchak's campaign as a tool of the Kremlin: her candidacy serves to create the illusion that Russian elections embrace free speech and involve genuine competition. Finally, the motto adopted by Sobchak - 'I represent the vote against everyone' – has proven controversial and as such constitutes a fruitful ground for analysis. Despite the claim that her campaign is targeted against the political 'establishment', the motto effectively puts Sobchak in opposition to various groups. In the long run, it is used against her and turned into a slogan 'everyone against Sobchak'. The outlook of the Russian electorate, which treated Sobchak with suspicion, dislike and irony throughout her campaign, has translated in voters' support of less than 2 percent and the fourth place in the presidential race.

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# YOUTUBE AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN RUSSIA

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After a five-year hiatus, Russian citizens once again amassed on the streets in their thousands on 26 March 2017 to show their discontent with the federal government. Whereas the 2011-2012 Russian protest movement erupted in response to mass electoral fraud in the parliamentary elections (Gabowitsch 2017) and was mobilized in considerable measure through social networking sites (Lonkila 2017; Reuter & Szakonyi 2013), video sharing platform YouTube played an essential role in mobilizing the recent series of anti-corruption rallies. This paper analyses the specific characteristics of the online cross-media campaigns organized by opposition leader and (banned) presidential candidate Aleksei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation that served as the instigator for the March 2017 and subsequent protests. Using Navalny, who also played a major role in the 2011-2012 protest movement, as its case study, the paper seeks to explain the shift towards YouTube as a central online platform for political activism in Russia and shed light on how the platform enables and shapes particular forms of engagement and mobilization. Scholarship on the political and societal aspects of YouTube in Russia has thus far examined the role of the platform in, e.g., public scandals (Toepfl 2011); gendered activism (Sperling 2012); and, pro-Putin propaganda (Fedor & Fredheim 2017). The rise of YouTube as primary platform for oppositional politics has yet to be comprehensively studied.

The paper departs from the following set of research questions: What is the role of YouTube as an enabling platform for political activism in Russia; how should we understand its importance vis-à-vis and interconnections with other online platforms, social media and messaging services in facilitating political mobilization? To what extent can the rise of YouTube-based activism in Russia be explained by 1) developments in Russian internet governance and regulatory mechanisms, and 2) global online media trends? To answer these questions, the paper focuses on the protest campaigns run by Aleksei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation over the course of the years 2017-2018 (e.g., the investigations concerning prime minister Dmitrii Medvedev and the alleged ties between oligarch Oleg Deripaska and Deputy Prime Minister and Chief of Staff of the Russian Government, Sergei Prikhodko).

The paper first provides an overview of the online platforms used for expressing political criticism and organizing protest in Russia from the early 2000s onwards, e.g., LiveJournal, Vkontakte, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram (Greene 2014; Koltsova & Shcherbak 2014; Nikiporets-Takigawa 2014; Podshibiakin 2010; Toepfl 2017). It includes a brief discussion of the importance of SNS and other platforms in the 2011-2012 protest movement (Oates 2013; Smyth & Soboleva 2016). The section explores to what extent these shifts in preference for a given platform were connected to or necessitated by governmental measures restricting particular media or forms of online freedom of speech (Soldatov 2017), or the state's attempts at "proactively subverting and co-opting social media for their own purposes" (Gunitsky 2015). For example, it can be argued that the so-called Bloggers' law (in force 2014-2017), which required online resources, including blogs, with more than 3000 daily visitors to register with media

watchdog Roskomnadzor and adhere to the restrictions effective for mass media in Russia, may have negatively affected the political blogging scene in Russia.

The second part of the paper analyses the rise of YouTube in Russia and, in more general terms, the shift from bloggers (e.g., LiveJournal) to vloggers (e.g., YouTube). It places these developments in the context of similar global trends. The section addresses the extent to which the Russian government has (up until now, mostly unsuccessfully) sought to control the video sharing platform, and elucidates the fundamental differences between strategies for and effectiveness of Russian internet controls that target national (e.g., leading SNS Vkontakte) and international media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram). The role played by the major internet companies (Google, Facebook) in enabling or facilitating censorship is examined.

The paper then delves more deeply into the case study of Navalny's YouTube-based campaigns of 2017-2018. It includes an examination of how YouTube functions within a wider interconnected network of platforms and apps (e.g., Telegram, the Foundation's website, Instagram, Vkontakte) in these online cross-media campaigns. It analyses to what extent this multiplatform embeddedness effectively serves to counteract top-down censorship attempts.

Finally, the paper formulates expectations for the future functioning of the platform with regard to facilitating political activism and signals potential alternatives. In addition to analyzing the (legal) strategies used to prevent the spread of the investigation materials (e.g., website blocking, information removal requests), it reflects on the accusations pronounced by prominent Russian political vloggers against YouTube about failing to prevent that the platform's anti-hate speech measures are abused to isolate oppositional content.

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# WHAT NATIONS DO ON THE INTERNET: THE CASE OF TWO BELARUSIAN WIKIPEDIA PAGES

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Frequent travelers know that when one enters a new country, Google's home page changes by default: while the information one searches for may be in English (or another language), the page itself switches to the country's language. The phenomenon can be seen as a manifestation of 'banal nationalism 2.0', if one adapts the term by M. Billig (Billig 1995) for the internet age. By banal nationalism, in the pre-digital era, Billig meant "the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced". For nations to be imagined as communities, 'reminders' of nationhood are needed, and its banal reproduction is embedded in the routines of life, as national visibility is created through cultural markers that shape 'national frameworks'. Nationhood can be flagged with the hanging of national flags on holidays, representations of important national actors or memorable places on money, local festivals, etc.

As cyberspace emerged as a new terrain where communities struggle for visibility and recognition, an outstanding question is what exactly nations 'do' on the Internet to maintain group integration and national (re)semantization. Like a flag hanging on a public building, online space needs flagging or "reminding" of shared images, representations, and myths. So how is 'national flagging' realized in the digital age, especially in "new" nations? How are "national spaces" flagged in cyberspace? By what means do national actors mark and assert their presence and distinction? These questions address the technologies of national affirmation rather than nationalist ideas *per se*.

An appropriate starting point for exploring the issue could be delving into the process of digital nation building in the post-Soviet region, where for the first time in history the formation of new nation states and a paradigm shift to the information age have been taking place simultaneously. One prominent manifestation of banal nationalism is the use of the national language (which historically has been codified through national academia, school system, and "print capitalism" in general). To explain how national visibility in the digital era may involve the hegemony of language, this presentation focuses on "the strange case" of two Belarusian Wikipedia(s).

Wikipedia, an online collaborative encyclopedia (knowledge system), has experienced tremendous growth since its inception in 2002. With openness (due to) the low cost of participation being one of its distinctive features (Kittur 2007), it has often been highlighted as a success story of low-cost collaborative knowledge systems. According to theorists of 'participatory culture', it attracts a large number of people making small contributions and thus creating a product while driven by the idea of the 'common good'.

However, who does the work on Wikipedia has important implications for the type of knowledge produced. Some prominent Wikipedians argue that a small number of users (administrators), rather than a large socially responsible crowd, are the driving force

behind Wikipedia. This can be the case with Wikipedia versions in national languages in the post-Soviet region, where the encyclopedia is (often) started by driven individuals with an agenda of asserting a national 'cognitive universe' to contest the one in Russian, the regional lingua franca and, historically, the main language of knowledge production.

According to my semi-structured interviews with administrators/activists of Belarusian Wikipedia, they flag nationhood online by doing three things. First, in order to cover information lacunas, they introduce nationally important topics and write entries on historical figures and events which are either not covered or scarcely covered in other encyclopaedias. Second, some believe that any nation, to be fully autonomous intellectually, should have the whole repository of world knowledge available in its national language. To contribute to achieving this goal, they aspire to write (translate) as many articles on "non-national" topics in the Belarusian language as they can. Finally, some activist contributors seek to use Wikipedia as a covert propagandistic vehicle through what they may see as "steering the biases" in the coverage of some topics. Under the pretence of objectivity, they introduce their own visions, cite some facts and omit others, use particular vocabulary, etc.

Comparing the treatment of some 'nationally sensitive' topics in several Wikipedia versions (e.g. Russian, and Belarusian) provides the material to prove this last claim. The Belarusian case is especially representative, as the nation has two somewhat different (Cyrillic) orthographic systems, *Taraszkiewitsa* (after the linguist B. Taraszkiewicz, who published an influential Belarusian grammar textbook in 1918) and a more Russified *narkomauka* (after *narkom*, i.e. a Soviet government official) and, hence, two versions of Belarusian Wikipedia. The one in *Taraskiewitsa* is much smaller, with only about 20 000 articles, compared to more than 150 000 in *narkomauka*. These two national online encyclopaedias demonstrate differences in the treatment of nationally sensitive historical topics (WWII collaboration; the establishment of the Belarusian state; the meaning of socialist development etc.).

The case of national Wikipedia(s) as "propagandistic tools," and especially of two competing national encyclopaedias, adds important evidence to the ongoing debate on the economies of online cooperation. According to one point view, the era of the Internet and online communication ushered in unthinkable possibilities for the development of sharing economies and the production of the "common good" by multiple participants (Benkler 2006). Thus, Wikipedia can be seen as not just another encyclopaedia put into cyberspace, but as a product of shared participation and knowledge management created with the goal of contributing to the public good.

However, this view can be contested with the argument that is based on the concept of the "tragedy of the commons". In the social sciences, the term is used to describe a situation that may arise in a shared-resource system, where individual users acting independently according to their own self-interest behave contrary to the common good of all users by spoiling that resource (Hardin 1968). Wikipedia can be seen as one example of the "tragedy of the commons". Ideally, it is a shared resource/knowledge system, which is expected to be objective and unbiased, because this is in the best interests of all users. However, knowledge is hardly ever objective, for reasons which

have to do with the social conditions of its production, and the new national Wikipedia(s), poised as they are to promote “national” visions and points of view, offer an example of this.

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