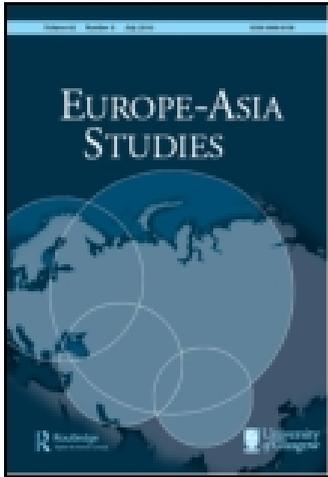


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Mind the Gaps: Media Use and Mass Action in Russia

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Mind the Gaps: Media Use and Mass Action in Russia

REGINA SMYTH & SARAH OATES

IN THE WINTER OF 2011–2012 IN RUSSIA, TENS OF THOUSANDS OF citizens attended protest demonstrations in Moscow and other Russian cities after anger erupted over electoral manipulation in the December 2011 parliamentary elections. In response, the state organised a large number of loyalists to participate in street rallies to support the regime. Similar to other events of mass protest from Occupy Wall Street in the United States (US) to the Los Indignados movement in Spain to the Arab Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, new media played a significant role in the mobilisation of protest in Russia. Yet, the role of new media and the precise mechanisms that link new media use and protest decisions remain the subject of some debate across all of these protest events.

In the Russian case, the prevailing wisdom endorses this wider view of the critical role that new media plays in the mobilisation of opposition. Proponents of this view divide protesters and rally participants by media use: anti-Kremlin protesters are consumers of new media while pro-Kremlin rally participants are consumers of traditional state-controlled media. Writing about the protesters in the *New York Times*, Ellen Barry (2012) noted ‘The critical mass of middle-class professionals that has existed on the internet for years was suddenly a physical fact, close enough to feel the body heat. It seemed like the birth of a new organism’. In contrast, a Levada (2011) poll reported that 89% of United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*—UR) voters received their information from state-controlled television. The causal implication is clear: the dominant narrative of state media engenders support for the regime while the alternative debates and critiques of government available through new media provide the cognitive basis for opposition to the regime.

This debate outlined above focuses on one of three gaps referred to in the title. We undertake an examination of those who allegedly receive their information from ‘traditional’ state-controlled media and those who receive information from new forms of media outside the realm of strong state control. The second possible gap is between those activists who balance their media consumption across a number of outlets and those who draw their information from a single source, thus reinforcing political polarisation. The third gap under investigation for this essay concerns the range of new media platforms used by both pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin activists and investigates a gap between those who seek complementary information online and those who look for conflicting sources of information online.

To explore these gaps, we use surveys conducted with more than 800 Russians who attended both protest and pro-regime types of street actions in late February and early March 2012, with a particular focus on their consumption of information both online and offline. We argue that the patterns of media use among pro-protest and pro-Putin citizens are more complex than implied by the divisions between online and offline or state-controlled and alternative media. The data underscore that while there are distinctive patterns of media use between the anti-Kremlin and pro-Kremlin groups, those patterns are not strictly defined by online and traditional media consumption. Rather, the findings highlight that while the internet creates a new space for political discussion, even among protesters new media remains one of only a number of sources of information that citizens rely on to assess the political situation in Russia, the value of contestation, and the need for reform.

The evolving Russian media environment: melding new media with traditional sources

The ‘gaps’ in the title of this essay refer to three descriptions of media use patterns among political activists on both sides of the political debate in the post-election period. These gaps characterise protesters and rally participants as adhering only to media that supported their political point of view. Moreover, they build on theories of media use that have not yet been tested using individual-level data in the context of Russian protest.

The first gap is between essentially two groups of citizens who are in opposition to each other: those who rely on ‘offline’ news sources, such as state-controlled traditional media, and those who rely on the internet for news. While it is clear that the content, or the supply side, of this expectation is accurate given the biased nature of Russian traditional media (Oates 2013; Oates & Lokot 2013; Freedom House 2013a), the actual evidence for this proposition has been largely anecdotal, based on characterisations of the protesters on Moscow’s streets (Balmforth 2011; Golosov 2011; Lally 2011).

In addition, these expectations also have a theoretical underpinning. The formulation is rooted in cross-national insights about the role that the internet plays in shaping political attitudes—that the digital sphere ‘rewires’ citizens into being more attentive and questioning media consumers (Oates 2013). Even if citizens rely on state-run television to interpret their political reality, the gap between its reporting and even the most cursory information from the online sphere—whether through reading an anti-regime website or merely a text from a friend with reference to the online information—will challenge their trust in traditional media. Finally, the internet can rearrange power structures from vertical to horizontal, opening the possibility that the ineffective and corrupt political institutions may not be the only possibilities to express the public will (Diamond 2012).

The second gap we identify focuses on varying understandings of the mechanisms that citizens use to cope with the politicisation of media outlets and the emergence of a hegemonic state narrative. Whereas citizens around the world accept a certain distance between the ideals as expressed by their government and the reality of everyday life, these ideals in democratic states tend to reflect public opinion and popular culture. Regular elections, in which parties and politicians are forced to win actual public support to stay in office, provide an institutional corrective to regimes that deviate significantly from public opinion. In Russia and other electoral oligarchies the state narrative deviates significantly from the lived experience of the citizens, particularly when it comes to equal access to social services, opportunities, or exposure to the corruption that pervades Russian life and political

competition. This deviation has been particularly obvious in Russia's rigged elections, establishing the basis for claims of electoral fraud in the post-election protests of December 2011 (Smyth *et al.* 2007; White 2011).

The internet and other types of potential opposition media throw up a particular challenge in non-free states that rely heavily on dominating the political narrative in order to continue legitimacy through rigged elections. The coverage of the elections, electoral fraud, and protest provide important examples of the increasing gap between the Kremlin's political reality and the experience of Russian citizens as depicted on a wide range of outlets from the television network *Dozhd* to YouTube, LiveJournal, *Vkontakte*,¹ and Facebook.

To counter this challenge, the state has crafted a stark narrative centred on Vladimir Putin as the guarantor of political stability and the only hedge against the chaos Russians experienced in the tumultuous 1990s (Hale 2011; Rose *et al.* 2011). The substantive content of the media gap pits the state's hegemonic narrative against the range of lived experience in Russia in a critical moment of political competition. As Orttung and Walker (2012) write about the protest events:

The country's unfair and fraud-ridden parliamentary elections on December 4, 2011, brought into sharp relief the dramatically different realities portrayed by new and old media. Russia's growing ranks of internet users collected and disseminated evidence of widespread and blatant electoral abuses, stimulating a response from a wider public that is showing less tolerance for corrupt and manipulative leadership. By contrast, the Kremlin-controlled national television networks, with only minor exceptions, have ignored both the extensive election mischief and demands that Russia's top leadership be held accountable for it.

This state narrative has to 'fill the gap' between aspirations and reality, allowing citizens to have a shared (albeit flawed) view of state capability, efficacy, and accountability. The internet significantly challenges this delicate and complex political game in Russia of negotiating the gap between a vision of a strong, competent state and the reality of Russian society. It is not that all Russian citizens would abandon watching the popular state television channels. Rather, it is that these citizens can no longer enjoy their cherished myths when those narratives are significantly challenged by the online sphere and—even more graphically—tested by the appearance of tens of thousands of protesters on Russian streets.

This essay argues that the relevant issue is not the position of the audience as either online or offline, but the credibility 'gap' that is created as legacy media in authoritarian states stick to pro-Kremlin narratives and 'new' media and social networks challenge these narratives. The critical contribution of this argument is that the link among new information, mass street actions, and growing public debate has a broader impact on both nascent civil society and the regime's strategies to maintain quiescence. The implications of this gap extend beyond consumers of alternative media sources since alternative media generate an independent source of pressure on the government to alter the hegemonic narrative to accommodate, or counter, rival views. A study of the differences in the narratives online and on television during the protest season found that the narrative on state-run television news did shift to reflect more populist views on commercial television news and the internet, with the online coverage far more challenging of the regime's narrative (Oates & Lokot 2013).

¹This is a Russian web platform for blogging and networking. The name means 'in touch' in Russian.

While this shift was by no means permanent, it was a manifestation of how online information flow ‘trickled up’ to affect the state media narrative.

This understanding of Russia’s media environment as starkly divided and deeply politicised raises questions about citizens’ strategies to cope with the dissonance in the media environment. Comparative studies of media use suggest two competing propositions about how Russian citizens might cope with this battle to define political reality. Relying on competing sources of information—the balancing hypothesis—might constitute an important tool for citizens to understand the gap between their private experience with the regime and the regime’s narrative about the existence of unified social support (Toepfl 2013). However, contemporary activists may have already decided on their personal beliefs and only consumed media that reinforced these beliefs, a pattern observed in other countries (Stroud 2008; Garrett 2009; Iyengar & Hahn 2009). We refer to this possibility as the polarisation hypothesis.

The third gap that emerges is concerned with the understanding of the internet as a generic type of evolved information source and the way in which media systems operate in individual countries. Those who seek to apply universal features of the internet, particularly the way in which it creates many-to-many communication that cannot be controlled by top-down censorship, often overlook the structures of individual media systems as well as how political institutions function (or not) within particular countries. Thus, there is a ‘gap’ in how this new method of information distribution is shaped by different media structures, political institutions, and audiences in various countries (Volkov 2012a). In the Russian case, we are interested in the variation in media use by two groups of citizens, protesters and rally participants.

We argue that each of the gaps outlined above is particularly acute in Russia given the rapid evolution of the media environment since the Gorbachev era and recent Kremlin interventions in the media environment. In the next sections, we focus on the structural changes that give rise to our theoretical expectations. These sections characterise the supply side of the media environment that profoundly shapes individual decisions about media use.

The evolution of the Russian media sphere in the internet age

The recent history of Russian media both demonstrates how much media development is linked to a specific history, political system and culture, and illuminates some of the effects of the internet age on domestic media systems. That said, it is important to resist political science narratives such as liberation technology or convergence that rely heavily on the idea that media logics will play out in similar and predictable ways across diverse media systems. In fact, it is these logics in the context of the Russian media environment that yield the gaps we identify above.

Both Soviet and Russian citizens have been enthusiastic consumers of the mass media, even at times when the diversity of the media was quite narrow. The Soviet state adapted the principles of a controlled press in service of the party, as seen in the Soviet Communist media model of the Cold War era (Siebert *et al.* 1963). In this model the key elements of the media system are self-censorship and a clear media mission to inculcate the masses with the tenets of communism. Issues such as truth, objectivity, and balance were irrelevant, as the paramount role of the media was to serve the objectives of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Siebert *et al.* (1963) make a distinction between the Soviet Communist and

the Authoritarian models of the media, noting that the former is aligned with a control for a social purpose while the authoritarian media serve the needs of an oligarchic elite. Both are controlled, but the social control of the Communist model is far more widespread and ambitious.

Thus, the Soviet media system had a wide range of publications and broadcasts, but there was little variation in the message. This *status quo* was challenged in the *glasnost*' era of the late 1980s, in which the Soviet media came to represent a range of messages. Although this period is sometimes portrayed as freedom of the press, in fact there was no fundamental re-orientation of the Soviet media toward a Western model. Rather, different media outlets aligned with different political interests, which created media diversity but no broad sector of the media that championed the public interest. Indeed, Russian citizens were very dismissive of this notion and had little good to say about the media cacophony of the *glasnost*' era in later years (Oates 2006). It is interesting to note the general rejection of a Western model of the media—ranging from the libertarian/US model or the more European notion of a socially responsible media—in Russia. Journalists and citizens alike perceive the media as political players, aligned with significant political/commercial interests in the country (Voltmer 2000; Pasti 2005; Oates 2006).

Russians love television even more than print media (Oates 2006). State-run television has dominated the political sphere in Russia from the Soviet era until the present day. Surveys have consistently identified state-run television as one of the most trusted and authoritative political institutions in the country (Oates 2006, 2013). Commercial television enjoys a much lower level of trust, but the most well established commercial station, National Television (NTV), claims it is available for viewership in almost all of Russia. However, while the Russian authorities have in the past found state-run television to be a particularly effective tool for framing and controlling the political sphere, the power of television in Russia is on the wane, as it is across the globe.

Beneath the monolithic messages of state-run television in Russia there has been significant diversity in media outlets. This includes the liberal newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and the online television station *Dohzhd* (*Rain*), which experienced a surge in viewership during the 2011–2012 protests. In addition, a range of online news outlets such as lenta.ru and bloggers including Aleksei Naval'nyi and organisations such as the opposition coalition *Solidarnost'* have continued to bring a range of voices and information to a media sphere that has resisted adherence to the idea of the media in service to the state. All of these media outlets have experienced oppression, which has increased in recent years and months.

This more expansive range of news and information available online has given Russian citizens far greater exposure to both information and ideas. Studies show that consumers of non-state traditional media are more likely to vote for opposition parties (Oates 2006; Enikolopov *et al.* 2011). These new media outlets have given Russian citizens a new way to engage with that information, from sharing and commenting to actually becoming the news itself *via* street demonstrations.

While the role of the internet will vary in different media ecologies, the unique features of the internet provide yet another alternative to these non-state traditional media sources. Key features include: the internet's ability to create asynchronous, many-to-many communication; the way in which the online sphere fosters networks of individuals outside of state or

corporate control; its relative low cost for both production and consumption of information; and the way in which the internet subverts national controls on information and exposes citizens to global news sources (Oates 2008; Diamond 2012; Rainie & Wellman 2014). While it is difficult to assess the role of the internet across media ecologies, the online sphere is likely to become more influential in states with significant censorship of the traditional media even with lower rates of internet penetration.

From almost no use in 2000, Russia's internet adoption had reached about 45% of the population by the beginning of the 2011–2012 protest cycle. This was the highest rate of growth for any significant European country (Oates 2013). Egypt also experienced an acceleration of growth just prior to the Arab Uprising, reaching about 25% of the population online by January 2011. While it is difficult to make an exact correlation between internet adoption and regime threat, evidence from both the Arab Uprising and the Russian protests would suggest that the rate of adoption is a significant factor that needs to be weighed along with overall penetration.

Like other countries around the globe, Russian internet adoption is linked to youth, a point the government made in a report in 2011 (Russian Federal Agency 2011). Indeed, the figures cited in this report suggest that virtually all of the population under 40 will be online in Russia by 2015. The study also shows that different age groups rely on different media sources, with television fading out among the younger generation to be replaced by online sources, including email portals.

The rise of the internet has enabled online social entrepreneurs, such as Aleksei Naval'nyi, to challenge the dominant media frames on key issues such as state corruption. Naval'nyi rose to prominence through his rospil.ru website that collected documented evidence on official corruption in Russia. While many internet activists could be seen as localised or elite protests, such as those surrounding the development of the Khimki forest near Moscow,² Rospil.ru's focus on corruption deals with an issue that touches the daily lives of all Russians. This was amplified through the popularity of native web platforms for blogging and networking, such as LiveJournal (www.livejournal.ru) and *Vkontakte* (www.vkontakte.ru). Analysts and researchers noted a rise in crowd-sourcing that naturally increased as internet usage spread in Russia and, as discussed above, was a key part of the electoral protests (Oates 2013).

While both the report and analyses on website-tracking companies such as alexis.com show that Russians are more interested in consumer rather than political issues online (as is true virtually everywhere), they are also engaging with a far greater range of sources outside traditional Russian media control. The challenges that the internet brings to the Russian state can be summarised as: very rapid internet adoption in a short time span; a gap between a non-free media and relatively free online sphere; an online/offline divide that reinforces other social cleavages in a country with a very distinctive Soviet and post-Soviet divide; and a young generation that matches advanced Western countries in its internet use and skill (Oates 2013). In the next section, we show how these gaps have been exacerbated by the policies of the Putin regime, thus defining the focus of our empirical inquiry.

²Environmental groups organised protests in 2010 over a planned highway through the Khimki forest on the northern edge of Moscow; see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11101448>, accessed 12 December 2014.

The reassertion of media control in the Putin era

Putin's regime has been marked by increasing attempts to limit all aspects of the media environment. Aimed at both individual journalists and media institutions, these attacks reflect the regime's penchant for combining institutional change with informal interventions to achieve political goals. For example, in 2001, the relatively outspoken *Segodnya* news programme on NTV was reined in by using financial laws to force a change in ownership (Oates 2006). Similarly, in 2002 a law that banned 'extremism' in media coverage was passed as part of a package of anti-terrorism legislation. While this change reflected common concerns about the use of media for radicalisation, this law in Russia also means that officials can interpret a wide range of government opposition as 'extreme'.

Contemporaneously with these efforts, there has been considerable violence against Russian journalists. While the most high-profile case was the 2006 murder of Anna Politkovskaya, who wrote in depth on the Chechen war for the oppositional *Novaya Gazeta*, she was only one of many who have been killed because of their reporting. The Committee to Protect Journalists estimates that 56 journalists were killed for their work in Russia between 1992 and the end of 2013 (Freedom House 2014).³

Not surprisingly, Russia ranks poorly in international measures of media freedom. According to the non-governmental organisation Freedom House, Russia was just below Rwanda and Sudan and ahead of Azerbaijan in 176th place out of 197 countries in the 2012 Freedom of the Press World Rankings. According to Freedom House, media freedom is on the wane in Russia, particularly in the wake of the 2011–2012 protests. In mid-2012, the president and the parliament approved a 'series of repressive, vaguely worded measures that significantly expanded the array of regulatory tools available to stifle legitimate news reporting on politically embarrassing issues and limit the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on media matters' (Freedom House 2013a). As discussed below, manipulation and control of the mass media has significantly increased due to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine.

Despite the challenge of information openness in the online sphere, the Kremlin also controls important 'choke points' of the internet, notably in being able to censor or block particular Internet Protocol (IP) addresses (Caral 2004). More broadly, authoritarian states can limit the internet through repressive regulations on internet-service providers, strangling the speed of information delivery by failing to develop technology infrastructure, monitoring citizens online *via* automation or even human oversight, as well as making examples of cyber-protesters in order to inculcate online self-censorship and fear. All of these actions have been observed in Russia. However, the Russian government has not (at least so far) chosen to pursue widespread internet control on the level of states such as China. This strategy means there is a significant disparity between the relative freedom of the online sphere and the lack of freedom in the traditional media sector as measured by Freedom House and others (Oates 2013). This uneven effort reinforces the gap between the state-led narrative that dominates traditional media and the far broader dialogue online. However, the Russian state is moving to limit the online narrative, using a range of existing 'security' laws to muzzle online outlets, banning

³'56 Journalists Killed in Russia since 1992/Motive Confirmed', *Committee to Protect Foreign Journalists*, available at: <https://cpj.org/killed/europe/russia/>, accessed 12 December 2014.

Naval'nyi from going online, and using a spurious pretext to dismiss the editorial board of the influential lenta.ru news portal.⁴

It is clear that the Russian state began to tighten controls on the online sphere even before the 2011–2012 election cycle (Freedom House 2013a). The Russian government laid some groundwork for dealing with social media platforms in the wake of the nationalist Manezh Square riots in 2010 that began with the murder of a football fan, Egor Sviridov, allegedly by a group of men from the Caucasus. Three days later, football hooligans and nationalist forces joined together to retaliate in central Moscow. Russian media widely attributed the riots and subsequent violence against non-Russian citizens to internet appeals, and passed new regulations limiting extremist speech through new media.

Direct actions against the online sphere in Russia have included denial-of-service attacks against websites that challenged the government, action against individual bloggers such as Naval'nyi as well as a growing level of ownership of online sites by pro-government allies (Freedom House 2013b). In addition, during the first cycle of protest, a number of reports alleged that the Security Services ordered *Vkontakte* founder, Pavel Durov, to shut down group sites that were involved in organising the 24 December 2011 protest at Bolotnaya Square, although he refused to comply (Koshkin 2011).

While the 2012 Freedom on the Net report labelled the post-election period in 2011 as an 'important period of awakening for the Russian digital civil society', the 2013 report sounded a more pessimistic note, arguing that the Russian government was taking more direct action against free speech online. In particular, the report noted that the number of websites classified as 'extremist material' and blocked by the Ministry of Justice increased by about 60% from January 2012 to February 2013 (Freedom House 2013b). In July 2012, the *Duma* passed a law (Federal Law No. 139-FZ) that allows the government to list websites that internet service providers must block. The 2013 Freedom House report found that while this law was allegedly passed to target sites with child pornography or extremist material, it has been used to block sites with legitimate content (Freedom House 2013b). Worryingly, cases of criminal prosecution for online activities increased almost threefold from 38 in 2011 to 103 in 2012, although overall levels remain low (Freedom House 2013b). In July 2012, Russian law was amended to re-criminalise defamation in both traditional and online media (Freedom House 2013b).

The Kremlin's intervention in the media environment in the lead-up to the 2011 parliamentary elections led us to expect that the gaps in media use and content across the state and non-states and online and offline dividing lines will shape activists' media use on both sides of the conflict. Yet, given the complexity of the environment and recent history, we do not expect that these divisions will be uniform within the pro-government and anti-government forces. We also expect that the uncertain political environment and control of media outlets will provide incentives for Russians to revert to traditional strategies to gather political information.

Kitchen talk: personal networks as alternative information sources

Alongside these tectonic shifts in Russia's public media environment between 1991 and 2011, a wide range of evidence suggests that Russians continue to value personal sources of

⁴See, 'Russia [Lenta.ru](http://lenta.ru) Editor Timchenko Fired in Ukraine Row', *BBC News*, 12 March 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26543464>, accessed 25 April 2014.

political information to complement the cacophony generated by the post-Soviet media environment and subsequent crackdown (Rose 2001; Patico 2009). The reliance on personal networks, referred to as close circles by Russian citizens, remains particularly important given the underdevelopment of civic organisations, political parties and interest groups that provide a good deal of political information in established democracies (Hemment 2012; Rose & Mishler 2010; Richter & Hatch 2013).

Russian citizens have a time-honoured history of relying on social networks to gather political information (Remington 1981; Ries 1997). This tradition of talk around the kitchen table emerged as a key source of information for Soviet and post-Soviet citizens who have long struggled to balance state media accounts with lived experience (Greenfeld 1992). Kitchen talk provided a mechanism to build an alternative personal narrative on the basis of personal experiences. The experience of trusted friends and family members was critical not only in the controlled media environment of the Soviet era, but in the confusing and overwhelming media environment of the *glasnost* and post-Soviet eras as well. Moreover, as Lonkila and Gladarev (2008) show, social networks overlap with but also influence both the adoption and use of new media technologies.

This focus on personal networks, or close ties, as both a form of political communication and information gathering resonates with the literature that links networks to protest mobilisation in the Russian as well as in the comparative context. The growing instances of protest in Russia underscore the important role that social networks play in individual mobilisation (Robertson 2010; Lonkila 2011; Yanitsky 2012). Likewise, scholars identify personal networks as a key causal factor in mobilisation. These networks operate through mechanisms such as grievance formation, recruitment, and leadership identification (Diani & McAdam 2003; Saunders 2007). Networks also allow for coordination around specific political events by providing detailed information as well as organisation and logistical support.

Highlighting the role of personal information flows in our study of the media context in which protest occurred underscores the way in which lived experience is institutionalised and reinforced in social networks. It also raises fundamental questions about the ways in which personal information flows interact with public media to forge individual worldviews and the influence of these worldviews on regime support and political participation. Our work addresses the first question—the interaction between personal and public information sources in the media use patterns of protesters and pro-Kremlin rally participation.

The three gaps that emerge from this discussion forge the bases of our empirical inquiry. Our discussion of the complex media evolution in Russia suggests that we should expect pro-regime and anti-regime forces to have distinct patterns of media consumption, as they would be expert at navigating a polarised media landscape. Yet we do not expect a stark dichotomy between these groups to be defined by traditional and new media sources within the Russian system. Rather, the evolution of Russian media suggests an overall decline in the efficacy of traditional media sources coupled with a growing, but limited use of new media by citizens who were either predisposed to reject the regime's hegemonic message or sought a media frame that challenged the Putin administration.

Likewise, as we discuss below, we do not expect that all issue areas will prompt the same patterns of media use. For instance, the uncertainty of the protest environment is likely to heighten the use of personal networks at the expense of more traditional sources and even new media. To explore these expectations, we present data on the media use patterns of

protesters and rally participants in regard to two distinct issue areas: information about global protest in 2010–2011 and information about Russian protests and rallies after the 2011 parliamentary elections.

Media use by protesters and rally participants

To uncover the patterns of media use among Russian political activists on both sides of the conflict we rely on a unique data set of surveys collected at the rallies and protests held near the end of the first wave of street action in late February and early March. Our analysis focuses on questions about media use regarding information about both Russian protest events and the global wave of protests that occurred about a year earlier.

As with any data on protest actions, it is difficult to say with certainty that this sample is representative of the population that participated over many events in large, open spaces where the true population, and even the number of participants, remained unknown. However, two factors give us some confidence about the data. First, other polling organisations such as Russia's distinguished Levada Centre also conducted surveys at the protests using similar techniques (Volkov 2012b). In addition, our analysis shows that while there was a large influx of casual protesters in the largest of the street actions, a core of protesters formed in the first wave of events and became fixtures at the subsequent events. This core is well represented in our study, suggesting that we captured information on a critical component of the protest environment.

The first gap: media use

Table 1 summarises media use patterns among our respondents for two different news events: how respondents had heard about protests in other countries in 2010–2011 and how they gathered information on Russia's protests and rallies beginning in December 2011. We generated this table using questions that asked respondents to identify all of the media

TABLE 1
VARIATION IN MEDIA SOURCES

<i>Respondent found out from ...</i>	<i>Information source</i>			
	<i>Pro-Kremlin rallies</i>		<i>Anti-Kremlin protests</i>	
	<i>Protests in other countries</i>	<i>Rally information</i>	<i>Protests in other countries</i>	<i>Protest information</i>
Traditional media				
State-controlled	50.7	24.0	19.6	6.8
Other	19.0	16.0	31.6	18.8
Internet	40.2	34.4	71.9	64.7
Personal networks	9.6	34.2	14.3	22.3
Party/Group	–	7.7	–	1.9
None	18.5	15.1	4.1	12.4
Hard to say/Refused	9.1	1.6	2.5	0.21

Source: Authors' original survey data.

sources they used for information regarding these events. We labelled those who attended protests against the regimes as ‘protesters’ and the mass meetings as ‘demonstrations’. We also label those who attended pro-Kremlin rallies as ‘participants’ and the meetings as ‘rallies’. While we take the point that there would be a spectrum of intentions among the participants at both types of events, these terms provide reasonable labels for generalisation and a delineated discussion.

Table 1 confirms that those who attended pro-Kremlin rallies had significantly different patterns of media consumption from those who attended the anti-Kremlin demonstrations. Yet, as the data indicate, the conventional wisdom is not entirely incorrect. For all issue areas, anti-Kremlin protesters are much more likely to rely on the internet for information than the rally participants. However, this difference does not mean that rally participants do not use the internet—more than a third relied on the internet for information about rally events, and 40% relied on the internet to gather information about protests in other countries. Thus, while there is a considerable difference in the levels of internet use among the two groups, the use of internet sources among rally participants raises questions about the details of internet platform use and the potential selection effects that might shape those choices. We return to these questions below.

Similarly as expected, pro-Kremlin rally participants relied more heavily on state-controlled media for their information, particularly for their news about protests in other countries. However, this use is not overwhelming, particularly in regard to information about Russian political events. Here government supporters also rely on political organisations, personal networks and non-state controlled traditional media. Most importantly, a significant plurality of rally participants relies on new media sources for political information, belying the characterisation of divided media use by pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin forces.

As is typical for our survey, we had a higher non-response rate and higher reported use of no media sources by rally participants. Even if we interpreted the non-answers—the don’t knows and refused—as individuals who did not want to reveal their reliance on state-controlled media, it would still not reflect the conventional wisdom. We suspect that non-response among rally participants reflects their lower level of political interest relative to the anti-Kremlin activists and points to the role of state incentives in rally mobilisation (for example that rally participants were transported *en masse* from workplaces).

In contrast, the Moscow protesters relied less on state-controlled media. Just under 20% used state media for information about protests in other countries, and only 6% relied on state-controlled media for information about Russian protests. They also supplemented their internet use with some reliance on non-state media outlets and social networks. Notably, political parties and groups play little role in providing information about Russian protests, confirming a general sense of an under-institutionalised opposition movement. Importantly, both non-response and the reported rejection of all information sources is considerably lower for protesters than for the rally participants, with the notable exception of information about Russian protest. This finding suggests that the protesters were inherently more interested in and informed about politics than their pro-Kremlin counterparts, who were primarily lured to participation with incentives provided by the state.

The differences across media sources in the two issue contexts are notable. First, the relative patterns of use are consistent across the two groups. Almost all public sources of information are less salient for information about Russian protests within both groups,

suggesting that the uncertainty of political contestation leads Russians to rely more heavily on personal connections. This possibility is bolstered by the increase in the number of protesters who do not use any media sources for information about protests.

While reliance on new media sources declines across these groups in the protest period, the decline is much less significant than the decline in traditional media. Importantly, state-controlled media suffer a precipitous drop for both groups in the period of the protests and rallies. Surprisingly, we also observe a slight drop in reliance on non-state traditional media despite the overall increase in use of these sources by the general population. This finding suggests that non-participants increased their reliance on non-traditional sources during the protest cycle.

In contrast, the role of personal networks as an information source about street actions is more important for those supporting the regime than for protesters (see [Table 1](#)). While this finding may seem counterintuitive to the idea of dissent spread through personal networks in Soviet and post-Soviet societies, it is consistent with what we know about the role that state proxies (workplace, political organisations and family) played in rally mobilisation (Smyth *et al.* 2013). Interestingly, the role of personal networks for information about protests in other countries is fairly small for both groups although protesters seem to rely more on these ties for general political information than rally participants. In both groups, there is also a significant percentage of respondents who do not identify a media source for information about protests and rallies, suggesting that at least some participants felt that the entire media environment was of very limited use.

Further analysis shows that even when we break down media use by social group or political attitudes, the differences in the patterns of media use are defined by whether or not these activists chose to protest or to participate in the rallies. The most prominent exception to this observation is the influence of age. Younger rally participants (42%) were much more likely to use social media to gather information about the street actions while older respondents (29%) were disproportionately more likely to receive their information from state-controlled media. Among protesters, this link between age and internet use was also observable although the absolute levels of use were very different: 70% of young people and 58% of older people used the internet for information about the protests. Similarly, state employees were more likely to rely on state-controlled media than private sector workers but this total remained quite low (13%).

The second gap: polarisation or balancing in media use patterns

The data in [Table 1](#) show a far more complex pattern of media use among Russians who took part in mass activities than we might expect. To further untangle this pattern, we explored the number of sources that people in each group identified as important to them (see [Table 2](#)). These data rely on the same questions that we draw on in [Table 1](#), but report the variation in counts reported by each respondent. The table summarises the data by creating five categories of media outlets and information sources: state-controlled media; other traditional media; internet sources; close circle of acquaintances; and political parties and groups.

[Table 2](#) provides only partial support for our proposition that many Russians use a number of media sources in order to form their opinions. More than half of the respondents in our survey said that they used only one source and this number reached closer to two-thirds

TABLE 2
TOTAL NUMBER OF MEDIA SOURCES USED BY POLITICAL ACTIVISTS

	<i>Pro-Kremlin rally participants</i>		<i>Anti-Kremlin protest participants</i>		
	<i>Information about protest in other countries</i>	<i>Information about Russian rallies</i>	<i>Information about protest in other countries</i>	<i>Information about Russian protests</i>	
Number of sources	0	9.4	13.5	1.6	12.2
	1	51.0	57.9	62.2	63.3
	2	23.7	22.9	26.5	21.9
	3	6.3	3.9	6.6	2.5
	4	0.55	0.28	0.62	0
	5	0	0	0	0
DK/Refused		9.1	1.6	2.5	0.21

Source: Authors' original survey data.

among anti-Kremlin protesters. This trend was slightly more pronounced in relation to the protest and rallies than in forming assessment of protests in other countries. About a quarter of the sample relied on two sources to assess these issues, although this number drops a few percentage points with regard to the protests and rallies. In all, about a third of the sample relied on more than one media source for information about protest in other countries and about a quarter relied on more than one source for information about protests.

Overall, the data support the polarisation hypothesis—that at the moment of protest many activists had already gravitated toward a single primary source of political information. This idea suggests that both protesters and rally participants tend to rely on the sources that they most agree with rather than hedge their bets and sample sources across the political spectrum. Our findings would suggest that in periods of uncertainty, Russian activists lean toward known or trusted resources over a strategy of weighing information across a range of different media outlets.

Additional analysis of Table 2 reveals interesting patterns of the mix of media sources used by the respondents who use multiple outlets. Activists on both sides of the conflict were most likely to supplement their primary information sources through personal networks and political organisations, particularly during the period of political unrest. Most respondents did not mix new media with traditional sources. Even rally participants who relied on the internet were far less likely to rely on state media than their compatriots who did not use new media. Among protesters who were internet users, a quarter consumed state media in relation to reporting about protests in other countries and only 2% consumed state media focused on Russian protest. This pattern was not much different from protesters who were not internet users.

This finding underscores a dramatic difference in how activists who were already receiving information online use state media. Particularly in regard to Russian protest, online engagement appeared to completely ‘switch them off’ from using state media for any news about domestic protests. Thus, for issues that protesters considered important and proximate (domestic protests), they did not bother to consult their own state media. For issues that were of less salience (foreign protests), online news users were more likely to consult their state media. This suggests that key state-run media outlets, such as The First Channel (*Pervyi Kanal*), are particularly challenged by online competition from disgruntled

citizens. Thus, these citizens are not comparing and contrasting news sources in the way that Russian citizens have long done (Oates 2006; Mickiewicz 2008). Rather, they have lost interest in consulting key state news sources in their own country, an erosion of trust that signals significant challenge to the power of state media in Russia.

We have seen that pro-regime demonstrators and anti-regime protesters have distinct patterns of media use but there are also some striking similarities. Between both groups, activists are more likely to confirm their primary information sources with personal networks rather than with other public information sources. To further clarify the salience of different media sources, Table 3 reports the responses to a question that asked participants to name the single most important source of information about Russian protests.

Unsurprisingly—given the general patterns of media use identified above—online sources are clearly more important for the protesters than the rally participants. About 60% of protesters identified an online source as their primary source of information while only 23% of pro-Putin rally participants relied primarily on online sources—partially confirming the view of protesters as driven by new media. Within social media use, there were also differences in platforms. Anti-regime protesters identified social media as their most important source of information (36% of protestor respondents), while another 24% of protesters relied on other online tools. Likewise, rally participants' use of online sources was also divided. This suggests some caution in blanket interpretations about the use of new media among these groups.

As a relatively large percentage of rally participants said they used state media, we might expect that to also appear as a key primary source. However, only 18% of pro-Kremlin respondents reported that state-controlled television was their primary source of information, and just 9% of the pro-Kremlin demonstrators relied on other types of traditional media. In contrast, only 2% of protesters used state-controlled media while 11% relied on other forms of traditional media. This finding makes it hard to maintain an argument that state-run television was dominant in the 2011–2012 crisis. Indeed, the results suggest that while state-run television still enjoys relatively high overall viewership in Russia, its influence is on the wane in crisis situations and among those who use online news sources. Coupled with an overall trend of shrinking market share among the younger generation, this suggests that Russian state television's powerful political presence may erode quite quickly.

TABLE 3
PRIMARY SOURCE OF POLITICAL INFORMATION

<i>Primary information source</i>	<i>Pro-Kremlin rallies</i>	<i>Anti-Kremlin protests</i>
Traditional press		
State-controlled	18.0	1.9
Other	8.6	11.1
Internet		
Social media	9.4	36.0
Other	13.6	23.7
Personal networks	22.4	16.7
Political/Social groups	5.8	1.1
None identified	22.1	7.6

Source: Authors' original survey data.

The data in Table 3 also allow us to refine our understanding of the use of personal networks. Given that state-led mobilisation efforts for the rallies were largely organised through UR, its youth groups and state sector workplaces, it is not surprising that 22% of rally respondents identified networks as their primary source of information and just under 6% identified political institutions (parties and organisations) as important sources. Networks were less important sources of information for protesters, and the effect of political institutions was very minor. While networks were more significant information sources for pro-regime rally participants than for protesters, other data reveal that protesters were more likely to be embedded in online and offline personal networks. This pattern suggests that networks fulfil other mobilisation functions within the protester community including framing, grievance formation, recruitment and leadership formation, rather than serve primarily as information sources.

The third gap: new media use

Consistent with our proposition about the media gap, there remains significant variation among both protesters and rally participants in the degree to which they use the internet and the ways in which they engage online media sources. To further explore the ways in which individuals use social media, Table 4 presents information about the reliance on different media platforms among the protesters and rally participants. This question asked respondents to identify all of the internet platforms that they use and allowed as many answers as were appropriate.

The pattern of media platform use in Table 4 is consistent with our previous findings. The majority of protesters and rally participants all reported using social media, at times converging on particular platforms and at others times clearly distinctive in their choice of platform. The largest numbers use *Vkontakte* (48.8% for those at pro-government rallies and 55.6% at anti-government protests). Pro-government rally participants prefer *Odnoklassniki* (24.5%), while protesters prefer *LiveJournal* (31.8%). These are particularly interesting findings that would suggest future research on the way in which political groups gravitate to particular platforms would be illuminating. Overall, while protesters used them more (only 14% said they did not), only 23% of pro-government supporters said they did not use social media sites. Clearly, social media sites are an important part of the information landscape in general in Russia, for supporters and protesters alike.

TABLE 4
NEW MEDIA PLATFORM USE (%)

	<i>Pro-Kremlin rallies</i>	<i>Anti-Kremlin protests</i>
Vkontakte	48.8	55.6
Odnoklassniki.ru	24.5	11.8
LiveJournal	8.8	31.8
Facebook	14.1	42.6
Twitter	12.7	32.9
Other	8.0	3.1
Don't use social media	22.9	13.8

Source: Authors' original survey data.

Despite the emphasis on Facebook and Twitter as tools for protests by media commentators in countries such as Iran and Egypt, only a minority of these users relied on Facebook, the blog site LiveJournal, or Twitter. The relatively limited use of LiveJournal—a site where many government officials and pro-government spokespeople blog—is evidence that this platform may be of limited use in galvanising political support for the regime. There is a notable gap in the use of Facebook between rally participants and protesters; a finding that is consistent with previous work that shows that Facebook penetration fosters protest participation (albeit in Russia's regions rather than the capital (Reuter & Szakonyi 2014)). The reliance on Twitter among the protesters also underlines the importance of that tool in protest coordination—a pattern particular to protests and not rallies. However, even among the protesters, the use of these emerging new media was limited to a plurality of the sample, suggesting that new media had a significant but limited effect on protest participation.

To sharpen our sense of the intensity or frequency of new media use across activist groups, we focused just on those individuals who reported that they frequently discuss politics. Figure 1 presents a new variable 'politicised internet networks' that describes individuals who frequently discuss politics and do so either on the internet or are equally comfortable discussing politics face to face or through internet interactions.

The figure reflects the findings described earlier about the reach of online networks and the role that they play in protest mobilisation. The use of the internet for political discussion among protesters is more than double what we found among rally participants. Our study found that 38% of protesters were embedded in politicised internet networks while only 18% of rally participants can be described in those terms. While this is a significant difference, we would argue it is not the monolithic internet engagement among protesters that is often described in the press.

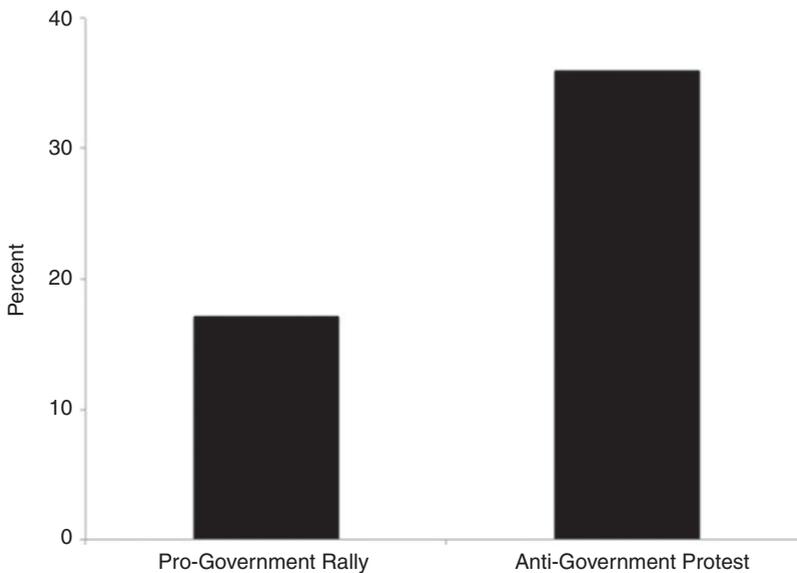


FIGURE 1. POLITICISED INTERNET USE.

Source: Authors' original survey data.

Moreover, non-politicised internet use among pro-Kremlin rally participants is fairly large. In time, this non-political use could easily spread to political use—or indeed, political use may be already embedded in ‘everyday’ practices of seeking and exchanging information online about issues such as health care, pensions or finding social housing (Oates 2013). Overall, however, this figure reflects a key point about understanding the role of the internet in protest. The landscape does not consist of one group that is engaged online and another that is digitally disengaged. Rather, both pro-government supporters and anti-regime protesters are engaged with both the traditional and new media spheres, although the protesters are turning away more from traditional media sources.

This final piece of evidence shows the growing role that new media play in forging ties among individuals in broad horizontal networks. While activism within these networks remains limited, it was clearly more prevalent among protesters than among rally participants, suggesting that protesters have the potential to transform political participation and challenge the regime. Assessed in the light of the findings above, it appears that these politicised internet networks play different roles in the pro-regime rally and protest communities. While protesters do not report relying on the networks for information, these data suggest that the rally participants do use them in that way. However, protesters use networks for other mobilisation tasks such as recruitment, framing and leadership identification. While such relationships are often hidden until events like protest in 2011–2012 break out, they have long-term effects for the key building blocks of anti-regime activism: the formation of shared grievances, a common understanding of the size and scope of the protest community, a shared sense of the target of blame, and some consensus about the efficacy of protest as a mechanism to foster regime change.

Closing the gaps: understanding media use and protest in contemporary Russia

We began our essay by proposing three potential gaps in our collective understanding of media use in contemporary Russia and its link to participation in both anti-Kremlin protests and pro-Kremlin rallies. First, we proposed that the simplified version of media use—that protesters rely on the internet and rally participants rely on state-owned television—was overblown and not useful. Second, we argued that activists were likely to rely on multiple sources of information to balance the perceived biases across media platforms, paralleling our understanding of the way in which Russian audiences have long ‘gleaned’ information from a range of sources. Finally, we suggested that within these two groups, internet use was also likely to vary considerably both in intensity and in the usage of a range of platforms.

Against these patterns of media use two of the three gaps we identified earlier appear overstated. First, conventional wisdom overstates the impact of state-controlled media on rally participants. While (unsurprisingly) anti-regime protesters do not rely much on state-controlled media for information about the events, state media also did not dominate the information sphere for rally participants. Although the pro-Kremlin rally participants did rely on state media to a degree, this use was balanced by information gathered through networks, political organisations, and even online to a certain extent.

Likewise, this pattern varies according to the substantive focus of media use. While the protesters showed more willingness to use state media for information about protests overseas, they were more likely to avoid state media when it came to information about

Russian mass public meetings in 2011–2012. Internet use played a role for both groups for gathering information, but protesters were far more likely to gather information from the internet. However we see significant variation in new media use patterns within this group according to platform and also issues area. That is, the pattern of the internet use is far from monolithic even within the protester group. Moreover, we see that in this complex media environment some of our respondents either do not use public media sources at all or rely on political organisations and their close personal circles to gather information across a range of issues.

In regard to the gap in media messages across state and non-state media outlets, we see that only a minority of activists in our sample systematically balanced state and non-state media signals against each other. These data underscore this trend particularly among protesters, who have rejected the Kremlin's political narrative and consume information that most closely reflects their own worldview.

This insight has a number of implications. First, this finding suggests that seemingly spontaneous protest participation is rooted in longer-term processes of political attitude formation, which has implications for understanding how internet use moves from being used primarily for commercial purposes to becoming politicised among different citizens' groups. Second, this finding suggests that polarisation reflected in the duelling street actions is reinforced by the multi-faceted media structure. In addition, the evidence suggests that the cognitive dissonance or the conflict between private preferences for regime reform and outward preference of regime support is now resonating into action in Russia and is fuelled by media use patterns. It is not, however, fuelled by binary patterns of media use, in which one side exclusively absorbs messages from state television while the protesters relate only to online information.

Russian citizens, who have historically developed mechanisms to reconcile their lived experiences with the state's hegemonic narrative, are likely to continue to uncover and develop new ways to share alternative political ideas. Particularly in times of political turmoil, Russian citizens rely extensively on personal networks for information about events, further reinforcing their tendency to select information sources that confirm existing beliefs.

Finally, we show that new media use is significant among both pro-regime and anti-regime forces, and particularly among young members in both groups. However, our analysis of politicised internet use shows that there are limits to internet influences in both groups, which suggests some caution in understanding the precise mechanisms that link new media with political activism. Yet, our findings also highlight the challenges that new media pose for authoritarian regimes that generate social support through the promulgation of hegemonic narrative.

Discerning these differences in media use patterns is the first step in theorising about the reciprocal links between media consumption and political activism on both sides of the street. We have suggested that some of the impact of these factors may rest in the gaps between the Kremlin's narrative and popular perceptions of political reality. We also argue that the mechanics of existing theories of information cascades are enhanced by a clear sense of available sources of information and the ways in which they are used by social actors. The tendency of activists to be selective about information sources suggests that the assurance mechanism that allows citizens to assess the costs and benefits of protest participation is working.

Yet, our exploration of media use patterns among activists also reveals a number of questions for future research. The first question is whether non-participants look more like protesters or rally participants in terms of media consumption. The second critical question is whether or not activists who have similar media use patterns have similar issue positions, attitudes, goals and regime assessments, or whether their opinions are formed independently of media inputs. Finally, this essay raises a series of questions about the effects of post-protest government intervention in the media space on both mass attitudes and the probability of future protest participation.

Afterword

This essay was completed just before the forced ousting of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 and Russia's annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine which was accompanied by an all-out effort at propaganda and framing through state television. For the Kremlin, the attack on Ukraine serves a persuasive double reminder to its populace of the dominance of state over citizen: it provides a powerful disincentive to pursue domestic protests and it allows the Putin administration to consolidate power under the rubric of a resurgent Russia. With these events, the information challenge has moved beyond domestic issues between protesters and rally participants in Russia to the role of media in international conflict. It has also led to a significant increase in media controls, notably with the muzzling of lenta.ru and forced cancellation of *Dozhd'* TV's rebroadcast arrangements with cable television and the apparent expropriation of *Vkontakte* by Kremlin officials.

Evidence presented above would suggest that the Russian state, despite its moves to narrow the information sphere and broadcast aggressive anti-Maidan propaganda, will struggle to maintain that narrative in the face of a contested information sphere. As demonstrated above, it is not that there are two sides of the debate; rather, there is a complex information sphere and a lack of significant dominance of state-run media. While political narratives of a pro-Russia 'liberation' movement in Ukraine may hold sway temporarily, it will take much more than the banning of Naval'nyi from the internet or changing controls at *Vkontakte* to maintain a dominant state voice. In other words, the Russian state can tighten controls on some important and influential providers of information online. It may even win some information battles when issues are consistent with the predispositions and preferences of citizens such as the near universal acceptance of Crimea as Russian territory. However, in the longer term the Kremlin will find it far harder to change the attitudes and pattern of information use established by years of experience with the burgeoning Russian internet, making people far more important than platforms. The Russian state will need to cope with diverse voices along myriad networks, making it far more difficult to 'close the gap' between Russian neo-imperialist ambitions and realities on the ground in Ukraine, not to mention the resulting costs of the conflict for a regime already plagued by economic crisis, corruption, and an autocratic state.

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