

“We Are Not Afraid” :

An analysis of the Internet’s effect in challenging the regime in Russia, 2011-2014

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Chapter One

“The Internet is the censor’s biggest challenge and the tyrant’s worst nightmare.”

- Rolling Stone magazine

On February 20, 2013, a senior member of Russia’s ruling political party gave up his seat in the national legislature. The lawmaker, Vladimir A. Pekhtin, was chairman of the Duma’s ethics committee and a major political figure. However, this was no typical retirement - it was less of a choice than a necessity. Activist blogger Aleksei Navalny had posted incriminating documents showing that Pekhtin owned over 1.3 million USD worth of luxury real estate in Miami, Florida. At the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin had recently announced a war against corruption and a proposed new law barring Russian lawmakers from owning foreign investment – including real estate. Although Pekhtin’s foreign property was not yet illegal, the revelations were an embarrassment to United Russia, Putin’s party, and Pekhtin’s resignation was likely encouraged by the Kremlin in order to maintain the party’s image.

In a nation where most of the mass media practically exists at the whim of the government, such an event was unprecedented. The Russian opposition movement, which can be loosely defined as activists who are deeply unsatisfied with the political status quo and who coalesced into an informal group during the street protests of 2011-2012, won a major victory through Pekhtin’s disgrace. It proved that personal blogs run by opposition cyber activists can have an effect in Russia, despite a precedent of the media serving the needs of the state and a general consensus that low levels of Internet penetration in Russia – slightly higher than 50 percent – would prevent any sort of actual impact. Despite its limitations, it seems the Internet can effect some amount of change in Russia.

The Internet is one of the most game-changing inventions of the modern era. It affects everything – how people communicate, find information, and even interact with each other. Today’s world is radically different than it was in the pre-Internet era. One of the many interesting aspects of this is examining how the Internet has the power to affect politics in non-democratic societies. In the United States, as well as many other nations, citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech and of the press. As such, the Internet can be thought of as an extension of the free press, albeit an extension that gives ordinary people a platform to spread their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. But what about nations that don’t guarantee freedom of speech to their citizens, or simply ignore their constitutions? What about nations with no free press?

Russia, with its hybrid democratic and authoritarian regime, is an especially fascinating case to examine. The government is at a strange crossroads with the Internet, unsure of how repressive to act. The traditional mass media in Russia – newspapers, television, radio, etc. – is mostly under government ownership or highly susceptible to government influence. Those who disagree with the Kremlin’s policies are typically driven out of the mainstream media and relegated to obscurity, unable to find an outlet to reach the public. However, the Internet has the potential to change that. Those who are driven out of the mainstream media, or those who never belonged in it to begin with, now have a platform to express their ideas and opinions, disseminate information, and collaborate with each other. The Russian opposition movement has grown out of and through the Internet, its very existence intertwined with it.

However, not all scholars agree that the Internet can have an effect on politics. A prevalent theory that scholars often reference, called the safety valve theory, suggests that authoritarian regimes can take advantage of the Internet by using it as a safety valve. In this way, people express their frustrations with other like-minded individuals in the virtual world, but since

they feel as if they are doing something meaningful, they are thus prevented from taking their action out of the cyber world and into the real world. Thus protests and unrest are prevented, because people have an outlet to express their anger in a way that does not encourage them to take their activism to the streets.

This theory, however, does not fully account for much of what has been occurring in Russia in recent years. The Internet in Russia may have originally served as a safety valve, but the safety valve theory fails to account for what happens when people expressing their discontent in the cyber world brings about a resulting effect. This is what has taken place in Russia. The young, Internet-savvy generation has managed to harness the Internet to increase activism, instead of using it as an alternative to action. Their cyber actions have affected politics and society to some degree, as well as spurred street protests and provided an important independent voice in Russia's constrained media sphere. This thesis will discuss some of these effects and the links between cyber actions and effect, thus questioning an unchallenged acceptance of the safety valve theory as it relates to the Russian case. The safety valve theory, and literature related to it, will be further discussed in chapter two. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an introduction to the Russian opposition movement and a timeline of events since 2011.

The Russian Opposition Movement

This history of the Russian opposition movement will begin, for the purposes of this thesis, with the 2011 parliamentary elections and continue onward from that point. Although there were notable protests in the mid 2000s, in addition to other opposition activity, 2011 marked a crucial turning point, in which levels of public discontent became so high that the government could not easily ignore or suppress it. In addition, the Internet use that will be

examined later in this thesis will be constrained to the time frame of 2011 to 2014.

On December 4, 2011, parliamentary elections were held for the Duma, Russia's national legislature. According to official results, United Russia, the ruling political party and the party of President Vladimir Putin, won almost 50 percent of the vote and 238 seats in the Duma, a vast majority. By comparison, the party with the next highest number of votes, the Communist party, won only 19 percent and 92 seats (Nichol, 2011, p. 6). However, international observers, election monitors, and citizen journalists all noted electoral fraud on a massive scale that took place during the elections. *Golos* [Voice], an important independent election monitoring organization in Russia, observed "significant and massive violations of many key voting procedures," and the North Caucasus regions reported the typical improbably high turnouts and support for United Russia that has been a trademark of that region for years (Nichol, 2011, p. 5). Although electoral fraud is not entirely unexpected in Russia, people became frustrated by the blatant dishonesty. In addition, Vladimir Putin had announced in September of 2011 that he would run for president again in 2012. Having already served two presidential terms, he stepped down in 2008 to allow his handpicked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, to become president. Medvedev then appointed Putin to the position of prime minister. According to the Russian constitution, it is only permissible to serve as president for two consecutive terms. Therefore, Putin's announcement that he would run for president again in 2012 was neither illegal nor wholly surprising. However, people were angry about the perceived inevitability of Putin returning to the presidency the following year. That announcement had already upset a number of people, and the fraudulent parliamentary elections served as the breaking point.

Small-scale protests broke out during the days following the elections, with protestors demanding fair and honest elections amidst chants of "Russia without Putin!" and "Putin –

thief!” (Schwartz & Herszenhorn, 2011). These smaller protests culminated in a massive protest at Bolotnaia Ploshchad in Moscow on December 10, 2011. With an estimated 40 to 50 thousand people braving the sub-zero temperatures to attend, such a protest was unparalleled in size since at least the early 1990s. It unfolded surprisingly peacefully, and despite a large police presence, there were no detentions reported. The protest’s organizers made several demands, including the release of prisoners arrested at earlier protests, new parliamentary elections, the resignation of the head of the Central Election Commission, an investigation into electoral fraud, and registration for the opposition parties that were previously unable to earn representation in the Duma (Barry, 2011). These demands show that although the protests were generally anti-Putin in tone, the opposition’s leaders were realistic about what they thought they could achieve and focused their energies on responding to the parliamentary elections. However, new parliamentary elections were not held, and the protests continued.

The next major protest was held on December 24, 2011, again in Moscow. In an almost absurd war of framing between officials and the protest’s organizers, the police reported the turnout to be 30,000, while the opposition reported that number to be close to 120,000. The only fact that both sides agreed on was that it contained a higher turnout than the first major protest. This protest, in addition to boasting a vastly larger number of protestors, was also notable due to attendance by some high-level people with ties to the Kremlin. Putin’s former finance minister, Aleksei L. Kudrin, who was a member of Putin’s close circle for more than 20 years, spoke during the protest. Billionaire oligarch Mikhail D. Prokhorov also attended the rally (Barry & Schwartz, 2011). Although some viewed this as the Kremlin attempting to interfere with the protest movement, it was more likely a sign of minor dissent among the political and social elite, although they were swiftly corralled back into the fold.

A major protest was again held on February 4, 2012. This protest had similar numbers to the December 24 protest, and officials and protest organizers again waged a battle over the reported number of attendees, with officials reporting 36,000 and the opposition reporting 120,000. This protest, in contrast to the December protests, was much more explicitly anti-Putin in nature, which is unsurprising given that it was held a month before presidential elections. However, this time the government organized a simultaneous rally in support of Putin. The pro-government demonstrators were brought in on buses, and police claimed that 138,000 people attended, although independent journalists asserted that this number was greatly exaggerated. Putin later expressed surprise at the turnout at the pro-government rally, claiming that people came of their own volition (Barry & Kramer, 2012). Unlikely as this seems, the government's response did allow the mainstream media to focus on the pro-government rallies, overshadowing the continually strong turnout at the anti-government protests.

On February 21, another event occurred that ties in with the opposition movement. The feminist punk rock band Pussy Riot staged a performance at Moscow's largest Orthodox cathedral, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Five of the band members jumped up on the altar and performed a song called "A Punk Prayer." The song criticized the Russian Orthodox Church for its close ties to Putin and at one point, invoked a prayer to the Virgin Mary, asking her to rid Russia of Putin. The women were immediately arrested and the video of their performance went viral on YouTube. International condemnation of the arrest was swift; regardless, three of the band members were sentenced to two years in prison a few months later on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred. Pussy Riot became an international media sensation almost overnight, and opposition leaders praised the band for its actions.

The last of the major street protests during this time period took place on May 6, 2012,

the day before Putin's inauguration for his third presidential term. Only around 20,000 people attended "The March of Millions," as public support for street protests drastically fell after Putin's reelection. This protest was marred by confrontation and violence between the police and protestors, which some believe was intended. According to Anastasia Rybachenko, a university student who participated in the protests and was later arrested:

It was clear that what took place was specially constructed: the police partitioned off the passage, provoking the crowd, it was very hot and cramped, and people began to panic, while the police started hitting them and then detained the leaders, who were trying to normalize the situation, and after their arrest everything spiraled out of control. By the end of the day the government had already called it "public unrest," and therefore it became clear that it was a set up and arrests would begin (Рыбаченко, 2013).

More than 400 protestors were detained immediately following the protest, including major opposition leaders. Arrests began three weeks after the protest. Over 1,200 people were interrogated and eventually 14 were convicted and sentenced. The proceedings were nicknamed *Bolotnoe delo*, after the name of the square where the protest took place, *Bolotnaia Ploshchad*. The article that the government used to convict protest participants carried a maximum sentence of 13 years in prison, and that is the sentence that the majority of defendants received ("Инфографика," 2012). This marked a turning point for the opposition. Street protests on a massive scale were no longer a viable option, and challenges to the government had to be constructed in other ways.

One of the key reasons that the opposition was so successful in constructing these mass protests lies in demographics. Although a significant number of older people did attend these

protests, the core opposition activists and the majority of protestors tended to be younger, generally between the ages of 18 and 35, and very Internet savvy. Moscow, the center of opposition activity, naturally has a large number of highly educated young people, as it is both the capital and the center of business and finance in Russia. This is both an accident of demographics and partially the key to the opposition's success, as having such a high concentration of young, technologically savvy people in one place results in a wider base of recruitment for the opposition movement. However, this highly educated younger generation does not make up the majority of the population in Russia, and the government's goal after the mass protests died off was to prevent this activist population from again achieving support from different strata like it did during the protests. In order to do so, the government moved to compress opposition activity and keep it from fomenting dissent among the broader population.

Government response to the protests came in the form of several new laws passed soon after Putin returned to the presidency in May 2012. These laws targeted political activists, as well as respected non-governmental organizations such as *Golos*. One of the laws imposed new, extremely high fines on participants in unsanctioned political rallies, as well as the organizations that sponsored such rallies. Another of the new laws allowed the government to shut down websites or remove content if it includes, among other things, "extremist material" (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2013). Several Pussy Riot YouTube videos were blocked in Russia soon after this law was enacted, as well as the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. In March 2013, the head of the Duma committee on information policy, information technology, and communications bragged that the "era of absolutely free Internet" was over (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2013). These laws were clearly intended to target anti-government activity and shut down the haven of free speech that the Internet had become.

Despite such government retaliation, the opposition movement attempted to coalesce and organize, holding online elections in October 2012 to form a coordinating council for the opposition, which would hypothetically plan future protests and serve as the public face of the opposition movement. Cyber activists continued blogging against corruption and political rallies continued, although they never again reached the late 2011 and early 2012 levels of attendance. The public had grown weary of protesting, and the government was continuing to crack down.

In one example of this, the government began to actively pursue a criminal conviction against prominent activist blogger and opposition leader Aleksei Navalny. As Navalny said at a rally on May 6, 2013, “One year ago, when I was here at the rally, there were zero criminal cases against me. At a rally on September 15, there was one criminal case against me. At a rally on December 15, there were four criminal cases against me. Now there are either four or six criminal cases against me. I lose count myself. And I don’t give a damn!” (“Navalny on Putin, Being Bugged and Revolution,” 2013). The case that eventually did convict and sentence Navalny was known as the *KirovLes* case, which was heard in July 2013.

This case is a textbook example of the Russian’s government preferred method of ridding itself of troublesome citizens. Criminal charges against Navalny accused him of embezzling \$500,000 from a timber company in rural Russia, in a region called Kirov. The case had previously been dismissed for lack of evidence, but was reopened in July 2012. A spokesman for the Federal Investigative Committee even publicly admitted that Navalny had been targeted because of his activities working to expose corruption. The spokesman, Vladimir Markin, said, “If a person tries with all his strength to attract attention, or if I can put it, teases authorities – ‘Look at me, I’m so good compared to everyone else’ – well, then interest in his past grows and the process of exposing him naturally speeds up” (Herszenhorn, 2013a). In Russia, the will of the

government and the will of the courts are typically one and the same.

The case received a flurry of international media attention and unlike the old Soviet show trials, was conducted in an open media system, in which details about the case and court proceedings were readily available online. The resulting conviction and sentence to five years in a penal colony enraged many onlookers. The international community condemned the conviction, describing Navalny as a political prisoner and accusing Russia of human rights abuses. Navalny supporters organized protests via social media, which boasted fairly large turnouts. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former oligarch considered a political prisoner by most of the world, wrote in an opinion piece after Navalny's conviction, "An acquittal rate of one out of 700 in district-level courts gives you an idea of how good your chances are if you try to stand up for your rights in an adversarial trial process here... they are just going to keep on locking us up, one at a time" (Khodorkovsky, 2013). All of these voices may have contributed to the ultimate result, which was as strange as the case itself.

Less than 24 hours after he was led away to begin his five-year sentence, Navalny was released. The same prosecutor who had fought for his imprisonment requested the release. There are a variety of theories as to why this occurred. The more optimistic claim that the spontaneous protests after Navalny's conviction showed the power of the people and the government was afraid to keep Navalny locked up. Others consider it a sign of a schism at the highest level of governance or a fear of making Navalny into a political martyr. Still another theory is that he was released in order to conduct his candidacy for mayor of Moscow and lend a certain legitimacy to the elections (Herszenhorn, 2013b). The oddity of this unexpected reprieve only serves to emphasize the apparent arbitrariness of the government's actions with regard to the opposition movement.

Although there is some amount of ambiguity surrounding the specific law, a felony conviction in Russia can make one ineligible to run for public office. The reason that Navalny was permitted to run for mayor of Moscow was that an appeal of his conviction was pending at that time. However, the appeal in October 2013 upheld the conviction, in addition to the suspended sentence. Therefore, provided the law is interpreted as such, the government is able to effectively shut Navalny out of politics and prevent him from running in future presidential elections while not turning him into a martyr.

Other amnesties took place several months later, in the lead up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. With the eyes of the world upon Russia, Putin apparently decided that he should take a more merciful route before the Olympics began. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the billionaire oligarch turned political prisoner, was released. Two Pussy Riot members were also released, in addition to a few other political prisoners. This marked a significant deviation from the government policy of 2013, which harshly cracked down on dissent. However, after the Olympics ended, the situation quickly worsened for the opposition movement.

Convicted participants in the *Bolotnoe ploshchad* protests were finally sentenced on February 24, 2014, one day after the closing ceremonies for the Olympics in Sochi and almost two years after their initial arrest. In Moscow the next day, protestors took to the streets to object to the convictions, and 420 of them were detained by the police (Новиков, 2014). Among those detained were Navalny, the two Pussy Riot members who were recently released from prison, and several other key opposition figures. Navalny faced a host of problems following this, beginning with a conviction for resisting arrest, which carried with it a sentence of one week in jail. This conviction was handed down despite a number of videos posted online from at least four different angles in which Navalny does not appear to be resisting arrest in any way

(Mackey, 2014). Three days later, a different judge ordered that Navalny be placed under house arrest for two months with no Internet or telephone access, officially because he violated a travel ban from one of his many pending criminal cases. In addition, he is forbidden to speak with the media and not allowed visitors other than close relatives (Roth, 2014). The timing this, less than one week after the Olympics in Sochi ended and the hordes of international visitors left Russia, makes this appear to be yet another crackdown on the opposition movement as the government is focused on silencing dissent. Navalny's Internet ban seems to be a clear sign that the Russian government fears his online activities and is trying to scatter the opposition organization that has conglomerated around Navalny.

The opposition movement has experienced further setbacks in March 2014, which has proved to be one of the most challenging months to the opposition thus far. On March 13, 2014, several liberal online news sites and Navalny's Live Journal blog were officially blocked in Russia by the government's communication watchdog for purported extremism (Ефимов & Брызгалова, 2014). Although Navalny had been unable to use the Internet due to the terms of his house arrest, his wife and close colleagues were still operating his social media accounts and posting on his blog on his behalf, continuing to express his opinions. Soon after the decision became known, a post on Navalny's blog read, "I don't even know if anyone is reading this now or not" (Навальный, 2014). Additional retribution by the government also took place. *Lenta.ru*, a highly popular and respect online news source, although not one specifically discussed in this thesis, saw its editor of a decade dismissed and replaced by a pro-Kremlin editor without warning. Out of its 84 employees, 39 resigned in solidarity (Barry & Kishkovsky, 2014). Two other online news sources that are later discussed in this thesis, *Ekho Moskvy* and *TV Dozhd*, have also been targeted. The government seems to have developed a fierce determination to

utterly crush independent voices in Russia.

This alteration in government response to the opposition may also have a significant effect on the safety valve theory as a model for Russia. Opposition Internet use seems to have been most effective in shaping public opinion during the street protests of 2011-2012, when a significant segment of the population was already politicized and dissatisfied with the status quo, and the government was finding it difficult to crack down due to the huge numbers of dissenters. Once the government became more repressive, public support waned, and the Internet's effect did as well. Ultimately, this thesis will try to identify the conditions under which the Internet was able to have an effect and explain why this may have changed since Putin's return to the presidency and particularly during the further consolidation of his power in 2013-2014.

In chapter two, the safety valve theory will be defined and briefly discussed. This will be followed by an analysis of arguments by one of the most vehement Internet detractors, whose claims will be examined in order to provide the direct opposite viewpoint to the one presented in this thesis – that the Internet can be a positive force for change. Two other countries will then be presented and their opposition Internet use discussed. The first country, China, contains many similarities to Russia, although it is an even more extreme example of government media control. Opposition blogging in China, however, has proven to have an effect under certain circumstances, similar to the Russian blogosphere. In the case of China, as in Russia, the regime has remained in power, and the Internet alternates between serving as a safety valve and having an effect, depending on the issue. The case of Egypt is an interesting juxtaposition, since the regime there was ultimately overthrown. An examination of Internet use during Egypt's protests shows that the government's response to activism, shutting down all Internet and telephone service, played an important role in the government's downfall. The Russian government

responded in a less repressive manner during times of public unrest, which helped protect the regime, in addition to the fact that it is vastly more popular than the Egyptian government was and simply did not experience the same levels of dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, the comparisons to other countries' Internet usage will help to further specify how the safety valve theory relates to the case of Russia.

In chapter three, two types of opposition Internet use will be closely examined for possible effect. Social media, which for the purposes of this thesis will include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and *Vkontakte*, have had a powerful effect on opposition organization and exposure in Russia. Additionally, Western social media has been able to shape public opinion on certain key issues. Alternate news sources will also be discussed in chapter three, which will include *Gazeta.ru*, *TV Dozhd*, and *Ekho Moskv*. These alternate news sources have had a surprising amount of influence during key opposition events, to the point of impacting the mainstream media's coverage. They also provide a crucial independent voice in an increasingly constrained media landscape. All of this Internet effect serves to seemingly contradict the safety valve theory's applicability to the Russian Internet; however, this effect only occurred during a specific time frame and under certain conditions, resulting in a more nuanced view of the safety valve theory's applicability.

Chapter four will be similar in structure to chapter three, containing two additional types of opposition Internet use. Blogging, particularly through Live Journal, has been an effective tool that opposition activists have used to reveal corruption, present an independent news perspective, conduct grassroots political campaigns, and more. In fact, Live Journal has been one of the most significant tools that the opposition has in its arsenal in terms of noticeable effect. However, not all corruption exposure has resulted in any sort of effect, as the timing must be right and the

exposure broad enough to warrant a response. Special project sites are also discussed in chapter four, which include anti-corruption projects and other websites built for a narrow purpose. These are ultimately determined to have merely a marginal effect, mainly depending on the level of activism among visitors to the site. These sites potentially fall under the safety valve classification.

Lastly, chapter five contains an identification of the time periods that Internet use in Russia can be broken down into and how the safety valve theory is applicable to these time periods. While considering this big picture, the safety valve theory seems to have been applicable in Russia up until 2011. However, from 2011 to early 2014, increased political activism and a number of other factors resulted in a blossoming of Internet effect and the decreased applicability of the safety valve theory. This decreased applicability applies only to a general consideration of the Internet, as specific cyber actions or information were still able to serve as a safety valve during this time period, but there was an overall heightened effectiveness of the Internet. From early 2014 onward there seems to be increased repression by the regime and perhaps eventually a complete lack of tolerance for any sort of safety valve for dissent. The conditions that affect the Internet's effectiveness under a semi-authoritarian regime are also presented, including the politicization of a population, a free Internet but constrained mass media, alternate news sources, technological infrastructure, and possibly international awareness of events. Ultimately, this thesis will determine that the Internet in Russia has the potential to defy the safety valve theory's expectations and bring about actual effect, provided certain conditions are met, while at the same time acknowledging that the safety valve theory may be applicable on a micro level regarding individual actions that do not seem to enact any sort of obvious change.

Chapter Two

“Modern authoritarianism, by its very constitution, is a wicked, not a tame, problem.

*It cannot be ‘solved’ or ‘engineered away’ by a few lines of genius computer code
or a stunning iPhone app.”*

- Evgeny Morozov

The role that the Internet can play in politics and society is a topic that has been hotly debated in recent years, exacerbated by events that have been widely touted by the Western media as proof that the Internet is key to overthrowing authoritarian regimes. The so-called “Arab Spring” and Iran’s “Green Revolution” are two such examples. In both cases, the media latched on to the concept of the Internet as a liberating force and these uprisings as being Facebook or Twitter revolutions. However, closer study reveals that the Internet was perhaps not quite as important as Western media maintained at the time. This is not to say that the Internet has had, and can have, no possible effect, but certain conditions must be met in order for the Internet to enact significant change on society or politics.

But first, the question of Russia as an authoritarian regime must be briefly addressed. Although the political system that exists there is clearly not a democracy, it is neither a full-fledged authoritarian system. Democratic mechanisms are in place, and it is generally possible for opposition parties to participate in elections, despite the overwhelming advantage that incumbent politicians hold. There is also a limited amount of freedom of speech and of the press. This type of political system, known variously as a hybrid regime or competitive authoritarianism, does differ from pure authoritarianism. Russia has shifted along this scale over time, either closely approaching authoritarianism or relaxing control, depending on the time

period. Since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, however, control has inexorably tightened and the political system seems to be shifting toward an increasingly authoritarian one.

This chapter will consider the premises of the safety valve theory in addition to the arguments of a well-known Internet detractor, Evgeny Morozov. Both the safety valve theory and Morozov present an alternate point of view to the one that this thesis will argue, which is why it is important to note these concerns and the potential limitations of the arguments presented in this thesis. Following that, this chapter will discuss two cases of opposition Internet use beyond Russia, one that ultimately resulted in a regime change and one that did not. These two cases, China and Egypt, will be considered in light of the safety valve theory and later in this thesis reexamined for comparisons with the Russia case.

The safety valve theory as it relates to the Internet essentially postulates that the Internet, rather than facilitate and encourage action against the political status quo, has the opposite effect. Instead, people use the Internet to openly express their anger with the government and connect with other like-minded individuals but are therefore less likely to publicly protest, since they already have an outlet for their dissatisfaction. Put into other words, the Internet serves "as a 'safety valve' by allowing enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence, thus giving people more things to do with their frustrations before considering taking their gripes to the streets" (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 33). It comes as no surprise, then, that authoritarian regimes would permit a certain amount of Internet freedom, in order to give these activists an outlet while hoping to avoid their dissatisfaction translating into action. However, as this thesis will examine, it is entirely possible for cyber activities to have an effect on politics or society while all action remains solely on the Internet, thereby undermining the main underlying assumption of the safety valve theory, which

is that cyber activities remain solely in the online sphere. Additionally, it is possible for the Internet to facilitate, instead of prevent, public protests and other public expressions of discontent, provided certain societal conditions are in play.

Some people, however, go beyond the safety valve theory to argue that the Internet has a purely negative effect and only strengthens authoritarian regimes. One of the most vehement Internet pessimists is Evgeny Morozov, whose book *The Net Delusion* is a scathing attack on the so-called “cyber-utopians” of the day. His central argument revolves around authoritarian use of the Internet to promote the “three pillars” of Orwellian authoritarianism: propaganda, censorship, and surveillance (Morozov, 2011, p. 82). Of particular note is his discussion of the security threat that social media networks present to activists. Intelligence agencies can easily find information about opposition members that is stored on social media sites and also piece together entire opposition networks based on social media connections (Morozov, 2011, p. 27). This is a valid point to concede, as opposition activity based online is by its very nature difficult to hide.

Morozov also argues that authoritarian governments can use the Internet as an entertainment tool to distract people from the real issues (Morozov, 2011, p. 80). To support this, he cites a study done in East Germany before the fall of the Soviet Union. The results of the study showed that East Germans were more content with their own government and less likely to become politically active if they had access to West German television broadcasts. Capitalist television was used as the “opium of the people” (Morozov, 2011, p. 65). This tactic, using entertainment to distract the general populace, has indeed been tried by Russia during the Internet era. Examples include Duma member Konstantin Rykov, “an undisputed godfather of the Russian Internet,” who has been involved in a number of Internet projects since the 1990s. His sites include *zaputina.ru* [forputin.ru]; *dni.ru*, an Internet tabloid; and *fuck.ru*, a quirky

entertainment site. He also helped to found *Russia.ru*, an online television station that produces “The Tits Show,” and other entertainment propaganda (Morozov, 2011, pp. 124–125). And then there’s Maria Sergeyeva, a “blogging Pat Buchanan trapped in the body of Paris Hilton.” She has been variously referred to in the international press as “Putin’s Poster Girl” and “Russia’s Sarah Palin” (Morozov, 2011, p. 127). All of these examples show that the Russian state has invested in online entertainment in the hopes of it serving a dual purpose of propaganda and distraction; however, the street protests of 2011-2012 and the heavily politicized Internet use that took place during that time frame still managed to occur within this framework, bringing doubt to the notion that the Russian government has had much success with this tactic.

Another significant criticism that Morozov makes regarding the Internet is its effect on opposition organization. He argues that the Internet is eroding more traditional and effective methods of organizing and protesting and resulting in a decentralized system that is less effective. According to him, “Revolutions prize centralization and require fully committed leaders, strict discipline, absolute dedication, and strong relationships based on trust” (Morozov, 2011, p. 196). If his argument is to be believed, the Internet is undermining all of this. However, simply considering the case of the Russian opposition contradicts much of Morozov’s argument. Although the opposition movement did struggle from a lack of clear leadership structure early on, a few people rose to the forefront based on their extensive Internet activities and oratory skills. These leaders were no less committed because of their Internet use; rather, they were even more committed because of it. Their Internet use put them in the spotlight and made it impossible to hide their opposition activity, giving them even more dedication to and investment in the cause. Opposition members were also able to build strong relationships based on trust by supporting each other’s Internet activities and engaging online. Quite simply, significant pieces

of Morozov's arguments against the Internet do not hold up, although he does raise some valid concerns regarding the security threat that the Internet holds and the potential for it to be used as a tool for distraction – although that tactic has mostly failed in Russia.

Now that the safety valve theory has been defined and some particularly negative arguments about the Internet's effect have been presented, the two case studies of China and Egypt will be examined in relation to the safety valve theory. China, which has an authoritarian regime committed to maintaining the status quo, also has a vibrant blogosphere that has been able to shape public opinion and report on issues that the mainstream media ignores in a very similar way to the Russian blogosphere. The case of Egypt, while containing fewer similarities to the Russian case due to its ultimate outcome of regime change, is important to consider from the perspective of the safety valve theory.

China contains many similarities to Russia. Both countries encompass massive expanses of land, with varying ethnic groups and tensions associated with that. Both have strong centralized governments determined to remain in power and ubiquitous mainstream media that are heavily influenced by the state, although China's media is considerably more tightly controlled than Russia's. And most importantly, both countries have a thriving blogosphere. The Chinese Internet boasts well over 200 million blogs and, despite the fact that less than one-third of the total population regularly go online, these blogs have accomplished everything from exposing corrupt local officials to affecting foreign policy (Hassid, 2012, pp. 213–214). However, political scientists who study Chinese Internet use still struggle with the same questions that this thesis addresses in the Russia case: is the Internet a safety valve or a “pressure cooker” that increases social tensions and unrest?

One study conducted by Jonathan Hassid from the Chinese Research Centre in Sydney,

Australia, analyzes the convergence of blogs, the mainstream media, and the state. Using quantitative data, Hassid compares blog and newspaper content and differences in the time frame of discussion. He then divides the issues into ones that the mainstream media take the lead in framing and issues that blogs take the lead in framing – in other words, which medium reports first on an issue, which is then eventually followed by coverage from the other medium. Newspapers take the lead on discussion of issues such as energy policy and political coverage, whereas blogs take the lead on discussion of issues such as religion, rural problems, and the arts, which all have the potential to be very sensitive topics in China. Blogs also take the lead on reporting natural and man-made disasters, which are rarely reported in the mainstream Chinese media (Hassid, 2012, pp. 217–221). These clear divisions show the increasing divide between mainstream and Internet coverage of events and the power that citizen journalism can hold in shaping that coverage.

Unsurprisingly, the state responds differently based on which medium is setting the agenda. Hassid's findings showed that Beijing was fairly tolerant of criticism and discussion of an issue that was first framed by newspapers, which they are confident in their complete control over. They permitted people to voice their complaints on the Internet, which is acting as a safety valve in this instance. However, in cases where blogs led the newspapers and reported on issues that the newspapers had not yet discussed, the government was forced to scramble to react and redress grievances, although generally without touching the underlying problem (Hassid, 2012, pp. 221–223). This divide is explained by Hassid, who says that, "By getting ahead of official coverage, bloggers and Internet users ultimately increased social tensions and increased the growing awareness of Chinese class conflict. In short, when the central government feels in control of a story, it tolerates, and sometimes even encourages, criticism and public comment"

(Hassid, 2012, p. 223). According to Hassid's research, therefore, whether the Chinese blogosphere functions as a safety valve or whether it increases social unrest depends on the simple question of whether mainstream media have already discussed the issue at hand.

In this example of Chinese Internet use, major political change has not occurred and massive protests have been forestalled. The regime remains stable, mainstream media remain under the control of that regime, and blogs operate in a marginalized sphere. Typically, that sphere is permitted to exist and considered fairly harmless, and open criticism is tolerated. But occasionally that sphere is able to affect discourse and increase unrest. Issues first discussed on blogs have brought about such effects as small-scale protests and corruption investigations against officials. In the grand political scheme, these effects are relatively minor. And yet, the government seems to consider these effects dangerous enough that they have prosecuted and convicted several activist bloggers. This shows the power that blogs potentially hold to shape public discourse and enact some amount of change within authoritarian regimes, provided the blogs are first to set the agenda and frame the discussion.

Egypt provides an entirely different case study when considering the safety valve theory. In Egypt, revolution and the overthrow of the regime was the ultimate outcome and the Internet served as a means to an end. However, prior to 2011, the Internet had a long history of serving as a safety valve, not only in Egypt but throughout the Arab world. "For a number of years, the Arab media landscape has been witnessing a perplexing paradox, namely: a gap between the vibrant and active media arena, where many resistant and oppositional voices could be heard, on one hand, and on the other hand the dormant and stagnant political arena, which did not exhibit any serious signs of active change, popular participation, or true democratization" (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011, p. 2). Scholars explained this paradox as being a prime example of the safety

valve theory and that citizens were “substituting words for actions” (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011, p. 2). The political upheaval that threw the Arab world into chaos helped push Internet use out of the safety valve and into the streets.

Egypt as a case study has fewer similarities with Russia than China does, but is still worth considering in order to consider why Egypt’s protests resulted in revolution and Russia’s did not. Although both had at least semi-authoritarian regimes and mainstream media dominated by the state, the events that unfolded in 2011 in both countries resulted in entirely different outcomes. Whereas the existing regime in Egypt was overthrown, the existing regime in Russia endured and seems to have grown even stronger since that time. One of the key differences may lie in the government’s response to the protests, in addition to the goals and construction of the protests themselves.

An extensive history of the Egyptian revolution will not be laid out here, but a few facts about the situation prior to the revolution will be briefly mentioned. Before massive street protests broke out on January 25, 2011, there were already existing opposition structures within Egyptian society. However, these groups had yet to achieve any level of large-scale public mobilization, and were therefore easy to suppress (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011, p. 8). Despite only marginal support for opposition groups at first glance, there was widespread public dissatisfaction, which was apparent on the Internet. Egyptians already knew that discontent was simmering throughout the country; unlike in Tunisia, where people were unaware of the level of dissatisfaction that their fellow citizens experienced, it was well known by most Egyptians that people were angry. Rather, the reason that mass protests had not yet occurred was that “it was only a matter of calculating the risk involved in protesting and the chances of success; how much people are ready to sacrifice; and whether they are willing to pay the price of freedom” (Lynch,

2011). People finally calculated that they were willing to pay that price on January 25, 2011, when Tahrir Square filled with Egyptians demanding change.

During the revolution itself, Egyptians made broad use of the Internet by broadcasting information about the protests, mobilizing citizens by issuing a “call to action,” protecting each other by “evading censorship and surveillance,” transferring money, and more (Joyce, 2011). This widespread use of technology did not go unnoticed by the regime, which decided that its best option was to shut everything down. On January 28, 2011, the government shut down all Internet and mobile phone service across the country, essentially blacking out the nation for an entire week. This approach, intended to impede protest organization and shut protestors off from the outside world, completely backfired on the regime. Activists were able to find innovative ways of getting around the blackout, which included piggy backing on the one network that remained active, using landlines to access the Internet, and using “Speak-2-Tweet” services that Google and Twitter offered (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011, pp. 14–15). Most importantly, public opinion toward the regime completely soured as a result of this approach, and more people took to the streets than ever before. Although the army withdrawing its support from the regime was the true final blow to the Egyptian government, the actions that led to that point were aided and abetted by the Internet.

All of this begs the question of how the Internet in Egypt transitioned from serving purely as a safety valve to facilitating the revolution. Ultimately, “there was a need to find the missing link between public anger and resentment of the ruling regime on the one hand, and actual public mobilization to bring about real change on the other hand. Political activism in the real world, aided by cyber activism in the virtual world, succeeded to find this missing link” (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011, p. 10). Political activism and cyber activism went hand in hand to help create the

revolution that Egypt experienced. Despite the masses of Western journalists that scrambled to label the Egyptian revolution a “Facebook revolution” or a “Twitter revolution,” it is entirely inaccurate to say that Facebook or Twitter caused the revolution. Rather, the Internet was able to assist, after moving out of the safety valve, in facilitating the revolution. Would revolution still have occurred without the Internet? Eventually, yes. Would it have been considerably more difficult to organize and ultimately achieve its goals? Most likely.

China and Egypt present two very different examples of the safety valve theory in practice. The example of China is a case in which the Internet alternately serves as a safety valve and as a vehicle for increased social tension within the same time frame. Which of these two it serves as ultimately depends on whether the issue at hand was addressed first by the mainstream media or by the blogosphere. It is, therefore, dependent on the order of agenda setting. The case of Egypt represents an instance in which the Internet went from serving solely as a safety valve to actively assisting in revolution. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the Egyptian populace became especially outraged when they temporarily lost their Internet use and mobile phone service, encouraging more people to flood the streets than before, with the Internet also indirectly assisting the revolution in this way. This abrupt and drastic shift in the Internet’s use – from serving as a safety valve to aiding revolution – occurred because of a combination of political and cyber activism.

Where, then, does Russia stand with the safety valve theory? Russia seems to combine both the Chinese and Egyptian models. Up until the 2011 parliamentary elections, the Internet served as a safety valve in Russia. Discontented citizens were able to express their anger with the government, but in a way that did not seriously affect the regime. However, just as the revolution transformed the Egyptian Internet, the Russian Internet became increasingly politicized after the

2011 parliamentary elections. Immediately following the elections, the Internet became a crucial platform for reporting on electoral fraud and instigating the first major protests. However, instead of following the Egyptian government's model and shutting everything down, the Russian government chose to ride out the protests and wait until people lost interest, thus avoiding further provocation. This choice seems to have been more effective than the Egyptian one, since the Russian government remains in power and its popularity among the majority of its citizens remains high. However, it can still occasionally face challenges from the cyber activists.

Since 2011, the Internet in Russia has become more similar to the Chinese model, in which the Internet is able to occasionally enact change, depending on the issue, similar to the case of China. There are documented instances in which Russian cyber action has shaped public discourse or influenced the mainstream media, or resulted in some minor amount of change. The majority of these instances occurred when blogs got ahead of the mainstream media on an issue, as seen in the Chinese blogosphere. Additionally, there are certain "hot topics" that the government appears less likely to tolerate discussion about, which are generally any topic that the mainstream media will not touch. However, unlike in the case of China, political mobilization did occur and blogs seems to have both assisted in that and benefited from it.

There are still some underlying problems with the safety valve theory as it relates to Russia. First and foremost is the assumption that effect is based solely upon actions taken in the real world. Sometimes, cyber activity can directly translate to real effect. Examples of this will be presented in chapters three and four in an attempt to show that Internet use in Russia after 2011 does not entirely subscribe to the safety valve theory. Another issue with the safety valve theory is that it seems to assume that online discontent, provided it remains solely in the cyber world, cannot threaten an authoritarian regime in any meaningful way. Cyber actions on the

Russian Internet have proven this untrue. And lastly, the safety valve theory disregards the importance of the Internet to the organization and implementation of public protests, which is in fact a key to challenging an authoritarian regime.

Despite these concerns with the safety valve theory's argument, it does still seem to be applicable to Russia in certain situations. On a macro level, it was certainly applicable up until 2011, and on a micro level, it has also been applicable in recent years to certain cyber actions that do not match up with the conditions necessary for the Internet to have an effect. However, the safety valve theory's applicability is entirely reliant upon an authoritarian regime being willing to tolerate a certain level of dissent, and recent events in Russia have suggested that perhaps the regime is moving away from that tolerance and toward a more tightly controlled approach, which would render the safety valve theory entirely obsolete.

Chapter Three

"Мы пришли, чтобы показать, что не боимся."

"We came in order to show that we are not afraid."

- anonymous protestor

The Russian opposition movement has made extensive use of the Internet to further its cause. While much of the vast amount of information and dialogue that is spread via the Internet remains solely in the cyber world, there have been important instances of cyber activity translating into real world effect, contrary to the safety valve theory's argument. Chapters three and four will discuss these instances by considering the various ways in which the opposition uses the Internet. Internet use by the Russian opposition movement can be broadly grouped into four general categories. The first two of these categories, social media and alternative news, will be discussed in this chapter. The other two categories, blogging and special project sites, will be discussed in chapter four.

Effect is not an easy thing to measure, particularly where the Internet is concerned. In the words of political scientists Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi, there has been a tendency among political scientists to treat the Internet as a "black box," about which "little effort is made... to spell out the causal mechanisms by which this or that type of online activity translates into specific outcomes that undermine authoritarianism" (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2013). As such, despite a dearth of precedent, these two chapters will contain an attempt to show the Internet's potential effect by using the case study of the Russian opposition. Although there is some quantitative data that supports the arguments to follow, it will be mostly based on research that tries to identify a link between the cyber world and real world action. The effect that this Internet

use has will later be considered through the lens of the safety valve theory in order to consider how the safety valve theory can fit the Russian case.

Within this chapter, the social media sites that will be discussed include Facebook, Twitter, *Vkontakte*, and YouTube. Although YouTube is more of a video sharing service than social media in the strictest sense of the term, it will be categorized as such for the purposes of this thesis. The examination of alternative news sites will focus primarily on three of the most prominent – *TV Dozhd*, *Gazeta.ru*, and *Ekho Moskvy*. These sites also represent each type of alternative news, as one is a television channel, another is a newspaper, and the third is a radio station. A discussion of each of these sites and the extent of their use within Russia will be followed by an examination of the potential for effect that they hold, individually and as an entire category, to argue for the safety valve theory's decreased applicability after mass protests began in late 2011.

Social Media

Social media is defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (“Social Media,” n.d.). Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which are all extremely popular in the United States, are also relatively widespread in Russia. However, by far the most popular social media site in Russia is *Vkontakte* [In Contact], which is in essence the Russian equivalent of Facebook. All of these social media sites provide the opposition movement with an organizational platform, a way to spread information on planned events and to reach out to potential members. In the words of St. Petersburg opposition leader Nikolai Artemenko, “With the help of Facebook and *Vkontakte*, we organize our followers. We

promote our groups, organize meetings, and conduct PR. Without the Internet, it is not possible to function as an opposition organization” (Артёменко, 2013). Just as countless organizations across the globe are now using the Internet to advertise their product and reach a broader base, so too is the Russian opposition harnessing social media to expand its operations.

A poll conducted by the Levada Center, a respected independent pollster, found that 22 percent of Moscow residents say they receive their news from social media. (Respondents were allowed to pick more than one method of receiving news.) Although only 53 percent of Moscow residents said they use the Internet regularly, 35 percent said they use social media very often, and 15 percent said they use it a few times a week (“Инфографика,” 2013). So, roughly 50 percent of Moscow residents use social media regularly. Although Moscow is a unique case, as it boasts some of the highest levels of Internet penetration in Russia, this still demonstrates the possibility that social media holds for reaching large numbers of people in Russia. Of course, whether people maintain their ties to opposition networks purely in the cyber world or if they choose to extend that activity into the real world depends on the individual, but social media does hold definitive potential to construct a broad base of support.

This potential derives partially from the structure of social media sites. Social media allow connections to share whatever they consider worthwhile with each other. In highly politicized situations, this can often be news or updates on a current event. This provides exposure to the issues of the day, often from people who are experiencing something firsthand. Social media also allow people to discuss these issues in a form of open dialogue. This dialogue can take place between people who would not otherwise be able to talk as freely or have the opportunity to connect. So in addition to exposure about the issues, it provides connection between like-minded individuals. Lastly, it provides organization. Once people are connected in

a loosely knit group with similar ideas, social media can assist in maintaining these ties by making organizational matters simpler. Members of a group can also share information with their own contacts and thus spread the word further. Although the spreading of information has been seen throughout history, even under repressive conditions (*samizdat* during the Soviet Union is one such example), social media facilitates and speeds up the process.

Each of the specific types of social media mentioned earlier will be briefly described, followed by a discussion of concrete examples when social media use translated into measurable effect or action.

Facebook

Although Facebook is not as popular as *Vkontakte*, as of December 2012, it had roughly 8 million users in Russia (*Internet World Stats: Usage and population statistics*, 2014). A digital marketing website in July 2013 estimated that number was up to 13 million (Smith, 2013). The demographics of these users show that the most prominent age group, claiming 37 percent of users, is between 25 and 34 years old. The second largest group is 18 to 24 year olds, who make up 22 percent of users (“Russia Facebook Statistics by Country,” n.d.). Therefore, roughly 60 percent of Facebook users in Russia are between the ages of 18 and 34, which also happens to be the age range of the most politically active group in Russia during the protests in 2011 to 2012.

Facebook users in Russia do not differ greatly from Facebook users elsewhere in the world. They post statuses, share links, upload photos, and their ilk. However, Facebook also provides a means for Russians to share and discuss politicized issues via a medium that remains free of censorship. Although Facebook is not inherently political, it has the potential to affect social discussion of an issue. It is an unregulated medium through which people are able to

connect, organize, and share, although it is limited in potential by its low penetration within Russia.

Twitter

Twitter has experienced a huge increase in popularity in Russia within the past few years. A study in 2010 done by *Yandex*, a popular Russian search engine, estimated merely 183,000 Twitter users in Russia (Яндекс, 2010). Today, the top nine Russian Twitter profiles all have more than one million followers each (“Twitter Statistics in Russia,” n.d.). A study done by SemioCast in 2012 ranked Russia as 14th in the world by number of Twitter accounts, with roughly 7.5 million accounts (“SemioCast — Twitter reaches half a billion accounts — More than 140 millions in the U.S.,” 2012). However, it is important to remember that this number does not represent active Twitter users – it is possible to have more than one Twitter account, and more than a third of registered Twitter accounts worldwide are inactive (Алексеева, 2013). A technology site sponsored by *RIA Novosti* estimated that the number of Russian users was actually at 4.2 million as of May 2013 (“Аудитория «Одноклассников» в мае выросла больше всех соцсетей — на 8%,” 2013).

Leading opposition figures tend to be very active on Twitter and tweet blog posts or online news articles about current events or political issues. As will be discussed later, opposition leaders have politicized both Twitter and Facebook. However, like Facebook, Twitter’s potential is limited by its low penetration.

Vkontakte

Russia's equivalent to Facebook is one of the most popular websites in all of Eastern Europe and Russia. Although there are other major Russian social media sites, such as *Odnoklassniki*, *Vkontakte* remains the most prevalent. As of October 2013, the site had 230 million registered users. Out of those, roughly 100 million are active users in Russia (Smith, 2013). Considering that Russia's entire population is approximately 143 million, this is a significant majority. The site also has large numbers of users in Ukraine, other parts of the former Soviet Union, and across the world. The demographics, which are similar to other social media sites in that the majority of users are in the 18 to 34 age range, also has a noticeable percentage of users that are between the ages of 12 and 17 (Pavelek, 2013). Russian teenagers, while perhaps not as interested in what Facebook has to offer, love *Vkontakte*. This is largely due to one of *Vkontakte*'s most popular functions – streaming.

Vkontakte differs from Facebook in several respects. It is first and foremost a Russian social media site – created by Russians for Russians – and allows users to stream popular movies and TV shows for free. Digital piracy is commonplace in Russia, but the free streaming on *Vkontakte* has resulted in some legal trouble for the company in the past. Nevertheless, streaming is still an integral part of the *Vkontakte* experience and continues to be permissible.

Vkontakte holds huge possibility for opposition organization due to its widespread use within Russia, but the opposition elite has generally disregarded it, as well as *Odnoklassniki*. The likely cause of this strange phenomenon will be addressed later in the chapter.

YouTube

As of May 2013, Russia was among the top five countries in the world for YouTube traffic. The number of site users stands at roughly 25 million, but that number grows to 51 million when taking into account the number of people who view YouTube videos that are embedded in other sites (“Russia in Top 5 For Generated YouTube Traffic,” 2013). The two most popular Russian YouTube channels are Russia Today, a news broadcaster (though slightly misleading to call it a Russian YouTube channel, as it posts all of its videos in English), and *ELLO*, which posts music videos by the most popular Russian artists. Both have more than one billion combined views for all of their uploaded videos (“Youtube Statistics in Russia,” n.d.). Opposition online news channel *TV Dozhd* ranks in at number 28 on the top Russian YouTube channel list, with a combined 35 million views for all of its videos.

Although YouTube does not provide the same opportunities for dialogue and connection as other social media sites, it does have considerable power that is concentrated in the visual elements. Video tends to be considered a reliable, trusted medium, more difficult to fake than photography. It also has the potential to be extremely powerful and irrevocably alter public opinion, particularly in Russia, where the television has long been the ultimate medium for receiving news.

Effect of Social Media

Social media, in the case of Russia, can be considered to provide two types of measurable effect: organization and the shaping of public opinion. Organization is a vital function for any group, particularly if the group’s members are disparate and poorly connected. Although the heart of the Russian opposition movement is in Moscow, there are also significant opposition

movements in St. Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, and other cities. Opposition leaders from each of these cities are therefore able to organize both intra-city and inter-city. This thesis will discuss primarily intra-city organization through social media, focusing on Moscow. Following that, the possibility that social media holds to shape public opinion will be examined.

The first major street protest that took place in the winter of 2011 occurred on December 10 at *Bolotnaia Ploshchad* in Moscow. To help organize and spread the word about the protest, leaders created a Facebook event. Tens of thousands of people responded as “Going” on the event’s page, while presumably just as many were aware of it. An estimated 40 to 50 thousand ultimately ended up attending the protest, braving sub-zero temperatures to express their displeasure with election falsification in recent parliamentary elections. Creating a public event like this on social media is beneficial for several reasons. For one, it creates a sense of camaraderie and reduces the fear that no one will show to the protest. When information is passed by word of mouth, there is no way of verifying the estimated number of people who will be attending a supposedly mass protest. Answering “Going” on an event demonstrates to others an intent to attend and convinces still more people that they too can attend, as they will not be the only ones who come. Particularly when a protest is anti-government in nature, it is crucial for a potential attendee to be convinced that there will be countless others also attending, to help with anonymity.

In addition, creating an event on social media allows opposition leaders to spread the word about the protest much more easily. It is more time-efficient to spread information via the Internet than by word of mouth and will likely reach more people. It is also more cost-efficient than printing pamphlets for distribution. In short, the Internet is the most effective means of communicating with a large number of people about an anti-government protest, which cannot

be advertised via more traditional media. This Internet organization gave the Russian opposition movement a distinct advantage and helped boost the number of protest attendees in 2011 and 2012. Of course, simply learning about an event via social media does not significantly change a person's attitude and influence their support of the cause, but seeing that vast numbers of other people plan on attending can help convince someone who is unsure of their decision, as well as reaching a broader section of the population to inform them of an event. Additionally, social pressure can also come into play, as people whose friends are attending may also attend as well, even if they are not themselves overtly political. Therefore, the Internet's effect is to both reach more people and provide an increased incentive to attend.

The other major function that social media can perform is to shape public opinion. One example of this is the role that YouTube played in early December 2011 during the parliamentary elections. With the help of a video sharing service, aspiring citizen journalists or volunteer election monitors can post incriminating video that shows election falsification. Ordinary Russians did just that, capturing videos of election officials stuffing ballots and other violations. They then uploaded the incriminatory footage to YouTube, where it went viral and helped serve as a spark for the protests that broke out (Schwartz & Herszenhorn, 2011). Video can easily be shared via social media sites to increase the number of people who are exposed to the footage and as previously mentioned, it can have a powerful impact, particularly in a culture that values visual media such as Russia.

Other Western social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, can also have a powerful effect on public opinion. A study conducted by Reuter and Szakonyi, which used data from a representative poll conducted by the Levada Center in the wake of the 2011 parliamentary elections, examined this phenomenon. Ultimately, users of Facebook or Twitter were

significantly more likely to believe that there were major electoral violations that took place. Reuter and Szakonyi argue that this can be attributed to the politicization of Western social media by the core opposition elite, which was determined to raise public awareness of the issue. They also note, "... the effect of online social media usage on awareness of electoral fraud is dependent on the type of political information that has been injected into the network" (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2013). In the case that opposition activists do succeed in the politicization of social media, this data shows that such social media sites can have a proven influence on shaping public opinion and raising awareness of such issues as electoral violations.

Part of the reason that social media can have such an effect is based on their perceived trustworthiness. Social media users receive news or updates from people they have designated as their friends, and in general, this denotes a certain degree of trust. Therefore, information that people receive from trusted acquaintances is given more weight than information that they receive from other, perceived as less trustworthy, sources (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2013). This is one of the huge advantages that social media holds as a method of shaping public opinion. It serves as a form of dialogue between trusted friends and holds huge potential for spreading information rapidly and convincing people of its veracity. Whether this information stays purely in the cyber world or affects actions in the real world is a burden that lies with the individual. But it seems likely that individuals who were more aware of the extent of electoral fraud were also more likely to take to the streets to protest.

It is worth noting that, thus far, no mention has been made of *Vkontakte* or other domestic social media and the effect that they have. This is due to the fact that they simply do not hold the same potential for effect as Western social media. Although this seems counterintuitive, considering the huge advantage Russian social media holds in sheer number of

users, there are some explanations of this phenomenon. According to Reuter and Szakonyi, the key consideration lies in the fact that the core opposition elite has not politicized *Vkontakte* and other domestic social media to the same extent that it has politicized Western social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. An example of this exists in the organization of the first major street protest on December 10, 2011. Whereas tens of thousands of people had signaled their intent to attend on Facebook, only ten thousand had done so on *Vkontakte*, and the event did not even have a page on *Odnoklassniki* (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2013). But why would opposition activists neglect such an important tool?

Some argue that it is based purely on the personal preferences of the opposition elite. The opposition movement does contain a majority of fairly young, well-educated, and often English-speaking Muscovites. This demographic may prefer Western social media based on their own personal biases and preferences. However, another compelling reason lies in the ownership of domestic social media. The government can potentially control and restrain dissent that occurs via domestic social media, since the owners live and operate within Russia and are therefore easy to reach. This is not an unfounded worry, as, “On December 9, four [sic] days after the elections, *Vkontakte*’s owner, Pavel Durov, was summoned by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) for questioning. On his Twitter feed, Durov displayed a copy of the summons and explained that FSB had requested that *Vkontakte* close several anti-regime user groups on the site” (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2013). In order to avoid the potential dangers of operating on domestic social media sites, the opposition instead chooses to generally eschew Russian social media and focus its efforts on Western social media, which are seen as a bastion of freedom and untouchable by the Russian government.

Social media play an important role in the organization of opposition groups. Websites

have the ability to easily spread the news about major protests and encourage people to attend by openly showing the number of other people who will also be attending. This function is illustrated by the use of Facebook to organize the first major protest on December 10, 2011. Social media also has the potential to shape public opinion, such as the case of electoral fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary elections. Citizen journalists were able to use YouTube to post incriminatory evidence proving fraud, and Facebook and Twitter users spread information about the electoral fraud to their connections, contributing to the spread of awareness about the issue. However, as discussed, *Vkontakte* and other Russian domestic social media do not hold the same level of potential, largely due to opposition fears of government pressure on the websites.

Social media, then, can create actual effect provided that opposition activists are able to politicize the networks. Using social media networks to organize protests is an example of cyber activity that clearly is not limited purely to the cyber world. Activists are using the Internet with the intention of creating real effect in this example. In the case of social media shaping public opinion, Western social media that have been politicized by the opposition elite have the power to sway public opinion. Is it the sole determining factor of public opinion? Certainly not. However, it does have some amount of influence, and that influence can assist in incensing a population enough to take dissent to the streets.

Next, alternative news sites and the effect they can have will be examined.

Alternative News Sites

In order to understand the contributions of alternative news sites, it is crucial to understand the mass media situation in modern-day Russia. The mass media in Russia is largely controlled or heavily influenced by the government. Issues within the media structure, which

made the media especially vulnerable to government influence, can be traced back to the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union. The post-communist media focused its energies on emulating Western media, with ethics and journalistic morals considered a high priority. However, this resulted in a disregard of finance, which in turn resulted in a weaker business model for the media (Wegren, 2013, p. 126). These underlying problems, sown during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, would trickle down to modern-day Russian media. “Problematic ownership of media assets, murky business practices, and institutional weakness all helped to erode the foundations of an independent media” (Ostrow, 2013, p. 467). The independence of the major media outlets would be further constricted during the presidency of Vladimir Putin.

Putin quickly went about consolidating power after obtaining the presidency in 2000. Understanding the unique power that the television holds in Russia, one of Putin’s first steps was to gain complete control over the major television networks. He stripped the major media oligarchs of their wealth and holdings, putting most of the major national television networks under state ownership and control. Changes to media operations were swift to commence. In 2002, the popular political satire show *Kukly* [Dolls] was removed from the air, and critical political talk shows were also shut down (Wegren, 2013, p. 130). Although some criticism of the government remains on air to this day, it is carefully managed, as are the people who are permitted on national television.

Print media, on the other hand, has remained freer than television. However, publications that remain independent typically have low readership and dissemination levels and are concentrated in one geographic area, thereby unable to reach a broad audience. As Masha Lipman puts it, “The problem with today’s media in Russia is not just that the Kremlin controls national television, but also that those publications that remain uncontrolled do not make a

difference, since they operate in a virtually empty public space” (Ostrow, 2013, p. 471). The brilliance of the Kremlin’s system of media control is twofold: they don’t need complete control in order to maintain it, and self-censorship mechanisms are already in place, a holdover from the Soviet era.

True investigative journalism is rare in Russia for the reasons mentioned above, but also due to the danger of being a journalist in Russia. Between 2000 and October of 2006 alone, there were an estimated 87 investigative journalists murdered in Russia. No killer was ever identified in any of these cases (Ostrow, 2013, p. 450). Many of these journalists were aware of the danger that they were putting themselves in, but continued to try to write their story anyways. This is why being an investigative journalist in Russia requires “uncommon bravery and integrity” (Ostrow, 2013, p. 458) and why it has all but disappeared in modern-day Russia – an important void to be filled, particularly in a country where corruption is a widely accepted fact of life. Citizen journalists, as well as alternative news sites, are stepping in to fill this void by using the Internet as their platform.

It is challenging to prove measureable effect when considering alternative news sites. However, it will be argued that these alternative news sites provide crucial coverage of events from a perspective independent of the government, providing people with an uncensored version of events. This results in a “trickle-up” effect, in which online news coverage affects television coverage. Alternative news sites also provide a platform for investigative journalism, which, as already discussed, is lacking in Russia. The government’s response to these alternative news sites will also help show that they do have an effect – or at the very least, that the government fears their potential. Three of the major alternative news sites, *TV Dozhd*, *Gazeta.ru*, and *Ekho Moskvy*, will be briefly described, followed by an examination of effect.

TV Dozhd

TV Dozhd [TV Rain] is a television network that represents the only truly independent televised viewpoint in the media landscape of today's Russia. It is available online, but has also been possible to buy as part of a premium cable package in Russia until recently, due to a controversy that will be discussed later. *TV Dozhd* has a wide variety of programming, ranging from educational programs to sports to hard news to in-depth interviews with leading political figures. The channel tends to represent the opposition viewpoint – it is considered an opposition channel by the state and, as such, generally is not permitted the same level of access to officials that state-run channels enjoy. During the 2011-2012 protests, *TV Dozhd* incorporated a white ribbon into its website design in solidarity with the protestors. And during anti-corruption blogger Aleksei Navalny's campaign for mayor, *TV Dozhd* often featured him in interviews or news updates. This is in striking contrast to the state-run television channels, which have a “black list” that prevents Navalny from appearing on their programming.

Gazeta.ru

Gazeta.ru [Newspaper.ru] is an online independent news site. It covers a wide variety of topics, from politics to culture to sports. Articles on the site tend to either be written as either a news article or as a feature piece. The feature pieces are longer and more opinionated, often focusing on political issues ignored by the state-controlled mass media. *Gazeta.ru* is a well-respected independent news sources and provides critical coverage of events. During the December 2011 protests, *Gazeta.ru* ran a live blog that detailed what was occurring while quoting the speakers at the protests. They provided uncensored coverage of the events of 2011-2012, making them an important alternative news source.

Ekho Moskvy

Ekho Moskvy [Echo of Moscow] is a popular radio station with a strong online presence. According to their own data, in January 2014 alone they had 6.4 million unique visitors to their site and a total of 109.4 million total hits (“Радио ЭХО МОСКВЫ,” 2014). *Ekho Moskvy* has a variety of news programs and interviews on their radio channel, as well as frequent contributors who write posts for their website. Leading opposition members often contribute opinion pieces. Although *Ekho Moskvy* is primarily a radio station, it does live tweet public protests and post video and photography of certain events, which is why it is included under the umbrella of alternative news sites. As with other alternative news sites, it provided extensive coverage of the 2011-2012 protests.

Effect of Alternative News Sites

The role that alternative news sites play in general media coverage of events is best illustrated by media coverage of the 2011-2012 protests. The alternative news sites played a crucial role in providing unbiased, uncensored information about the protests. Their sites contained live blogging on the protests, guest columnists, analytical articles, extensive visual media, and, critically, accurate and unbiased estimates of the number of protestors. In short, they provided ethical journalism, which was arguably not present in television coverage of events.

Sarah Oates and Tetyana Lokot conducted a study to compare television coverage of the 2011-2012 protests with online coverage. The results were unsurprising. Online coverage was much more in depth and better represented the goals of protestors, while the television networks devoted little time to covering the protests, in addition to misrepresenting the goals of the protestors. This “war of frames” resulted in a victory for online coverage, which successfully

influenced television coverage of events (Oates & Lokot, 2013). Of the three online sources that the study examined, two of them – *Gazeta.ru* and *Ekho Moskvyy* – are also within the scope of this thesis, and the study results for these sources will be discussed. The third, *Lenta.ru*, is another online news source that is fairly similar to *Gazeta.ru* in both structure and content.

Key points that the study noted about *Gazeta.ru*'s coverage of the protests include their analysis of mainstream media coverage of the protests; their emphasis of the solidarity of various opposition groups; comparisons of police estimates versus event organizer estimates of the number of protestors; a discussion of the anti-Putin nature of later protests; and a questioning of the legitimacy of “pro-Putin” rallies that were suspiciously organized at the same time as opposition protests (Oates & Lokot, 2013). All of this added up to an implied criticism of the government, as well as a criticism of the mainstream media, which is especially notable. *Ekho Moskvyy* had slightly different methods of distributing information, including live audio streaming, heavy amounts of photography (with help from citizen journalists), and a number of opinion columns. Otherwise, the general inferences from their coverage are much the same as *Gazeta.ru*'s, although *Ekho Moskvyy* provided even more balanced coverage by including opinion columns that presented constructive criticism of the protests (Oates & Lokot, 2013). However, even the columns that included constructive criticism were in favor of the protests themselves. In general, online news coverage of events presented the protests in a positive light, which resulted in an important balance to television coverage of events.

TV Dozhd, while not included in this study, also provided important uncensored coverage of events. “For Russia's young, politically minded elite, as well as Russia-watchers outside the country, Dozhd was considered essential viewing during the antigovernment protests in 2011 and 2012...” (“Opposition Dozhd TV Appears To Be Latest Victim Of Kremlin Pressure,” 2014). It

devoted broadcasting time to leading opposition figures and conducted interviews, as opposed to the state-run television broadcasts, which did not allow any opposition figures to speak.

Most importantly, all of this online coverage of events resulted in a “trickle-up” effect on television coverage where the alternative news sites actually had an effect on the mainstream media. Oates and Lokot conclude, “... as the internet reported on the true scale and meaning of the protests for Russians, this liberated the commercial television to report in a more realistic and positive manner on the protests in terms of citizen mobilization. As commercial news shifted the frame, the state-run news was forced to adjust its frame so as to come close enough to reality to be feasible to the viewer” (Oates & Lokot, 2013, p. 24). This shows that providing an alternative to the state-run, tightly controlled mainstream media can have an effect – not merely on audience opinion, but also on the mainstream media itself. Online news sources can therefore impact the mainstream media by simply reporting the facts on the Internet. However, this represented one specific instance, and conditions in Russia have drastically changed since that time, making this an isolated case that would most likely not result in a similar effect today.

Another, more indirect way to consider effect is through the lens of the government’s actions. In a hybrid-authoritarian regime such as Russia, if the government considers something or someone to be a threat to its authority, they are likely to take action against it. Therefore, the government considers these alternative news sites to have at least some modicum of effect, as they have sought to disrupt their activities. During several major political events, including the parliamentary elections in 2011 and the mass protests in 2011-2012, several alternative news sites reported encountering DDoS attacks that made their websites temporarily unavailable. DDoS attacks, or distributed denial-of-service attacks, are targeted network attacks directed at specific servers in order to make a website or websites temporarily unavailable. These attacks

were likely intended to shut down alternative media coverage at crucial junctions. For that reason alone, despite the fact that DDoS attacks are notoriously difficult to pinpoint the source of, it seems probable that the Russian government was behind the attacks.

TV Dozhd has encountered troubles of its own. All of its programming can be watched online; however, it was also available with a premium cable package in Russia. But on January 26, 2014, *TV Dozhd* posed as a question to its viewers on the 70th anniversary of the blockade of Leningrad, “Should Leningrad have been surrendered in order to save hundreds of thousands of lives?” (“Главред сайта «Дождя» прокомментировал опрос о сдаче блокадного Ленинграда,” 2014). The question proved to be offensive to many and, despite *TV Dozhd* immediately taking it down and apologizing, national politicians gladly spurred the controversy, calling the question everything from unacceptable to a rehabilitation of Nazism. The premium cable providers who had included *TV Dozhd* began cutting it out of their packages, including *Akado*, *Dom.ru*, and *NTV-plus*. *Dom.ru* claimed this was due to an inability to agree on the terms of a contract, while *TV Dozhd* released a statement making it clear that it believed this was due to controversy over the blockade question (Сафронов & Антонова, 2014). Pavel Lobkov, a former television host for *NTV* who now works for *TV Dozhd*, claimed that “the poll scandal was merely a pretext for bumping Dozhd off the air” (“Opposition Dozhd TV Appears To Be Latest Victim Of Kremlin Pressure,” 2014). Although the Russian government did not cause the scandal, it has taken full advantage of the situation. *TV Dozhd* could continue operations online, and there were some operators who continued to broadcast its content, but the “Optimistic Channel” began to struggle financially and was essentially shut down as a result of the scandal. In mid-March 2014, the general director of *TV Dozhd* announced that the broadcaster would close within two months

(Barry & Kishkovsky, 2014). This is a death knell to independent television broadcasting in Russia.

Alternative news sites have proved to be an important independent voice, particularly during political events that the government would prefer to maintain unchallenged dialogue over. Sources such as *TV Dozhd*, *Gazeta.ru*, and *Ekho Moskvy* have provided unbiased information about protests and other anti-government activity that the state-controlled mainstream media would prefer to ignore. This resulted in a “trickle-up” effect in 2011-2012, where the mainstream media was forced to conform its reporting to more reasonable standards. However, there is still plenty of information remaining that the state-run media will still not report, and alternative news sites can freely discuss such taboo subjects, providing a platform for critical journalism. In addition, the government’s attempts to disrupt the independent media’s activities shows that the government itself feels threatened and believes these sites have some sort of effect on society. Alternative news sites also add to the effect that social media has by increasing public awareness and providing an alternate source of news. These sites are engaging in critical investigative journalism and providing a balanced voice in an otherwise severely unbalanced media system. By contributing all of this effect via the Internet, these sites are serving as much more than a safety valve for disgruntled citizens.

Chapter Four

“Я голосовал за других сволочей!”

(“I voted for the other bastards!”)

- slogan from 2011 protests against voter fraud

Having discussed the effects that social media and alternative news sites can bring about, it is now time to discuss the other two categories of Internet use: blogs and special project sites. *Zhivoi Zhurnal* [Live Journal], a blog-hosting site, has experienced huge popularity and widespread use in Russia. Opposition activists have made extensive use of *Zhivoi Zhurnal*, accumulating respectable followings while using their blogs to discuss political issues. The blogging site has also been alternately used as a platform for political campaigning, an outlet for citizen journalism, and a means to expose corruption. Special project sites, which will be loosely defined for the purposes of this thesis as any site created by opposition activists with the intention of a particular outcome, each have a potential effect that depends on the specific reason they were created.

These types of Internet use will be considered as more individualistic than the earlier categories due to their structure and function. Blogs do not focus as much on connections with others users like social media does, but rather consist of individuals expressing their viewpoints and experiences to the rest of the world. With some exceptions, blogs tend to be more of a monologue than dialogue. Therefore, their success – and effect – largely rests with the individual’s charisma and the effectiveness of their writing style, as well as the number of people who read their blog. Special project sites are created by individuals for specific purposes and also are very individually driven, depending on the creators and designers of the project for their

structure and function and individual users for their effect.

These two categories of Internet usage will be analyzed to determine what, if any, effect they are able to have.

Blogs

Although there are several popular blog-hosting sites in Russia, *Zhivoi Zhurnal* [Live Journal] is the most influential. With an estimated 5.7 million users, Russians consist of half of Live Journal's total number of worldwide users (Nastacia, 2013). What is considered in the United States an outdated blogging platform, long outstripped by Facebook and Twitter, is an intrinsic part of the Russian Internet. How, and why, did *Zhivoi Zhurnal* become so popular?

There are a number of reasons, according to analysts. *Zhivoi Zhurnal*'s initial rise in popularity was aided by the fact that its servers are located in the United States, which to many Russian bloggers seemed to guarantee freedom of speech. In addition, it interfaced well with foreign languages, it was developed before other possible competitors, it synced well with social networking sites, and it merged with the "Russian mentality," which values friendship and connections (Greenall, 2012). The site itself is very different from social media sites, which is why it is classified separately for the purposes of this thesis, as its primary function is to provide a platform for long, wordy posts. Such 10-page posts would never be found on Facebook or *Vkontakte*, argues Eugene Gorny, a blogosphere researcher. "Those things [Facebook and *Vkontakte*] are not for writers. *ZheZhe* [Live Journal] is very convenient for people who have something to say" (Greenall, 2012).

Zhivoi Zhurnal's use in Russia also differs greatly from its use in other places, including the United States. For one, it varies in magnitude – Russians typically read many more blog posts

than other users. This is why the founder of Live Journal initially saw it as a tool for activism in Russia. Additionally, *Zhivoi Zhurnal* is considered “older, more serious” than Live Journal as a whole (Arutunyan, 2009). In short, *Zhivoi Zhurnal* is perfectly designed for political purposes, as opposed to social media, which merge both trivial matters with current events and politics.

Effect of Blogging Sites

The Russian opposition elite has effectively harnessed *Zhivoi Zhurnal* to create “a hub for grassroots reporting of current events in a country where TV is largely controlled by the government... a place for political discourse...” (Nastacia, 2013). The leading opposition activists use *Zhivoi Zhurnal* to spread their ideas and share information, generally accomplishing four different effects. One is revealing corruption. Opposition activists use their blog sites as a place to post incriminating information about the entrenched political elite in order to try to disgrace high-ranking officials. Another effect is challenging the traditional media. Activist bloggers post information that directly opposes the official version of events, resulting in an open contradiction of the government’s account. Activists also use blogs for political campaigning. *Zhivoi Zhurnal* is perfectly designed for constructing a grassroots political campaign among the Internet-savvy younger generation. Lastly, there is a sort of general citizen journalist effect, in which activists using blogs as their platform can engage in investigative journalism and affect public discourse.

One of the most well-known opposition bloggers, who has made a name for himself by becoming an online anti-corruption crusader, is Aleksei Navalny. His blog holds examples of the effects that a determined individual can bring about by using *Zhivoi Zhurnal* as their platform. Before using his blog as a case study, Navalny’s background will be briefly addressed.

Aleksei Anatolievich Navalny was born in the Moscow region and grew up about 100 kilometers southwest of the capital. He studied law at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia and graduated in 1998. In 2000, Navalny joined the opposition party *Yabloko* [Apple]. Opposition parties in Russia have typically suffered from low levels of popular support, and *Yabloko* was no exception. In the 2003 parliamentary elections, *Yabloko* won roughly 4 percent of the vote ("Russian Federation Elections to the State Duma, 7 December 2003, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report," 2004). Nevertheless, Navalny remained in the party until 2007, when he was expelled after accusations of nationalist activity. Following the expulsion, Navalny turned his activism toward the Internet and his site on *Zhivoi Zhurnal*, becoming an anti-corruption crusader.

One of the most high-profile effects that opposition blogging has been able to accomplish is the disgrace of corrupt public officials. However, this comes with a caveat. Most of the information that opposition bloggers post, even if it is fairly incriminatory, is lost in the mass of information in the cyber world. In order for a revelation about corruption to have effect, other conditions must be met. Unfortunately for Vladimir A. Pekhtin, a representative in the national Duma, these conditions were perfectly met in February 2013.

Vladimir A. Pekhtin was a senior member of United Russia, the ruling political party created and controlled by Vladimir Putin. Pekhtin was also chairman of the Duma's ethics committee, a major political role. However, he also secretly owned over 1.3 million USD worth of luxury beachfront real estate in Miami, Florida. Navalny posted incriminating information on his blog documenting this real estate ownership, which was previously kept well hidden. Although owning foreign real estate was not technically a crime, the timing could not have been worse for Pekhtin. When Navalny publicized this information, President Putin was pushing for a

new law that would bar members of the Duma from owning foreign property. This scandal, which stood in direct opposition to Putin's goal of cleaning up the party's image, was unacceptable – particularly for the head of the ethics committee. Pekhtin resigned on February 20, 2013, likely on orders by the party in order to maintain its image. One month later, Pekhtin sold the real estate to his son for a sum of 10 USD, which was also publicized on Navalny's blog (Навальный, 2013b). Navalny discussed Pekhtin's resignation in an op-ed on the website of *Ekho Moskvy*, saying, "This, of course, is not any sort of 'victory of Navalny.' The main thing is the spreading of information. Those of you who clicked, liked, referred, reposted. That is, creating such a torrent of information that the traditional mass media could not ignore the matter" (Навальный, 2013a). This leads to the question of what sorts of conditions brought about this clear and decisive opposition victory, and why this type of obvious effect does not occur more often.

One of the keys to successfully disgracing public officials is timing. Part of the reason that Navalny's revelations were so damning was the simultaneous effort being made by Putin to clean up the image of his party and keep his own politicians' money inside of Russia. Over the years, the fact that the richest people in Russia tend to spend the majority of their wealth overseas has not gone unnoticed, especially since most of that money was acquired in Russia. Opposition activists have seized onto this with vigor, attempting to trace as many questionable financial transactions conducted abroad as possible. Therefore, Navalny's revelations about Pekhtin's foreign real estate were perfectly timed, and the resignation necessary to avoid the taint of scandal on Putin's party. Another key is breadth of exposure. If not for the combination of the popularity of Navalny's blog and alternative news sites picking up the story, as well as extensive exposure on social media, the mass media would have been able to ignore the story entirely, and

the outcome would have been much different. These two conditions do not often match up, which is why this sort of clear effect when considering opposition blogging does not often happen. However, when conditions align perfectly, the effect can be explosive and highly potent, resulting in an outcome as shocking as a leading political figure's resignation. This is yet another example of cyber activity resulting in a real effect.

Another effect that blogs can have is to directly challenge the news that is spread by the traditional mass media. As discussed in chapter three, the mass media in Russia is stifled by government control. Television, as well as state-controlled newspapers, has little editorial independence. As a result, the news that the traditional mass media reports is often conflated with government propaganda, creating a strange hybrid of true and altered news. Occasionally, it is quite simple to tell the difference. Other times, it is not. Blogs provide an alternate point of view, which allows an aware and educated consumer the opportunity to compare these points of view in order to discern the truth. One example of blogs challenging the traditional mass media can be found in early 2012.

On January 7, 2012, a regional newspaper distributed by a pro-Kremlin group in the city of Ekaterinburg published a photograph of Navalny with the exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who was wanted on criminal charges in Russia. The caption accompanying the photograph accused Navalny of having close ties with the disgraced oligarch. The photograph itself, however, was a fake. To help prove this, the actual photographer, Aleksei Yushenkov, posted the original photographs online. The unaltered photographs, taken in the studio of *Ekho Moskvy*, showed Navalny and businessman Mikhail Prokhorov in May 2011 (Kramer, 2012). Navalny said in a telephone interview with the International Herald Tribune, in reference to the altered photograph and state propaganda, that, "Contemporary technologies, the contemporary

information society, are barriers to such primitive approaches” (Kramer, 2012). Activists took to their blogs to further denounce the altered photograph and posted parodies of the photo, including doctored photographs showing Navalny with Soviet leader Josef Stalin, Navalny with an alien, and more. Opposition activists were able to use their blogs to not only challenge the mass media, but also to ridicule their version of events and therefore further degrade them and decrease their credibility.

Yet another effect that blogs can have is to provide a platform for political campaigning. Navalny’s campaign for mayor of Moscow in the late summer of 2013 demonstrates the potential that blogging, and the Internet, holds for grassroots political activism.

The September 8, 2013, elections for mayor of Moscow were a unique event. Mayoral elections had not been held in the capital city in a decade. The incumbent Putin-appointed mayor, Sergei Sobyenin, resigned as mayor before the elections in order to be eligible to run, in accordance with Russian law. Sobyenin was the clear favorite for victory – he was predicted to win by a large margin, had the full backing of Putin and United Russia, and held an overwhelming advantage in the form of political funding and television air time. The race was over before it began. However, Navalny decided that he was going to run for mayor despite the overwhelming disadvantage, and Navalny and his campaign team undertook a grassroots campaign completely unprecedented in Russia.

With his access to television blocked (except for the independent channel *TV Dozhd*), Navalny’s campaign relied heavily on the Internet and other innovative campaign methods. As spending reports released after the elections show, Navalny’s campaign spent the most money on self-published and distributed newspapers [16.5 million rubles], closely followed by their Internet campaign [13.55 million rubles], and radio [12.48 million rubles] (Перцев, 2013).

Focusing such a large amount of campaign spending on the Internet is quite unusual, but was necessitated by Navalny's lack of access to the mainstream media. Navalny advertised his political meetings and stumping on his blog, so people knew where he would be holding events and when. He urged followers of his blog to "agitate Moscow" by messaging friends on *Vkontakte* in order to get more votes, providing a step-by-step instruction guide as to how best to campaign (Навальный, 2013c). Although it is impossible to say whether the Internet campaign, or the slightly more traditional radio and newspaper campaigning, was most effective, it is clear that Navalny's blog was a key piece of the puzzle for his campaign's success.

The result of the campaign was a surprisingly strong showing for Navalny in the elections. He went from polling in the single digits to receiving almost 30 percent of the vote in only a few short weeks. Sobyenin did ultimately win the election with 51 percent of the vote, tidily preventing a runoff election by receiving the 51 percent required for an outright victory, but the opposition proved that it could run a viable political campaign using vastly different campaign methods than the incumbent political elite.

And lastly, blogs also provide a citizen journalist effect. Opposition activists used their blogs to report on events such as the 2011-2012 protests and provide more accurate information than the government-controlled mass media provided. The younger, Internet-savvy generation is likely to get their news from the Internet, knowing that the television news will hold certain biases. St. Petersburg opposition leader Nikolai Artemenko says that he only receives his news from the Internet and does not watch television at all (Артемько, 2013). This type of attitude is illustrated by the 2011 parliamentary elections and the dominant influence of *Zhivoi Zhurnal* during that time frame.

Blogs were a key part of the citizen journalism that took place during the 2011

parliamentary elections. Activist bloggers would post damning information revealing electoral fraud, analyses of polling data, and links to other reports of fraud. In addition, “Of the top twenty-five Russian LiveJournal blogs [during the 2011 parliamentary elections], eight were run by opposition activists who posted extensively about electoral fraud during the 2011 elections” (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2013). Data on Internet usage before, throughout, and after the elections shows a noticeable change in use of *Zhivoi Zhurnal* immediately after the elections. Elections took place on December 4 and one day later usage of *Zhivoi Zhurnal* spiked dramatically, peaking on December 12. This shows the importance that blogs held during the period right after the elections in documenting and exposing electoral fraud, affecting the surge in public opinion that ultimately led to the street protests of 2011-2012.

Blogs have had several key effects over the course of the opposition’s recent history. One of the most obviously successful effects is revealing corruption, as evidenced by opposition blogger Aleksei Navalny’s revelation of incriminating information about Duma representative Vladimir Pekhtin’s luxury real estate in Florida. Pekhtin was forced to resign, and the power of blogging about corruption became immediately apparent. Challenging the traditional media is another effect, as demonstrated by the role that blogs play in revealing false state propaganda. Yet another effect, political campaigning, is evidenced by Navalny’s use of his blog during his 2013 campaign for mayor of Moscow. And lastly, the citizen journalist effect of blogs has proved incredibly useful during major events that the government would otherwise prefer to shape the discourse of, such as the 2011 parliamentary elections. Blogs, particularly *Zhivoi Zhurnal*, have had an important effect on the dynamics of modern-day Russian society and have proved they have the power to affect and shape public discourse. The blogs run by the most prominent opposition activists in Russia have been able to move far beyond serving as a safety

valve. Instead, their use is specifically targeted and premeditated to bring about the most effect.

However, these blogs and their effect, like all other types of Internet use, do depend on the exposure that they are able to receive and the number of dedicated followers they amass. Blogging has proven to be one of the most highly effective tools that the opposition has harnessed, with the widest range of effect and potential. But they can be easily targeted by the government and have any impact forestalled. Navalny's blog being finally blocked in Russia as of March 2014 illustrates this limitation. Despite the wide range of effect Navalny's blog has been able to have, it is ultimately simply a website that can be blocked by the government. The question of why the government waited so long to choose this option is an interesting one that will not be discussed here, but it is worth once again keeping in mind the oddity and occasional contradiction of the government's response to opposition activity.

Special Project Sites

Special project sites will now be considered, as well as the potential effect that these sites are able to have. For the purposes of this thesis, special project sites will be classified as any sites created by activists for a specific purpose that do not fall under the previous categories of Internet usage considered earlier. This thesis will examine three types of special project sites that were created for various purposes. However, in a slight change from earlier thesis sections, the effect that each of these special project sites may have will be examined independently from each other, since the sites are connected by general category alone and not necessarily by form or function. Moreover, the three types that were chosen were picked specifically due to the fact that each of them is intended for a different effect, and therefore, three different types of potential effect can be measured. The first special project site that will be examined are the online

elections held to choose a coordinating council for the opposition. Second are the *Fond Bor'by s Korruptsiei* [Foundation of the Struggle with Corruption] sites, which encompass a variety of sites intended to expose and fight against different types of corruption. And lastly, this thesis will discuss the website set up to try to prove Aleksei Navalny's innocence during his embezzlement trial in July 2013. Each of these special project sites will now be examined, along with possible effect.

Elections for Coordinating Council

Facing issues that included a lack of unity and clear leadership structure, in October 2012 the opposition movement decided to try to create some sort of unification among the disparate groups that had been participating in the street protests. In order to do that, it was decided that a 45-member "coordinating council" would be elected. This council would be in charge of organizing and leading future opposition activities. Anyone could run, and the 45 candidates who received the largest numbers of votes would be on the council. Almost 200,000 people registered to vote, with 216 candidates running. Voters could cast a vote for up to 45 candidates. However, it was the voting system itself that was especially notable.

The voting system for these elections was entirely reliant on technology. As Masha Gessen describes it for *The New York Times*:

The organizers worked to create a voting system that would be entirely transparent and falsification-proof. People registered to vote online, verifying their identity with scanned documents, photographs and their cellphone numbers. A voter ID number was then sent to their phones; that's what they were to use to vote online. Lists of registered voters were also posted online, open for anyone to

inspect. The voting was to last one weekend, and the minute the polls closed, at 8 p.m. on Sunday, the results would be known: the electronic system would have tallied them automatically (Gessen, 2012).

Gessen's description of the process, while rather glowing, does bring up some interesting points. It is worth noting that the opposition, in designing these elections, used the Internet to create a voting system that would address the issues that people had with the 2011 parliamentary elections and presumably prevent voter fraud. The registration was done online, to prevent any corrupt middlemen involved in registration. The lists of registered voters available online added another layer of transparency. And tallying the votes automatically presumably prevents any purposeful alteration of the outcome. This entire system was based around the Internet, harnessing its powers to ideally create the honest elections that the opposition movement wanted all along. However, there were two major problems that resulted – one common to elections all over the world and the other inherent to the Internet.

The first problem, voter turnout, is an issue that elections everywhere face. Although close to 200,000 people did in fact register to vote, only half of them were actually verified through the online system. Then, only 84 percent of those verified voters actually cast a vote – this number of actual voters turned out to be 81,801 (Tselikov, 2012). Though not an insignificant number, it is still only a small fraction of Russia's total population of 140 million. Although Internet elections may help improve certain areas, voter turnout does not seem to be one of them.

The other major problem that occurred was specific to the Internet. DDoS attacks crippled the election website soon after elections began and shut down the site for almost 36 hours. This prompted criticism of the protections that the creators of the site claimed to have put

into place, especially since the type of DDoS attacks that occurred were fairly typical and low budget (Tselikov, 2012). This demonstrates the most important flaw in using the Internet to hold elections – security. Hackers are ubiquitous, and it is a huge challenge to forestall all possible types of cyber attacks on a website. When conducting overt opposition activity such as this solely via the web, it is crucial to have strong protections in place.

Ultimately, the intended outcome was successful. Elections were held, fraud was presumably prevented, and a coordinating council was elected. However, this case serves as both an interesting case study for how the Internet can be used in the future to create innovative, high-tech elections and as a cautionary tale on the dangers inherent in creating such elections entirely online. The model that the opposition used has huge potential, but it needs to be adjusted and developed accordingly in order for online elections to be considered a viable model. Beyond that, this example of special project site did have the effect that its creators had hoped, but the potential effect of holding Internet elections for an opposition leadership group is limited by the drawbacks that were already mentioned.

Anti-Corruption Projects

In early 2011, Aleksei Navalny founded the *Fond Bor'by s Korrupsiei* [Foundation of the Struggle with Corruption] organization. Since then, various special project sites have been set up in connection with this organization. These projects include *RosPil*, *RosYama*, *RosZhKKh*, *RosVybory*, *DMP*, and *Olimpiada*. Each of these will be described and examined for potential effect.

RosPil is a project dedicated to exposing corruption in the Russian government's procurement process. As of February 2014, their site claims to have resulted in 178 complaints

currently being considered by the federal anti-monopoly office, as well as 129 complaints that were recognized as valid. The site also claims to have determined that a lump sum of 59,168,160,733 orders was marked by abnormalities and verified 426 orders (“Результаты,” n.d.). Additionally, the site includes links to the complaints currently being considered, the complaints recognized as valid, and the verified orders. Provided that these numbers are true, this shows that this particular project has had some sort of effect in revealing corruption in the procurement process, although it is unknown what, if anything, was done to address the complaints recognized as valid. In addition, the procurement process is such a narrow topic that these complaints likely exist in a relatively obscure sphere and are not considered relevant or especially important by most people.

RosYama, in abrupt contrast to the serious topic of *RosPil*, focuses on potholes. According to Russian law, potholes on public roads should not be more than 15 cm in length, 60 cm in width, and 5 cm in depth. All potholes that exceed any one of those measurements must be fixed (“О проекте,” 2012). The site advises people who see such a pothole to register a complaint with the bureau in charge of road maintenance, wait 37 days, and if the pothole is still not fixed, upload a photo of the pothole to the project’s website and file a complaint. Roads in Russia are notorious for being poorly maintained, and this website provides a means for people to complain about the condition of their roads. Although it is unclear what sort of actual effect this project is having, it is, at the very least, exposing the infrastructure issues apparent throughout the country. The photos, which are not only from Moscow and St. Petersburg, come from a diverse number of cities and towns and paint a picture of general government inefficiency.

RosZhKKh invites people to submit complaints about issues with their living conditions –

for example, a dirty elevator, graffiti on the stairs outside of their apartment, a smell coming from the basement, and more. It totes itself as a service to help people submit complaints about public utilities (“Как это работает,” 2012). The website also provides contact information for the appropriate departments and inspectors in each of Russia’s many regions. Lastly, it provides a poster that advertises the website’s services, along with a suggestion to hang the poster in the entranceway of one’s building. A running count boasts that close to 20,000 people have downloaded the poster. Similarly to *RosYama*, the effect of a service such as this is difficult to measure from a distance. However, it is clear that both services are providing people with an opportunity to participate in shaping their surroundings and bring some measure of accountability to infrastructure in Russia. At the very least, it acts as a useful resource.

RosVybory, an election-monitoring project, helps train and prepare election monitors to do their work effectively. It provides resources for volunteer election monitors such as common voter questions and appropriate answers. It also provides a series of useful documents, including official documents for reporting fraud, interactive courses on falsification, links to the specific sections of Russian law that deal with electoral fraud, and more. Lastly, it provides an online form for volunteer election monitors to submit complaints about voter fraud. The project compiles these complaints, as well as information from other sources like *Golos*, a highly respected independent election monitoring organization, to create reports. The information contained on this site is extremely useful for volunteer election monitors and anyone else wishing to become more aware of electoral fraud; moreover, it is crucial to have independent watchdogs during national elections. The effect of volunteer election monitoring projects such as this can be partially measured by the amount of fraud they observe, and the recent mayoral elections in Moscow did appear to be free of any blatant falsification, perhaps because it was

known that the elections would be closely observed for any hint of irregularity, or because the Putin-backed incumbent knew that victory was his without massive fraud being necessary.

DMP, or *Dobraia Mashina Pravdy* [The Good Vehicle of Truth], is essentially a propaganda website. It provides a variety of items, from posters to stickers to t-shirts, as “Materials for Independent Agitation!” These materials presumably allow people to show their support for the opposition, the Foundation of the Struggle with Corruption, and Navalny. This sort of encouragement of grassroots propaganda presents a much different approach than the top-down approach preferred by the Russian government. A running count on the bottom of the website details how many visits the site has had, and as of February 2014 that number stands at almost 2.5 million, certainly not an insignificant number. However, it is difficult to know whether such a grassroots propaganda approach has much of an actual effect – the potential is ultimately determined by the people who choose to spread the materials provided by this site.

The last special project, and the most recent, is an “Encyclopedia of Spending” for the Winter Olympic Games held in Sochi in early 2014. This project sarcastically names events in which Russian businessmen are awarded gold, silver, and bronze medals. The events, which include such titles as “Classic Embezzlement,” “Ecological Multi-Sport,” and “Skating the Figures,” focus on the embezzlement, corruption, subterfuge, and ecological destruction that these activists see as an irrefutable part of the Winter Olympics. The site also includes an in-depth report that contains extensive data on spending for the Olympics. Few Russian news outlets focused on the corruption and graft that occurred in order to construct the Olympics, preferring to focus on the Games themselves, so this sort of project does help contribute to an underreported issue. A project such as this is clearly filling a citizen journalist role; however, the ultimate effect is currently unclear.

All of these projects work to fill, and are intended toward, a variety of roles and effects. Although they can be characterized generally as “anti-corruption” projects, they differ in their individual goals and methods. It is not easy to make generalizations about such a wide variety of projects. However, they can be roughly divided into two groups: the individual-based projects and the corruption-revealing projects. The individual-based projects, such as the pothole project or the propaganda project, have an effect that is based entirely upon the individual. If motivated individuals choose to take responsibility and participate in these projects, then they have the potential to have a much broader effect than if only a few people participate. On the other hand, the corruption-revealing projects have an effect very similar to alternate news sites. They are designed to fill a void in investigative reporting within Russia. None of these projects seem to have had a particularly noticeable or sweeping effect on the surface, but they also were not designed as such. The key when considering these special project sites is what they were constructed for, and these sites do at least seem to be fulfilling the basic functions of what they were designed to accomplish, making them a success by that measurement. These sites will never be mentioned in the same breath as major online opposition activity, but they fill their own niche role.

“Why is Navalny Innocent?”

During Navalny’s trial for embezzlement in July 2013, his team set up a special website designed to prove his innocence. The site, entitled *Why is Navalny Innocent?*, discusses both the prosecution’s version of the case and Navalny’s version, which is entitled “What Actually Happened.” The site contains links to additional documents, timelines of events, and reports, all of which aimed at proving the prosecution wrong. At the bottom of the page is a section that

says, “We want you to precisely understand why these claims are fabricated.” Underneath are options to access the opinions of experts, look over the case file, or tell others (“Навальный не виновен. Я проверил.” 2013). The effect of this special project site is intended to be twofold: to prove Navalny’s innocence and also to raise awareness of the trial and the charges being leveled against Navalny. Although the first goal was not accomplished, as Navalny was found guilty, the case did receive international media attention. This website was not the reason for that media attention; however, it likely served as important research material for Western media seeking to understand the case and whether the charges were biased. In such a way, the activists who created the site were able to affect the international dialogue about the case to some extent and help gain worldwide sympathy for Navalny. Such an effect, while doing nothing to alter the outcome of the trial, is not entirely insignificant.

Overall, blogs and special project sites work together to reveal corruption, highlight inefficiency at all levels of governance, fill a void in investigative reporting, and much more. They have been able to have measureable effect in Russia – particularly blogs, whose effects are much easier to pinpoint. Special project sites, which have less traffic than blogs, are able to accomplish as much as the individual using them wishes to accomplish. Therefore, their effect is harder to measure, although some conclusions about their use can still be drawn. All of the Internet use described in this chapter and in the previous chapter amounts to a direct challenge of the status quo and the structure of civil society within Russia. However, as will be discussed in the conclusion, this effect may have been limited to a specific window of time due to certain conditions and restrictions. But it is indisputable that the opposition has harnessed the Internet and managed to bring about real effect. This is evidenced by countless examples in these chapters of politician disgrace, grassroots politics, citizen journalism, a challenge of both the

traditional mass media and the status quo, the planning of street protests, and more. The Russian opposition has created something real via the cyber world.

Chapter Five

“There are two keys to making challenges to dictators work: belief and planning.”

- Giorgi Meladze

After an introduction to the Russian opposition movement and its gains and setbacks in recent years, this thesis then contained a discussion of the safety valve theory and other arguments that claim the Internet cannot have any sort of real effect on politics and society in authoritarian regimes. In chapters three and four numerous examples of Russian opposition Internet use were presented that seem to counter this claim, as some of their cyber actions have translated into actual effect. The Internet has clearly had some sort of effect in the case of Russia, and it has the potential to be of use to other social movements, who can use it to organize, challenge the dominance of the mass media, create an alternative social sphere, lend a sense of legitimacy to their movement, gain international exposure, and more. However, the Internet does have its own limitations, and there are certain conditions that were applicable to the Russian case in 2011-2012 that made the Internet much more effective at that time than it has been since, despite a few outliers. The safety valve theory seems to have been applicable in Russia before that time period and sporadically applicable after 2011 depending on other societal conditions.

The Internet has been a very effective tool that the Russian opposition has used in its struggle against the regime. Social media, alternative news sites, blogs, and special project sites all combine to create a framework and a home for the opposition movement in the cyber world. Opposition activists have taken full advantage of this framework by defying the government's dominance over the media and posing a challenge to the regime. By pulling from the earlier discussions of opposition activities, several specific time frames of Internet effect will now be

identified and classified, followed by an analysis of the conditions that affect these divisions.

The first period of Internet use that clearly differs from the prior model can be identified as taking place from mid 2011 and continuing up until Putin's inauguration in May 2012. This is an era of free and vibrant Internet that coincides with the major street protests, which also took place during roughly the same time frame. This era is characterized by heavy use of social media to organize protest marches and affect public opinion. It is also marked by the emerging importance of alternative news sites, which first become popular during this time frame, largely due to their independent reporting on opposition events. These online news sites are even able to affect the mainstream media through the "trickle up" effect. *Zhivoi Zhurnal* flourishes during this time frame, becoming highly politicized and frequently used to monitor and discuss the 2011 parliamentary elections. The site experiences a peak in popularity during and right after the elections. Special project sites first begin to be conceived during this time frame, although they have not yet emerged fully-fledged. This era of free Internet, however, is not to last, and it comes to an abrupt end when Putin is inaugurated for his third term as president.

The next era of Internet will be identified as taking place from Putin's inauguration in May 2012 up until the Winter Olympics in Sochi in February 2014. This time period is marked by an intensified crackdown by the government and a suppression of opposition activities and Internet freedom, but it is also characterized by the occasional opposition victory. Social media's usage as an organizational tool is constrained by a decreased enthusiasm for street protests after the inauguration, but it remains a hub of lively discussion and information sharing. Alternate news sites are subjected to increased government pressure and are no longer able to have the same "trickle up" effect they earlier achieved, although they are still an important independent voice in reporting on the government crackdown. Blogs also experience increased suppression,

exemplified by leading opposition blogger Aleksei Navalny being tried and convicted for embezzlement in July 2013. Special project sites are concentrated during this time frame, as they tend to be direct reactions to suppression and corruption.

However, this era also contains a number of unexpected opposition victories. The disgrace of high-ranking Duma member Vladimir Pekhtin is a blogging victory. This disgrace came about partially due to the exposure that the blog post gained through social media and alternate news sites, showing the increased interconnectivity of these categories of Internet usage as time goes on. Despite Navalny being sentenced to five years in prison in July 2013, his release a day later was advantageous to the opposition movement, and the grassroots campaign that he conducted for mayor of Moscow proved that the opposition movement has the potential to be a serious political contender if they are permitted to freely compete. Several amnesties to political prisoners in the lead up to the Winter Olympics in February 2014 gave the illusion that there was a further thaw in repression.

And yet, this turned out to be merely an illusion. The third era of Internet will be identified as post-Winter Olympics Russia, and it appears extremely grim thus far for the opposition movement. Opposition activity is being increasingly suppressed, and the chances of any sort of minor opposition victory appear slim. Online news sites are being systematically dismantled or blocked and Navalny's Live Journal blog is also blocked as of mid-March 2014. Participants in the *Bolotnoe delo* case finally received sentences, and response protests were quickly crushed and participants arrested. Navalny was also put under house arrest and banned from the Internet. The government is clearly trying to prevent any sort of regression to the more open days of 2011 to 2012 and take out the top anti-government figures and news sources it fears the most. The equation has changed, and the Russian government is no longer willing to tolerate

dissent. The opposition is trying to respond to these new developments. Navalny's blog will be moved to a new platform, and alternate news sites are struggling to remain afloat. However, if the situation remains as serious, they are unlikely to ever regain the same level of influence that they achieved in 2011 and 2012. High public approval rates for the regime further complicates the picture, as well as a significant segment of participants in the 2011 to 2012 protests who have since essentially given up, resulting in current low levels of public support for the opposition.

Why are these three time periods so vastly different, and what are the conditions that determine whether the Internet is able to have an effect in Russia? For starters, opposition Internet activity was highly effective during the mass protests of 2011-2012 due to the politicization of a certain segment of society, generally young, well-educated, and urban. This politicization occurred partially because of a heightened awareness of corruption within the government. This, however, is a chicken and the egg conundrum, as the Internet helped contribute to that awareness as well as becoming more and more effective because of it. The more that people were willing to acknowledge and respond to corruption within the government, the more they turned to the Internet to vent their frustrations and seek out alternate sources of news. Ultimately, these alternate sources of news helped to politicize people and encourage them to take to the streets to express their dissatisfaction, as they learned of the huge numbers of people who were equally dissatisfied. The trigger for all of this was the fraud-ridden parliamentary elections in December 2011. Information about electoral fraud was widely dispersed and shared via the Internet, which helped bring a certain level of awareness to the population about the issue, also encouraging mass protest.

Another condition that helped the Internet have an effect in 2011-2012 was a tightly constrained mass media but relatively free Internet. As previously discussed, the mass media in

Russia is controlled by several mechanisms, both direct and indirect, amounting to a media sphere that is almost always pro-government and rarely presents a serious dissenting viewpoint. Journalists, editors, or broadcasters who step out of line face dire consequences. However, during the 2011-2012 time frame, the Internet remained a fairly uncontrolled sphere, creating a space for dissenters who were otherwise unable to easily spread their message. This use of the Internet as an abeyance structure for dissent seems to fall in line with the safety valve theory, but is slightly different because dissenters were additionally able to bring about effect through their Internet use and pose a certain challenge to the regime. One of these challenges lies in another condition, which is a population that is not wholly dependent on the state-controlled media for news. The advent of the Internet allowed people to seek information elsewhere and find different options than the opinion being fed to them on the state-run television. It is important to note that the majority of Russians do not use the Internet with that purpose in mind, and many of them would not believe anti-regime information if they did stumble across it. However, people who do wish to seek out an alternative point of view are easily able to, and perhaps some people who are generally fairly apolitical may come across information that sways them in a certain direction. This condition again is a chicken and the egg conundrum, as the Internet both helped to cause people's growing independence from the state-run mass media and is also dependent on it.

A rather obvious condition for Internet effect is a certain amount of technological infrastructure, as the Internet could not have an effect in a nation with minimal Internet penetration and ancient technology. Although Russia does not have an extremely high Internet penetration, fairly recently reaching 50 percent, it has a large enough number of tech-savvy citizens, particularly the younger generation, to make the Internet influential. It is no coincidence that mass protests in major urban centers with higher Internet penetration boasted the highest

turnouts, as this is where the most politicized segment of society lives.

Another condition, although not a major one, is international awareness of events. Mass repression is much easier to accomplish in a closed society than an open one. The international community was highly aware of events taking place in Russia in 2011-2012 and repression picked up again soon after interest waned. Even authoritarian leaders, provided they are authoritarian leaders of an economically, globally integrated country such as Russia, must at least consider the effect their actions could have. And although they are much more concerned with domestic issues and sparking further unrest among their own populace, they typically¹ do not completely disregard international norms and risk being ostracized from the international community. Being completely cut off is not a preferable outcome since it has the potential to stir up trouble at home, which authoritarian leaders want to avoid at all costs.

These conditions, when taken together with technologically savvy opposition activists, contain the possibility for the Internet's effect to reach beyond the core opposition activist segment and influence the broader public and society. Additionally, the conclusions drawn in this thesis have the potential to be relevant to other semi-authoritarian nations that have similar political structures to Russia. This does come with a caveat. Semi-authoritarian nations, though broadly grouped, do differ slightly in their approaches toward media, dissent, and the Internet. And populations have different reasons for becoming highly politicized. In Russia, the key factor that drove the mass protests was the fraudulent parliamentary elections. In Egypt, a poor economy played a huge role in the discontent that swept the country. Other nations have different triggers. Therefore, although these conditions can be broadly applicable to other situations, every case contains its own specifics that dictate the course of events.

¹ Typically, as events in Crimea have seemingly contradicted this statement.

However, many of these conditions are no longer applicable since that time frame, or have changed as events dictate. Immediately after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, at the beginning of the second Internet time frame, the Duma passed several new laws designed to suppress Internet dissent, as mentioned earlier. Prominent opposition activists who used the Internet as their key platform have been repeatedly arrested or convicted on various charges over the past few years. Certain key websites are blocked or unavailable for viewing in Russia. *TV Dozhd*, a bastion of independent television reporting, is going under. The era of free Internet truly is over in Russia, making it increasingly challenging for the Internet to have any sort of meaningful effect.

Another condition that has changed is the political mobilization of the population. Other laws passed after Putin's return to the presidency made it increasingly more risky to hold protests, particularly unsanctioned ones. Although a certain segment of hardcore activist has continued to participate in unsanctioned rallies up through 2014, the average Russian citizen no longer is willing to risk participation in such protests. In addition to fear, this is also due to a certain amount of apathy and weariness. Russians grew tired of protesting, particularly when they saw that the system was not changing in any meaningful way. The majority of participants in the 2011 and 2012 street protests essentially gave up after Putin's return to the presidency, willing to concede defeat and accept the political status quo. They no longer wanted to continue struggling in what seemed like an impossible battle to win.

Something else that has changed is the Russian government itself. Aside from the amnesties handed out before the Winter Olympics in Sochi, the government no longer appears to care at all about its image or international censure. This has become increasingly apparent and is a worrisome trend for a semi-authoritarian regime, and it could easily tip the scale from semi-

authoritarian to fully authoritarian. Since 2013, Putin has blatantly disregarded the opinions of the international community even more than usual and developed a further air of invincibility and unquestioned authority that has clearly discouraged large segments of the population and quelled dissent. It seems that the Russian government can now do whatever it pleases, when it pleases, and there is precious little that can be done to stop it.

Because ultimately, the Internet did not bring about any sort of revolution in Russia. The effect that the opposition movement has been able to create via the Internet has been meaningful and nothing to disregard, but this effect has been constrained. The regime remains solidly in place, and the mass protests in 2011 and 2012 have had few tangible outcomes. The occasional opposition victory since then, such as disgracing a politician or gaining 30 percent of the vote in the Moscow mayoral elections, can almost be viewed through a lens of false hope that the Russian government has been permitting the opposition to experience. Perhaps in the end, this false hope is similar to the safety valve theory in the sense that it keeps people generally compliant while providing an outlet to a few dissenters.

Even this false hope, however, seems to be slowly disappearing. Unfortunately for the scope of this thesis, events in Russia are fast outpacing the time frame that this thesis encompasses, and the challenges that the opposition faces are looming ever larger. The government may have ultimately decided that false hope, or any sort of safety valve for dissent, is worthless for their purposes. Perhaps they no longer want any dissent at all tainting their authority. Recent events have certainly pointed toward this. No one can know what the future holds for the Russian opposition and the Internet as a conduit for dissent, but the future does not appear bright. The opposition still maintains its infrastructure on the Internet, although pieces of it are gradually being chipped away. This space will likely be used as an abeyance structure for

the opposition movement in the future, where they can continue to coordinate and prepare for a time when they are again able to openly protest the regime with broad public support. However, the key difference between 2011 and 2014 is that the opposition is increasingly constrained in the likelihood of its cyber actions having an effect, as their actions are being restrained to only resonating within their own sphere of existing hardcore opposition activists. Although they can maintain their network within this structure that the Internet provides, it remains to be seen whether their actions can overcome these new challenges and reach the broader public again.

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