

Chapter 88

In Putin's Russia, Information Has You: Media Control and Internet Censorship in the Russian Federation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the practices of state control over Internet content in Russia and highlights their grounding in the information culture and media environment of the country. Building on existing data on freedom of the press and online censorship, the text explores the socio-cultural context of Kremlin's considerable influence on the Web. To this end, three relevant spheres of power relations are explored. The first one involves censorship and self-censorship routines embedded in the Russian information tradition. The second pertains to the state-controlled mainstream media where news goes through a political filter and the framing of Internet's role in the Russian social life is predominantly negative. The third domain concerns local legislative frameworks and their selective application. The analysis suggests that most of the tools used to control objectionable materials on the Russian Web are not Internet-specific. Rather, they can be seen as a natural extension of the censorship mechanisms used in traditional media.

Press freedom and media censorship across political regimes have long been a subject of academic interest (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). The advent of the Internet – a decentralized and unruly communication medium – introduced new complexities into both the research and the policy-making efforts in the field (Sussman, 2000). The Web's impact on democracy, while difficult to evaluate fully (Morozov, 2009), is undoubtedly fundamental. Social media platforms have often been deemed an alternative space for civic dialogue and public participation (Faris, Wang, & Palfrey, 2008). In countries with restrictive media environments, web services can provide a way of circumventing official information channels (Shirky, 2008).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7113-1.ch088

As Internet censorship is typical of non-democratic regimes, it is most often studied in the context of authoritarian societies. In recent years, research in the area has focused largely on China and the Middle East (Lum, 2006; MacKinnon, 2008; Faris, Roberts, & Wang, 2009). The People's Republic of China is said to have deployed one of the most sophisticated and intrusive Internet filtering systems currently in existence (OpenNet 2009). Access to online information in the country is selectively blocked through blacklisting of web addresses and scanning of Internet traffic for banned keywords.

Although it is a particularly invasive technological censorship tool, filtering is only one of many mechanisms used to limit access to Internet content. In their *Access* book series, Deibert et al. (2008, 2010) discuss numerous non-filtering solutions, or *soft means of control*. Those include laws and regulations related to media, telecommunications, or national security that restrict the publication of objectionable materials on the Web.

In reaction to the Arab Spring and recent unrest in former Soviet Republics, the Kremlin has also expanded its surveillance program, using it to track the movements of opposition figures. Russia's main surveillance system, known as SORM, has now been adopted in other states, including Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine (Freedom House, 2013).

While not engaged in large-scale technology-based Internet censorship efforts, the Russian government does use soft means to deal with disagreeable online content. Russia presents an important case study in part precisely because the state is so successful in establishing its influence on the Web (Fosfato, Lloyd, & Verkhovsky, 2009) without resorting to extensive real-time content filtering techniques.

This work aims to provide a framework describing the existing practices of Internet control in Russia, as well as their grounding in the country's idiosyncratic information culture and media environment. The study draws on findings coming from two separate lines of research. Reports on freedom of expression provide statistical data and details about the country's legislation and its application to online materials (Annenberg SPRC, 2007; Freedom House, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2011, 2012, 2013; Global Integrity, 2008, 2009, 2011). The text also builds on a body of literature exploring Russian cultural practices, socio-historical circumstances and their effects on political and civic dialogue. Particularly relevant in this regard are Zassoursky's (2004) work on the transformations of the Russian media-political system; de Smaele's (2007) analysis of the dimensions of information culture; and Koltsova's (2001, 2006) model of power relationships between the Russian authorities, media and citizens.

In a report published by Freedom House, Karlekar and Cook (2009) outline three broad categories of Internet control mechanisms:

- Obstacles to access (including blocking applications or technologies, infrastructural and economic barriers, etc.)
- Limits on content (including filtering software, blocking of websites, censorship and self-censorship, online propaganda, etc.)
- Violations of user rights (including legal restrictions, surveillance, legal prosecution, harassment, etc.)

Even though the Internet penetration in Russia remains relatively low and the access speeds relatively slow, there is no evidence of specific efforts on the part of the authorities to keep citizens offline (*obstacles to access*). This study examines control practices that fall in the last two categories, including:

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