THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE IN MOSCOW: HOW YOUNG ADULTS NAVIGATE SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ONLINE SPACE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: The Networked Public Sphere in Moscow: How Young Adults Navigate Social Media and the Online Space

In this thesis I examine how social media and the internet function as an alternative to Habermas' public sphere and their potential to facilitate public discourse in the Russian Federation. Using in-depth interviews conducted in Moscow in 2019, I attempt to show how recent political and social circumstances influence such uses by young adults. To understand actually existing uses of these technologies, I contextualize these interviews within facets of post-Soviet life such as media bias, lack of trust in journalistic institutions and politicians, and political apathy. In this sense, this project has the potential to show how agentive uses of social media and the online space function as an alternative to Habermas' public sphere within the context of my interlocutors' lifeworlds.

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I. INTRODUCTION

My primary interest as a researcher is understanding how citizens of the Russian Federation are impacted by the rising use of social media technologies. More specifically, I am looking at the role that social media and other media sources play in Russian life and how they influence the way Russian citizens interact with news and other political information. As noted by some scholars, the decentralized nature of technologies may have the potential to act as an alternative to Habermas' public sphere, thus revitalizing the potential for open public discourse and mitigating the influence of state or private interest groups. In this networked public sphere, "digital technologies reduce the individual cost of participating in civic life … [and] some may be motivated by independent online media reports or emboldened by encountering like-minded individuals online to take action" (Alexanyan, et. al. 2012, 5). They have the potential to foster dialogues and understanding between people who may be vulnerable to misinformation from centers of power.

However, it is important to maintain a sober view of these potentials, as those opposing this cyber-utopianist perspective point out. Social media to date has not been the massive democratizing force that many hoped it would be, but instead it remains a contested domain with many actors and interests. In these ways, use of these technologies has led to a new information environment in Russia that contrasts sharply with the top-down model in the Soviet period, while at the same time creating a new information environment that is not yet fully understood.

This study is based upon in-depth interviews with twelve young adults living in Moscow during 2019. I explore crucial aspects of the networked public sphere and then

contextualize how this sphere is experienced in Russia based on prior ethnographic accounts of the region and my in-depth interviews. I also draw from my personal experiences living in Moscow from 2016 until 2018, as this is when many of the ideas for this project originated. I add to the existing scholarship on the networked public sphere by interpreting the lived experience of internet users in Moscow. I then contextualize their use of the networked public sphere by linking it to recent political circumstances that influence their adoption of social media as an alternative public sphere. This approach acknowledges the agency of my interlocutors as they selectively adopt technologies into their everyday lives. Analyzing facets of post-Soviet life such as media bias, lack of trust in journalistic institutions and politicians, and political apathy is equally important to understanding the uses of these technologies. In this sense, this project has the potential to show the how social media and the online space function as an alternative to Habermas' public sphere in the context of my interlocutors lives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere was first introduced by Jurgen Habermas to denote the "realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (1974, 49). According to his original conception of the public sphere, citizens are able to formulate public opinion through public debate and then exert influence on the state via periodic democratic elections, or via other such institutions which allow citizens to influence state policy. Thus, it is the public sphere "which mediates between society and state" (50). For such a public sphere to exist necessarily demands certain guarantees such as of freedom of assembly, association, and freedom to express and publish their opinions "about general matters of interest" (49). Before the emergence of the internet, the closest thing to such a sphere was the mass media in the form of radio, television, and newspapers. However, Habermas rightfully points out that although the mass media at the time was the closest approximation of a public sphere, it has historically been rife with structural constraints and interest groups which exclude a vast array of voices. The centralized nature of the mass media was a key factor that excluded certain groups from such a public sphere.[1] With the onset of our current digitally networked society, made possible by the advent of the internet and social media, citizens are no longer completely reliant on the mass media to access or share opinions. This 'networked' public sphere

[1] The idea of a public sphere has been critiqued and expanded upon since Habermas' original conception of the term in 1962. Nancy Fraser, for her part, rejected the idea that "interlocutors in a public sphere can… [overcome] asymmetries of power and deliberate 'as if' they were peers, when in fact they are not". She distinguishes between two types of publics - "weak publics", which generate public opinion and "strong publics", whose deliberations issue sovereign decisions (1990, 75). Additional critiques posit that Habermas' theory fell short of acknowledging the exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere as it overlooks women's, worker's, and ethnic minorities' counterpublics (Eley, 1992; Ryan, 1990)

may act as an alternative space for the formulation of public opinion through debate and consensus. However, as we will see, this digital variant is complex and comes with its own array of issues.

The Networked Public Sphere

Yochai Benkler defines the networked public sphere as "a way of thinking about the cluster of technologies and practices we use to talk to each other about what matters most, to decide what counts as true, or untrue, and what counts as relevant to … or not relevant to political debate" (2016). The cluster of technologies to which Benkler is referring primarily centers around social media technologies, which enable computer-mediated communication that "expand(s) the capabilities of face-to-face interaction to provide new opportunities for finding, observing, and interacting efficiently with others across time and space" (Bayer, et. al. 2020, 75).

As noted by Kruse, Norris, and Flinchum, the structure of social media makes it a plausible candidate for an alternative to Habermas' idealized public sphere in that it may go farther in providing access to information, equal participation, and the absence of institutional influence (2018, 63). This accessibility could allow people "to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives, and publish their own opinions" (Loader and Mercea 2011, 760). Additionally, its decentralized structure may eschew traditional media narratives and power structures by allowing for increased access, participation, reciprocity, and peer-to-peer rather than one-to-many communication (Jenkins 2006, 6).

Scholars point to these affordances as giving rise to independent contributors who offer "competing expertise" that challenges traditional media influence. In these ways,

the networked public sphere is often discussed as a promising alternative to 'traditional' mass media (such as television and radio) which often persists in "controlling public discourse, restricting the spread of culture, placing profits before people, and colluding with the state" (Goldberg 2011, 742).

However, much of the initial promise of social media as a viable alternative public sphere has faded in recent years. As the reach of these technologies has grown, their second-order effects have started to make themselves known. Seemingly utopian ideas such as decentralization of agenda setting and the potential to overturn traditional power structures are now understood in a different light. Benkler provides the rise of Breitbart news during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election as an example. This rise was caused in part by the decentralized nature of social media, which led to an upending of traditional media power structures, but the outcome in this instance, and increasingly many others like it, has been less than favorable (2016). Both scholars and individual users are finding that unfiltered news feeds can be inundated with information from many actors ranging from targeted advertising, to corporate espionage, to state actors posing as grass roots activists (Zittrain 2016).

Additionally, scholars note that the for-profit nature of social media is a limiting factor in its ability to function as an alternative public sphere. This corporate interest often contradicts many of the potentially positive aspects of social media as a public sphere. It manifests in a number of ways including surveillance, targeted advertising, and predictive algorithms. Surveillance, performed at many levels by the state, corporations, and even interpersonally by friends, family, and employers, threatens to constrain information and participation (Kruse, et. al. 2016, 66), leading some scholars to liken its

effect to Foucault's panopticon (Bossewitch and Sinnreich 2013, 224-225). Predictive algorithms can serve to reify users' worldview by showing them content that they already agree with and thus constrain potential dialogic mechanisms. These are just a few of the key political-economic issues related to the networked public sphere and, as Goldberg notes, "on the internet there is no 'debating and deliberating' that is not also 'buying and selling'; participation is a commercial act" (2011, 747).

The Networked Public Sphere in the Russian Context

Literature on the networked public sphere in the Russian Federation has highlighted some of the potential benefits and drawbacks of these technologies for deliberative democracy in a constricted or "neo-Soviet" media environment. Because of the constrained environment in which traditional Russian media outlets were forced to operate, scholars in the late 2000s and 2010s were initially optimistic about the potential of democratization propelled by the internet (Oats 2013, 13). The largely unrestricted internet stood in contrast to traditional media outlets. While some sectors of the media, such as print, do contain a diversity of opinions and are less controlled, key broadcast outlets generally adhere to Kremlin-backed narratives (Becker 2004, 145; De Smaele 2007, 1310; Konzhukov 2014, 247). As such, contemporary Russian media has never developed into a democratic model, but instead contains norms and structures that are reminiscent of Soviet times. In this way, the role of the media "as objective or balanced has never been widely adopted" (Oats 2007, 1296).

To understand this emerging information space, scholars have focused on either media structures or how comparatively elite and politically active members of Russian

society are using the internet. One of the earliest attempts to understand the impact of the internet on democracy in Russia was a 2008 study carried out by Fossato, et. al. Their work was able to show the early emergence of a vibrant community of bloggers who enjoyed an immense degree of freedom of expression. However, it was unable to demonstrate that this community was driving political agendas, or reaching a broad user-base. Instead the internet at that time was serving to spread information largely among "closed clusters of like-minded users who are seldom able or willing to cooperate" (Fossato, et. al. 2008, 51). Additionally, the study focused on groups who were already politically active online, and excluded those who were not both politically engaged and active online.

In another attempt to outline the networked public sphere in Russia, The Berkman Center traced the spread of "contagious phenomena" by tracking political hashtags on Twitter (Kelly, et. al. 2012, 3). By tracking known opposition and pro-government hashtags, they determined that, in general, pro-Kremlin hashtags sparked high levels of subsequent uses over a short period of time, while opposition hashtags exhibited "greater staying power," albeit with lower levels of subsequent uses (15). This study, while useful from a macro-level in determining the attention that certain political topics received and mapping their salience and staying power on Twitter, is limited in the same ways as the Fossato (2008) study. In addition, it looks only at how certain hashtags have been used over time and ignores the reasons behind their use.

In a later study, the Berkman Center analyzed how the Russian "blogosphere" was being used to broaden media narratives on salient political topics (Etling, Roberts, and Faris 2014, 3). Findings revealed some evidence that blogs were acting as a limited

alternative public sphere. These blogs often contained media narratives that differed from the largely Kremlin-controlled broadcast and print media such as *Rossiskaya Gazeta, RIA Novosti*, *Pervyi Kanal* and *Rossiia 24* (45). Citizens were able not only to share evidence of election fraud during the 2010 parliamentary elections, but to share their thoughts on the matter online. This in turn created increased solidarity of opposition groups and may have led to greater support during the "White Revolution" (45). In this way, there was increased potential for some grass roots agenda setting and government accountability through online peer-to-peer sharing of information. However, they note that relatively few internet users in Russia actually used blogs as a source of information at the time, and that the top 25 most visited online news outlets contained agendas similar to Kremlin-backed narratives (46). Additionally, they found evidence of pro-Kremlin bloggers attempting to pull conversations back to government-driven narratives, suggesting early attempts by the state to influence the online space (45).

Despite examples of political discourse online which eschew Kremlin-backed narratives, not all scholars agree with the assessment that social media should be seen a potential force for democratization. Evgeny Morozov notes that the internet space is a domain that is equally, if not more constricted by power structures as traditional forms of media (2012, 16). He critiques the "cyber-utopianism" of the 2000s and early 2010s as a "belated cold-war triumphalism" which incorrectly assumes that the West will be able to export democracy and upend authoritarianism by simply relying on the internet as a "Radio Free Europe on steroids" (13). He criticizes this view as one that ignores the systemic issues which led to the fall of the Soviet Union and gives too much credit to the "genius of Ronald Reagan" (13).

Kristen Meredith applies the "cyber realism" of Morozov to analyze the "White Revolution" and the interplay between oppositionists and the Russian state. She argues that while social media may have acted as a limited alternative public sphere, the Russian state was able to use new methods for restricting and influencing civic discourse online (2013, 90). Just as social media enabled opposition members to organize, it enabled the state to surveil and police the public. The state used a number of tactics to obscure the information environment such as paid bloggers, fake social media accounts, and distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks on opposition sites (92). Thus, just as social media offers new affordances for bottom-up agenda setting, it offers new opportunities for top-down responses to this agenda setting.

Seva Gunistky expands upon this by pointing out that autocratic regimes have been able to use the internet for counter-mobilization efforts and discourse framing, among other things (2015, 42). He argues that such regimes are becoming more sophisticated in the way they use online space both to mobilize already existing bases of support and as a barometer of public opinions which exist around salient political issues. In this way, the online space actually represents an opportunity to counter opposition movements by understanding exactly which issues are being discussed. Thus, he argues, having some degree of dissident activity online is tolerated only because it allows state actors to identify relevant issues which could fester into protest movements or, more drastically, regime change. Once key issues are identified, media narratives can be controlled by introducing spurious counter-narratives designed to discredit dissidents and overwhelm the information space (45). As an example, he points to the Kremlin's use of

"web brigades" of thousands of commenters who are paid to comment on pro-democracy forums in an effort to control the conversation and detract from core issues (46).

In *Revolution Stalled*, a thorough account of the networked public sphere in Russia, Sarah Oats attempts to understand the impact and uses of the internet in the sphere of political communication. She eschews the binary between cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism to understand why revolution, or at least increased democratization, has not yet occurred in response to the relative openness of the Russian internet (Oates 2013, 196). Although her work does provide an exhaustive account of the online space and its potential to impact political communication and deliberative democracy, her focus is primarily on the "Fourth Estate" (media institutions), government controls, and online content rather than the everyday uses of the internet.

As I have noted, the aforementioned studies have been useful in showing the relative openness of the Russian internet, especially in contrast with the Soviet-like traditional media sources. However, so far none of these sources have put the user, or everyday use of the internet at the center of analysis. There are studies which look at internet users in Russia, but these are limited to comparatively elite members of Russian society.

In her 2012 book, *No Illusions, the Voices of Russia's Future Leaders,* Ellen Mickiewicz used focus groups with students at three elite Russian universities to understand the "way that Russia's future leaders view their own leaders, democracy, the larger world, and the most intense focus of their international outlook: the United States" (8). A large part of these focus groups centered on use of the internet and alternative sources of media, which, Mickiewicz argues, has led to an intense change in the types

and sources of information these Russians trust. Her findings indicate that the "status" of news outlets have little importance in determining trust and that content on the internet is key. These findings are partially supported by Joanna Szostek who, through in-depth interviews with 20 students at Moscow's Higher School of Economics (one of the country's top universities), determined that while her interlocutors reported using a diverse collection of online sources to try and arrive at an objective view of events, they were still influenced by narratives reported on Kremlin-aligned media (2018, 82).

While a handful of ethnographic accounts of the internet space in Russia and the former Soviet Union do exist, they are already largely outdated (due to the rapid advance of technology in this space) and they do not put the networked public sphere at the center of analysis. In his 2012 article (based on fieldwork done 2009-2010) on the significance of the internet in everyday life in Russia, Jeremy Morris makes a crucial connection between the 'virtual' world of the internet and its embeddedness in already existing social and cultural structures (1558). He focuses on actually existing use of the internet in a provincial "European" Russian town and finds that its use is largely limited to enhancing already existing social connections (1550). Jeremy Morris' account eschews such media-centrism. I follow him in taking the everyday lived reality as the starting point of analysis. Interestingly, he is able to connect central elements of contemporary Russian culture such as Ledenova's *blat* with use of social media. He points out that his collaborators' social media accounts consisted mainly of "other-regarding" posts to and from friends designed to maintain already existing social connections. Use of comment sections was rare in comparison to anglophone countries, thus he doubts any major possibility for substantial communicative discourse (1559). He also comments on his

collaborators' lack of reliance on internet news, concluding, "Russians get their news on television" (a statement that I will argue is no longer true) (1551). This study, while situating online practices within everyday life, is already nearly ten years old and, according to my experience, no longer reflects the actually existing use of the internet.

Conceptualizing a Russian Public Sphere

While the above studies have contributed meaningful media-centric or systemic views of the networked public sphere in Russia, they are largely ahistorical and omit key themes in late and post-soviet Russian culture which may impact actual use of the internet as an alternative public sphere. It is necessary to acknowledge such use as an agentive process governed by thinking individuals who have come of age amid a confluence of societal changes. As put by Stephen Woolgar when talking about the study of the internet and society, "we need to disaggregate the phenomenon, to focus much more on bottom-up experiences, on the nitty-gritty of actually making the damn modem work" (2009, 6).

Such a user-centric approach to the networked public sphere requires attention not only to the affordances of social media and the internet, but to uses of such an alternative public sphere itself in the Russian context. In Habermas' own conception of this user-centric approach, I am looking at the lifeworlds of my interlocutors. For Habermas, the lifeworld is distinct from the system (economic and administrative power) and serves as the "horizon within which communicative actions are 'always, already' moving" (1984, 119). Such communicative actions serve to reproduce cultural knowledge and promote social integration, solidarity, and the formation of personal identities through

socialization (137). Uses of the networked public sphere must be interpreted within such communicative action and the lived experiences or lifeworlds of Russian citizens. To locate some context within these lifeworlds it is important to acknowledge certain aspects of Russian culture and society which may frame their interaction with the networked public sphere.

The first of these issues is the absence of free and open public discourse during the Soviet period. Rather than being based upon open deliberation, public discourse in the Soviet Union took place within the confines of the Communist Party's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. In this way, ideology was not "up for debate" in the same way as it is in Habermasian notions of the public sphere. I refer here to Yurchak's observations of the nonexistence of metadiscourse concerning party ideology during the late Soviet period. He contends that Soviet citizens had largely stopped internalizing speeches from party members, party slogans, and propaganda as accurate descriptors of reality.[2] Rather, such speech and its reproduction by Soviet citizens increasingly became simply a necessity to live within the system, and decreasingly associated with its literal meaning. While agentive reinterpretations of the Soviet system allowed soviet citizens to live "normal" lives, the public sphere was essentially constrained by the inability to communicate such interpretations via any type of public forum (Yurchak 2005). The mediation between lifeworlds and the system via a public sphere was virtually non-existent.

With the fall of the Soviet Union after perestroika, public discourse emerged quickly. Critiques of the Soviet and system dominated both the mass media as well as the

[2] I focus here on speech, but it is important to point out that Yurchak's view is that this took place at all levels of Soviet society – including elections, parades, examinations, meetings, etc.

lifeworlds of Russian citizens (Ries 1996, 166). The entire country was subject to a period of economic chaos and political upheaval from which post-Soviet media companies where not exempt. Though the mass media was now free to contribute to meta-discourses about ideology, it was constrained by market as well as state factors that severely limited its ability to function as an effective public sphere. Managers and journalistic staffs had to deal with the numerous problems inherent to changing the entire economic system such as the withdrawal of financial support from the government and a lack of advertising revenue from newly emerging private companies (Konzhukov 2016, 242).

This climate of privatization was competitive for media organizations that were sometimes forced to make deals with the Yeltsin administration for survival, in exchange for altering their content to fit the narrative prescribed by the Kremlin. The Russian state was able to control media messaging via economic means. It was able to "subsidize the 'loyal' publications and (give) them tax breaks as well as special deals on newsprint, ink, and publishing expenses" (Konzhukov 2016, 246).

Despite these structural constraints during the Yeltsin regime, there were a number of private oppositionist media outlets that, for a time, started to grow in size and audience. However they were eventually shut down or significantly hindered in their ability to publish and/or broadcast in the early 2000s during the start of Putin's time in office. For example, the editorial managers of Lenta.ru "were replaced by the publication's owner when the news website was seen as taking its Kremlin criticism too far; the independent television station TV Rain was forced to broadcast from an apartment after being kicked out of its studios; and most recently, there was a purge of

the newspaper RBC after a string of reports on the wealth of Vladimir Putin's inner circle and an investigation into one of the president's daughters" (Kovalov 2017). Upon meeting their newly appointed editors, RBC journalists subsequently taped their conversations. In one conversation about the need for self-censorship, the newly appointed editors compared the work of the paper to traffic laws saying, "If you drive over the solid double line, they take away your license... Unfortunately, nobody knows where the solid double line is" and, "Our job is to show our professionalism in such a way that the traffic is safe for the people inside and for the pedestrians" (Hansen 2017, 20).

It is also important to point out that the lived experiences or lifeworlds of Russian citizens may make them less inclined to and, from a practical point of view, less able to influence governing institutions and the system in general via the public sphere. As this applies to the focal point of my research, the networked public sphere, users may be less likely to employ it for political discourse, instead focusing on utilitarian and apolitical uses. In her analysis of informal practices and the rule of law, Ledeneva draws on Bourdieu to distinguish the activities of institutions, which can be thought of as controlling the rules of the game, from the actual practices of those "playing" the game (22, 2006). By doing this she challenges traditional notions of focusing simply on the activities and laws employed by institutions in favor of practices, which show the relationship between cultural norms and rules. She argues that Russians are used to operating in the grey areas of the law, and are not inclined to try to change them. In the Russian context, laws have traditionally been seen as opposed to morals. Iakovlev points out "that conscience and ethics are supposed to be the basic part of law-consciousness

and that public morals are supposed to be the foundations of law are taken for granted in Western legal culture" (1995, 12).

For these reasons, one can argue that the conception of the networked public sphere leading to democratization is too narrowly constrained by western conceptions of deliberative democracy. It must be asked, are Russians likely to use the online space for deliberative democracy when "the incoherence of formal rules compels almost all Russians, willingly or unwillingly, to violate them and to play by rules introduced and negotiated outside formal institutions" (Ledenova 2006, 13)? It seems more likely, given this historical context, that most Russians would not use the networked public sphere to mediate between their lifeworld and the system.

I attempt to show that use among ordinary citizens is often apolitical and utilitarian in nature. Even Russians who use the internet actively and use a diverse array of media resources are not inclined to actively contribute to political discussions online. While the internet should be considered a counter to the hegemony of state-aligned media, it should not be conflated with a source for deep political change. In an attempt to provide a non-media-centric perspective of uses of the networked public sphere, I provide an account of my own experiences living in Moscow and conducting in-depth interviews with twelve "ordinary" young adults.[3] In these ways, this paper, while keeping an eye on the networked public sphere, seeks to explore use of the internet in social and cultural contexts that I have witnessed, while connecting such use to key themes in Russian culture and history.

[3] Who exactly these "ordinary" Russians are will be discussed in depth in the methodology section.

III. ETHNOGRAPHIC SCOPE AND METHODS

I conducted in-depth interviews with twelve Russian young adults between the ages of 23 to 30 in Moscow, Russia from August-September 2019. Subjects were recruited offline via contacts established during my time living in Moscow prior to the research period and via snowball sampling. I recorded all interviews on my personal mobile phone. I was initially weary of using my phone, but it proved to be an effective means of documenting our conversations. Because the presence of phones is so normalized in the current social environment, my phone went essentially unnoticed.

Questions were based on five main research interests and designed to allow room for conversation about agentive uses of social media as well as how social media is used as a networked public sphere. Throughout my interviews I sought to determine my collaborators' preferred social media sites and applications; their "everyday" uses of social media; uses of social media for dialogic exchange; media bias and views of journalism; and elements of trust and political change. I included the last topic in order to ensure that at least part of our conversations were based on politics. Additionally, protests in the summer of 2019, which took place just before my interviews, provided a useful framework through which I could understand how my collaborators where using social media to understand what exactly was going on at these protests.

Originally, I planned to recruit all of my collaborators via snowball sampling, but that quickly proved difficult and unreliable. Instead I relied largely on my friends and acquaintances from my time living in the city 2016-2018. Eight of my twelve participants were friends whom I had known previously, while the remaining four were recommended to me by these friends. Thus, my initial rapport-building with the majority of my

collaborators was built upon earlier friendships and acquaintances. Though this recruitment method came at the cost of a random sample population, my existing bonds with my collaborators allowed for more openness and greater depth of information. Prior to conducting this research I received approval from the University of Oregon Research Compliance Office.

Seven of the twelve interviews were conducted in Russian, which is not my native language. However, I do possess a reasonable level of proficiency and had prepared specific research questions which I cross-checked with a native speaker. Interviews conducted in English were done so upon the request of the interviewees, who were often eager to practice their English. We agreed to switch to Russian whenever they felt it was difficult to express an idea in English, and on many occasions they did. In hindsight, I do wish that I had conducted all the interviews in Russian. I believe that my collaborators' word choice and characterizations of the media and political happenings may have been richer in Russian. Additionally, when speaking in a foreign language, there is a shift in "power" dynamic. It would have been more beneficial for my interviewees to be in the position of the "knower" of the language.

Demographic Information

One of my main criticisms of previous studies of the networked public sphere in Russia is the focus on comparatively elite or privileged members of Russian society (Mickiewicz, 2012; Szostek, 2018). This study is focused on young adults who, while now working professionals in Moscow, came from relatively humble backgrounds. Many achieved early success in their careers and can be considered either approaching or in the

"middle class" of Moscow society. They do not, however, represent a cross section of society that could be considered manual laborers or rural citizens. The demographic information below provides an overview of the young adults who partook in the study.

Findings from the demographics section show that the average age of the twelve interviewees was 26.17, with five identifying as male and seven identifying as female. Interestingly, only three had lived in Moscow their entire lives, with the other nine having moved there almost immediately after finishing their university degrees, or moving there to complete their degrees. The average time spent living in Moscow for those not born in the city was 3.9 years. The sample consisted largely of young professionals working in various spheres: three in business-related occupations (marketing, demand planning, and sales), two designers (graphic and clothing), two in entertainment (entry-level screenwriting and video editing), one computer programmer, two university students, one Russian language teacher, and one athlete (supported by federal funding for Russian Olympic athletes). Seven interviewees had bachelor's degrees, two had master's, and two had high school diplomas (but were working toward their university degrees).

Personal Background to the Study

It is necessary to discuss my time living in Russia from 2016 to 2018, as this is when many anecdotal accounts regarding use of social media in Moscow first made their impressions on me. Indeed, my previous experiences living in Moscow led to the gestation of this research project. During this period, I worked as a business and freelance English language teacher, with a few additional jobs as an editor for a tech company and content creator for a small startup. This was my first-hand foray into the lives of

Table 1. Demographic details of all interviewees with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Name	Age	Gender	Length of Residence in Moscow	Hometown	Occupation	Education
Alexei	24	Male	2 Years	Tver, Russia	Freelancer/ digital marketer	Bachelor's
Sofia	23	Female	2 Years	Tver, Russia	Business analyst/ programmer	Bachelor's
Ksenia	24	Female	2.5 Years	Saratov, Russia	English Teacher	High School
Ivan	24	Male	5 years	Tver, Russia	Student	High School
Maksim	30	Male	30 Years	Moscow, Russia	Screenwriter & director	Bachelor's
Aidar	30	Male	7 Years	Neftekamsk, Russia	Demand Planner	Master's
Svetlana	27	Female	9 Years	Omsk, Russia	Russian Teacher	Specialist
Nikolai	30	Male	5 Years	Ashkabad, Turkmenistan	Account Manager/ Sales	Bachelor's
Vera	23	Female	1 Year	Orenburg, Russia	Cothing Designer	Bachelor's
Marina	23	Female	2 Years	Orenburg, Russia	Graphic Designer	Master's
Tatiana	30	Female	30 Years	Moscow, Russia	Video Editor	Bachelor's
Natalia	26	Female	26 Years	Moscow, Russia	Athlete	Bachelor's

Russians. I was forced to live with some approximation of the economic realities of Moscow and to shed my naiveties about what life there was actually like. Of course, my living there was by choice and my salary, although meager by American standards, was

roughly equivalent to the *household* average for Muscovites. Nonetheless, my naive notions of formal laws and practices which reflect those laws and my conceptions of a democratizing Russia striving toward a western model of governance (the list could go on) were all eventually pushed aside. These were replaced by getting paid late, under the table, or sometimes not at all, and witnessing how my Russian acquaintances navigated their everyday realities. I heard first-hand from my Russian colleagues, students, lovers, and friends, views of the crazy nineties (*sumasshedshie devonostye*), the shortcomings of democratization, and the societal upheavals caused by privatization.[4]

I vividly remember the interactions that lead me to start asking questions about the role of online space in Russian life. One such experience came when I was riding with a wealthy family's driver. I used to tutor the family's son once a week and made the roughly hour-long journey out to their gated community on the outskirts of the city. The driver and I were around the same age, had decent rapport, and often talked as we travelled along the Rublevo-Uspenskoye Shosse – the two-lane highway lined by massive green corrugated steel fences hiding the elites' estates from public view. He mentioned once that he needed a new place to live with his soon-to-be wife. I recommended that he look at housing groups on Facebook, or on a Russian website called "Locals". I had found roommates on Facebook, so I thought maybe he would have the same luck. However, to my surprise he scoffed at this suggestion saying, "Kyle you can't trust people that you just find online. They will probably trick you and take your money or

[4] I am unsure where exactly this term was first used: in the nineties the term democratization, *demokratizatsiia*, was often called *dermokratizatsiia*, combining the Russian word *demokratizatsiia* with the word for "shit" or *dermo*. This translates to "shitocracy," illustrative of attitudes toward reforms during that era.

belongings." I had similar interactions a few other times when discussing housing on social media sites. Even people who used social media for such things brought up cautionary tales of friends who paid their deposits and first month's rent, moved all their belongings, only to come home and find everything moved into the hall and the locks on the door changed. I never heard about this happening first-hand, but many were convinced that this was a likely event.

Despite these common trepidations, Russians do successfully use online sources for housing or any other wide variety of needs. I personally was able to find Russian roommates, a young couple who were 22 years old, to fill the empty room in my apartment via a Facebook group. However, when I showed them the apartment they were initially skeptical of me and thoroughly verified the details of the lease. To add another layer of complexity, our landlord at the time, a retired woman, relied on a real-estate agent to ensure some level of security in the lease. She forbade my use of social media for finding tenants; however, ironically, her real-estate agent used social media himself for this task. His official position as a real-estate agent gave her confidence, even though he did not do much besides shield her from the actual way in which he found new tenants. My landlord[5] initially rejected the new roommates outright when she learned I had found them online, but warmed up to them when she found out that they were ethnically Russian (*russkii,* as opposed to *rossiiskii*)[6] and had just moved from Tver, a

[5] With time I came to understand that my landlord was quite a shrewd business woman, at least in terms of maximizing her rent prices. This behavior was completely understandable, as I suspect she relied on our rent for her living expenses.

[6] *Russkii* is used to describe an ethnic Russian, or someone living in Russia who is ethnically Slavic. This is opposed to *rossiiskii,* which denotes a person of Russian nationality, but who is not ethnically Slavic.

historic medium-sized city a few hours north-west of Moscow. This experience and many others like it led me to question levels of societal trust in Moscow and how, according to my perceptions, a comparative lack of trust influenced the online practices of Muscovites.

I must also acknowledge other aspects of my positionality that may have impacted my interviews. First is my changing role from acquaintance and friend to researcher. The very act of me leaving Russia to pursue graduate study in the United States changed my identity in the eyes of my friends and acquaintances. I have come to understand that many with whom I became close saw me as someone who was drawn to Moscow by the opportunity of work, not necessarily by choice. Though I often tried to explain that I was there to *experience* Russia, to understand certain cross sections of Russian life, and improve my Russian language abilities, this is something I feel that I was never able to convey. Often, whether I wanted to be or not, I feel I was perceived as a fellow immigrant worker of sorts – brought to the economic center of the Russian world by its promise of a better life. Indeed, ten out of twelve of my collaborators moved to Moscow for work from smaller provincial cities, a common decision for young Russians in search of employment. In short, my arrival in Moscow for a few months to conduct research put my privilege on display in a more open way.[7] I was no longer the fellow worker brought to Moscow for the chance of a better life, sharing an apartment with Russians, and calling Moscow "home". Instead, I was a visitor who had ventured from my new home out into "the field" in order to collect data on *their* way of life. My relationships were not tainted

[7] It is also worth noting the incredible difficulty for Russians to obtain travel visas to the United States. For young, *especially* female Russians, it is nearly impossible to receive a travel visa to the United States. I feel that this may have added to a sense of distance between some of my interlocutors and me, as they rightly sensed my privileged ability to cross national borders.

by this dynamic – far from it. However, it is worth noting this shift in my role as it relates to my friends turned interviewees.

Additionally, my identity as an American may have had an impact on the data I gathered. Three of my twelve interviewees brought up that I was a spy, although they quickly assured me that they were just poking fun. As the questions turned away from general use of social media to more politically-charged topics, the atmosphere tended to grow less comfortable. Whether this was due to my identity as an American, or to a general sensitivity about discussing politics is not clear to me. I do not think my being an American influenced the course of the conversation in any notable way, but it is worth noting that some of my interviews were tinged with our nations' tenuous relationship.

Reciprocal Ethnography

In an effort to create some degree of multivocality and avoid being the authorial voice on my interlocutors' use of social media in Moscow, I undertook a reciprocal ethnographic approach. Reciprocal ethnography aims to create a "full hermeneutic circle" in which the interpretations of the ethnographer do not take precedence over their interlocutors' interpretations (Lawless 1992, 311). This hermeneutic circle, ideally, is created through an iterative sharing of the ethnographic manuscript, producing a dialogue between ethnographer and collaborator. It is important to remember that "our interpretations are not necessarily the right or the insightful ones" (310).

After transcribing my interviews and doing an initial analysis by coding chunks of data and identifying patterns, I conducted a follow-up interview with Aleksei, one of my key collaborators from my summer 2019 fieldwork. This, however, should not be

considered a fully reciprocal ethnography in the sense that input from Aleksei was limited to one forty-five minute interview conducted via video chat. He was able to comment on my initial analysis, but it was very limited in comparison to other attempts at reciprocity (see Gay Y Blasco, 2017; Lawless, 1992). Input from Aleksei will be included in my analysis section.

Methodological Limitations

Though the combination of in-depth interviews and personal experiences has helped to illuminate how my interlocutors experience social media and the online space, these methodologies have limitations. This study lacks the traditional embeddedness of a full ethnography, in that I did not actively participate in the lives of my interlocutors for an extended period of time. Although I did live in Moscow before this study, I was not systematically recording my findings, nor did I have ethnographic training. I opted for in-depth interviews due to limited time and funding for this project.

Future studies would ideally use participant observation and virtual ethnography in combination with interviews; this would create a more holistic view of collaborators' lived experience. A virtual ethnography in this case would be a passively observed analysis of social media profiles and other online spaces commonly used by my collaborators. Such an approach would rely less on the self-identified use of social media and the internet and would allow me to directly observe how this domain fits into my interlocutors' lives.

IV. ANALYSIS

Access to Information and Social Media Preferences

As noted by many scholars of the networked public sphere in Russia, although the country lagged behind Europe and North America in terms of internet access in the early 2000s, this situation has changed in recent years (Oates, 2013). There has been a rapid growth in internet availability, with 79.3 percent of the total population now active internet users. Of citizens between fifteen to twenty-four years of age (close to the demographic of this study), 96.7 percent now regularly use the internet. Additionally, within this demographic, 86.4 percent are active users of social media (Sabel'nikova, et. al. 2019, 8).

This study confirms these trends and provides further evidence of the widespread access and use of social media and the internet. My collaborators indicated that the internet and social media in general occupy a large portion of their time relative to other activities. These young adults spent an average of 3.75 hours per day on some iteration of social media. I must note that these numbers include use of social media for work and personal purposes, thus average time of use per day may seem quite high. According to this study, the most commonly used social media sites on average were: YouTube (28.75% of total time on social media per day), Facebook (17.92%), Instagram (16.67%), Telegram (12.91%), and Vkontakte (10%).

Because I focused on the networked public sphere as an alternative to traditional media, I collected data regarding where and how often my collaborators consume news. On average they spent 1.9 hours per day consuming news and overwhelmingly indicated

preference for online sources over traditional media.[8] Of the total time spent consuming news or information about current events, 79.58 percent occurred on the internet, 15.3 was received from friends, acquaintances, and relatives, 2.17% from newspapers, 1.75% from books, and only 0.42% from broadcast television. These metrics show that my collaborators spend a significant portion of their time on the internet. It is central to their gathering of news, garnering a notably higher percentage of their attention than other news sources. I must note, however, that the medium of communication does not necessarily determine the message. Just because the interviewees overwhelmingly indicated that they receive news from online sources does not on its own have significant implications for the networked public sphere. For example, many Kremlin-aligned news outlets are both online, in print, and on broadcast television. These distinctions will be discussed in later sections of the analysis.

"Everyday" Uses of Social Media

In order to present an accurate ethnographic account it is necessary to focus not only on the political, but the "everyday" uses of social media. These are uses which my collaborators identified in their own terms when I prompted them with broad questions regarding their daily activity online. These uses are central to constructing a holistic view of the lived empirical reality of this cross section of Moscow society. For these people, social media, and the internet as a whole, function as a means for maintaining existing social contacts and for the fulfillment of everyday needs and interests. However, it also functions as a window into the potentialities of life, often outside of Russia. These

[8] This data is supported by other qualitative studies (see Mickiewicz, 2012 and Szozek, 2018).

potentialities manifest in the form of career ambitions, wanderlust, or sustained contact with non-Russian friends who live abroad or friends who emigrated from Russia.

Messaging applications such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger, while not favored, are used primarily to keep in touch with older family members or international friends. Most collaborators prefer Telegram for keeping in contact with their Russian friends. They cite its overall ease of use and wide variety of "emojis" and "stickers" as their main reasons for preferring it over other messaging applications. Additionally, Telegram is used most often to create "chat groups" for work, again due to its convenience. Telegram's other function, "secret chat", was not identified as a reason for its use. The "secret chat" function allows users to communicate using end-to-end encryption, which is widely thought to render messages inaccessible to anyone other than the intended recipient. This function did come up during a few interviews, but collaborators did not cite it as the main reason that the messaging application was used. I sought clarification on this issue with Alexei (23, freelancer) (who was kind enough to comment on my initial analysis) and he confirmed that usually the decision to use Telegram is predicated upon its convenience (*eto prosto udobno*). On the contrary, Ksenia (English teacher, 24), the most politically outspoken of my collaborators, notes that WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are insecure forms of communication and that the government could access messages sent on these platforms. Despite this, she still uses these applications, albeit sparingly.

Of the "profile-based" social media applications such as Vkontakte, Facebook, and Instagram, the most commonly used is Instagram. Many enjoy that it is based around sharing and looking at photos and feel less inundated with outside content in comparison

to social media applications which use predictive algorithms to recommend content (Instagram does this to a lesser extent than other applications).

Collaborators prefer Facebook to keep in contact with international friends, as well as for professional purposes (online marketing) and political content. Ksenia notes that she has a Swedish friend who "posts a lot of vegan, feminist, anarchist things" which are some of her main interests. For her, and a few other collaborators, it seems that Facebook functions as a way to keep up with various trends outside of Russia by looking at their international friends' posts.

It is worth noting that just over half (seven) of my collaborators regularly use social media as means of political information, while the remainder (five) did not mention this until asked directly later on in the interview process. Many instead, as mentioned above, focused only on the functionality of their favorite applications and made no mention of politics.

Finally, my collaborators overwhelmingly pointed out that many native Russian social media sites, which have garnered much attention from scholars of the networked public sphere, are outdated (Oates, 2013; Etling, et. al., 2014). For example, LiveJournal, once the center of the Russian blogging world, is neither used by them nor any of their friends. Though Vkontakte is still used, they note that it is only for keeping in contact with older relatives, occasionally getting news about domestic affairs in Russia, or listening to music. This marks a significant shift from use of these older, largely domestic sites, to YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram.

Dialogic Exchange on Social Media

A key aspect of the networked public sphere is its potential for peer-to-peer communication which is comparatively free from state and corporate interests. This advantage may promote greater dialogic exchange through use of comment sections, sharing posts, and user generated content. Habermas' description of the public sphere as applied to the internet may allow citizens to identify mutually shared interests (Habermas 1974, 53). Applying this to social media, shared consensus among users, in theory, may be identified via debate in comments sections. During my interviews I focused in part on my interlocutors' use of comment sections to see if they were using them to have dialogic exchanges about politically-oriented topics. The extant quantitative research indicates that such exchanges are rare (Miller et. al. 2015; Pew, 2016). Rather, users often exhibit "politically avoidant" behavior on social media. However, especially in Russia, there has been little research to show *why* users are politically avoidant. In an attempt to answer this question, this section explores the extent to which my collaborators comment on politically-oriented posts and how they interpret discussions in the comments sections.

Most of my collaborators identified that debates in comments sections on social media are pointless (*bessmyslenno*). Answers to my interview questions revealed three main issues which keep them from engaging in such debates. First, debates usually descend into arguments, name calling, and rarely result in productive dialogue. Second, they were concerned about government 'trolling' or surveillance. Third, they expressed a lack of interest in arguing with strangers. The result is an overall apolitical use of comments sections, suggesting limited dialogic potential regarding online interpersonal political discourse.

Maksim (30, screenwriter) and Nikolai (30, sales account manager) reported that, while they used to engage in political debates online when they were younger, they had stopped after being involved in heated arguments. Maksim's told me that, "it is very rarely productive… I don't do this because it ends the same every time… it is like, 'you're a jerk', 'no you are… fuck off.'" Nikolai said he had eventually stopped because it was pointless to argue with random people on the internet. He doesn't respect random comments from people he does not know, because most of the time such people lack the expertise to meaningfully contribute to the subject of discussion. This sentiment was echoed by Sofia (23, programmer), who expressed disillusionment with the often inflammatory and superficial content she sees in comments sections. As she put it, "often people just throw a stick in the water and want to discuss the waves."

It is somewhat common, however, for these young adults to have political discussions or to share interesting political information in the form of videos or articles via messaging applications with friends outside of the 'virtual' world. These friends either lived in Moscow or some other part of Russia in which my collaborators had grown up or spent a significant amount of time. This suggests that, in general, social media as a facilitator for political discourse is limited to already established contacts based on geographic locales in which my interlocutors had spent a significant amount of time.[9]

[9] This use is reminiscent of Stephen Woolgar's work outlining the "rules of virtuality" which hold that online practices serve to supplement other activities, not replace them. In this sense messaging applications allow for political discussions which may have been taking place anyway among friends, but are supplemented by the ability to communicate across geographic locales and to share multimedia content (2009).

Ksenia rarely comments or interacts with political information online since, "people who are connected to the government browse through that… you'll go to jail if you post stuff that they don't like… that's illegal, but you will still go to jail." Ksenia was unique in expressing these trepidations. The fear of government censorship, or even the possibility of going to jail did not usually seem to be a concern. Collaborators' general feeling is that online debate is tolerated by the authorities and that, for the most part, 'usual' citizens are able to exercise their right to free speech. Despite this perceived freedom, many expressed an awareness of government efforts to misdirect conversations in comment sections. However, the efficacy of such attempts was called into question. For example, Maksim spoke of the obvious presence of "government trolls" who try to coopt conversations in comments sections, but are largely ineffective. According to him "you can easily see what is fake… just click on the account and you can see that it is not a real person."

Due to these misgivings my collaborators generally used discussion sections to find out specific information about apolitical events (such as time, location, etc.), not to contribute political opinions. Use of comments sections can be characterized as clearly utilitarian, with little interest in contributing to drawn-out dialogic exchange in pursuit of general consensus. In fact, the cyber-utopian view of social media imbedded in such a line of questioning was often met with a chuckle.

This held true for most of my collaborators with one notable exception. Although Nikolai had initially stated that he had stopped participating in political debates online, he later qualified this answer. While he has stopped commenting on public posts on VKontakte and Facebook, he later said that he prefers to take part in discussions in chat

groups, known as "channels" on Telegram. On these channels, which can be public or private[10], often subscribers become acquainted with one another's virtual identity (everyone has a username and if someone participates in the chat enough, then they eventually develop a reputation).[11] Nikolai noted that though people from these channels have never met each other, they have all been part of the same channel, or collection of channels for several years. In Nikolai's case, these virtual groups consist of about 500-600 people (though they can vary greatly in size); certain users had gained social currency within these groups over months, or sometimes years of posting their opinions. Nikolai explained that he knew of certain users in these chat groups who were highly respected. He told me, "when you are having a discussion with someone… sometimes you think… hey this guy is pretty smart, they speak perfect Russian for example, your respect for this person grows, his opinion becomes more important."

Nikolai told me that he found these groups through a sort of trial and error method, first starting with large groups of about 10,000 people and then branching off to smaller groups that he felt were the best fit for him. When I asked him how he chose which channels were a good fit, he said, "well I tried some different ones and then found one and I was like, 'this is comfortable,' people here think like me." Thus Nikolai has been able to find a community with which he is able to have political discussions; this is

[10] When setting up these channels, the group administrator (the person who creates the channel) can choose whether the group is open to the public, in which case anyone can join, or whether other users need an invite from the administrator in order to join. Telegram channels are essentially analogous to an oversized group message in which users can write to each other.

[11] Users do not have profiles pages on Telegram, but are prompted to add a profile picture and to choose a username, which is often a pseudonym. Thus, it is possible to be anonymous or semi-anonymous, if one desires.

an example of a 'hug-box' mentality, in which users "intentionally limit their social media connections to likeminded others" (Kruse et. al. 2018, 73).

Although collaborators for the most part avoided political discussions on social media, a number of them reported that while they do not feel that *participating* in debates on comments sections is useful, they do occasionally read comments. The reason for reading comments fell into two main categories. First, it was a way to see what variety of opinions exist about potentially controversial topics. For example, Ivan (24, student) noted that he "likes to see other opinions and how people are reacting." Second, it was a way to save time and circumvent actually reading articles. A few noted that, in combination with the title of the article and the way that people had reacted in the comments section, it is possible to deduce its content without actually taking the time to read it. It seems to me that this is a way to mitigate the large flow of information present online.

Media Bias and Journalism as the 'Fourth Estate'

A central aspect of Habermas' public sphere is the "rationalization of power through the medium of public discussion among private individuals" (Habermas 1974, 55). In an ideal public sphere, state and corporate interests are in negotiation with the citizenry concerning the shape and limitations of their power. In this ideal form the mass media should facilitate this negotiation by bringing to public attention key issues which are in society's interest. This role as a mediator between interests is why the press is often

referred to as the 'fourth estate'.[12] However, in the Russian context, the press has not traditionally filled this role, instead functioning as the ideological arm of the communist party during the Soviet era, enjoying limited diversity during the Yelstin era, and again becoming increasingly restricted under the Putin regime.

Instead of acting in the public interest, the press in Russia often acts on behalf of private/corporate and government interests. Ledeneva outlines the use of the press for what she terms informal Public Relations (PR) (*chernyi piar*) in influencing elections. She sums up the impact of this on efforts to democratize, saying, "in the case of political PR, the damage has… implications for the public perception of liberal values, free media, and beliefs in principles of democracy" (2006, 36). As noted by De Smaele, journalists in Russia often "consider themselves missionaries of ideas rather than neutral observers," an idea largely shared by the public (2007, 1304). This has had an adverse effect on public perception of journalism, as often these tactics are brought to light well after their intended impacts on elections have taken place, leaving the viewership feeling deceived and altogether disillusioned (Ledeneva 2006, 37). The Russian press's history of transgressions raises significant questions relating to the issue of trust in the virtual public sphere. Specifically, how can Russians believe what they see or read online? Does the decentralized nature of social media and the online space allow them access to alternative points of view that they feel are trustworthy?

To answer these questions I asked how collaborators viewed news received from online and social media platforms versus news received from traditional (Kremlin-

[12] The media as a fourth estate, or "branch" of government, is an idea often credited to British politician Edmund Burke. The other estates consist of the judiciary, legislative, and executive powers. By discussing the media as the fourth estate, or "branch" Burke was attempting to demonstrate the importance of the press in holding the government accountable to its citizens.

aligned) media sources. Due to the well-documented fact that media narratives on national broadcast television and many, but not all newspapers are controlled either directly or indirectly by the Kremlin, I wanted to explore which sources my collaborators use on a regular basis.

Additionally, because the existing literature claims that, in contrast to acting as neutral observers, journalists act as political players who represent certain factions of Russian society, be they financial or political, I was curious how my collaborators view journalism as a profession (Oates 2006, 1285; De Smaele 2007, 1304). Do they feel that journalists are trustworthy? Is it a journalist's job to provide objective, non-biased information? I hoped to gain information regarding their view of the press in general and whether they conform to the western ideal of the press functioning as the 'fourth estate'. When discussing the difference between social media and traditional, or Kremlin-aligned media sources, and the role of journalists, our conversations began to reveal deeper insights into how my collaborators try to make meaning of their political reality via a diverse array of sources.

Moving Away from Kremlin-Aligned Media

One of the strongest findings from both my personal experience in Moscow and my interviews, is that my collaborators have a generally negative view of Kremlin-aligned news sources, especially broadcast television. These findings are in agreement with other qualitative studies which assert that young adults in Moscow have low levels of trust in such media sources (Mickiewicz 2014, 110; Szostek 2018, 76). However, these studies focused strictly on university students at Moscow's most prestigious institutions, while my sample draws mainly from young professionals who have moved to Moscow

after completing their university degrees in various provincial institutions around Russia (see figure 1 in the methodology section for a detailed breakdown of demographics). Thus, my findings provide new evidence of the increasing decline of the hegemony of Kremlin-aligned news sources among young adults in Moscow.

Maksim, being a bit older than many of my collaborators (30 years old), provided insight into his experience with traditional media sources by explaining the Kremlin takeover of many of the nation's top media sources in the early 2000s. He recalled how, when he was younger, there was a more diverse collection of traditional media sources saying, "yeah I used to watch the news on TV, or read some newspapers… and they all died, they changed politically… even if they still exist they aren't the same." For this reason, he has gravitated toward alternative online sources saying, "the internet is the last free thing." His account was reminiscent of other explanations of the centralization of major media sources during this period (Oates 2007, 1283).

Moving from a reliance on traditional news sources in early life to online sources later in life was a common theme. Often my collaborators had spent a significant amount of time during their childhoods watching Kremlin-backed television channels such as Ren TV, NTV, *Rossiia 24*, and *Pervyi Kanal*. Aleksei and Aidar (30, demand planner) noted that the news programs *Vesti* and *Vremya*, two long-running TV news staples on *Rossiia 24* and *Pervyi Kanal*, were fixtures of their childhood. Their families would gather to watch the evening news around dinner time, making a point to tune in to these long-running programs. As these young adults moved away from home, so too have they gravitated away from these nightly rituals. Of course, this trend toward internet news is not unique to Russia. The convenience and pervasiveness of the internet means that this

shift is global. However, it is still worth exploring the nuances behind *why* this shift is occurring in each of its separate iterations.

In this instance, the main reason that young adults no longer watch TV is due to blatant censorship. Sofia reported, "on TV everything is really strict and there are censors… TV news is just for grandmas." Aleksei also reported this lack of trust in traditional media, saying, "in Russia, on television, it is very clear that there are censors… but on the internet it is not as evident… no one reads [print] newspapers or watches TV anymore." His main critique is that, "for example, *Rossiia 24* is not interesting, they only have opinions from one point of view… from those in power." Additionally, although Kremlin-aligned media sources now have a large online presence, people still avoid them in favor of alternative sources such as independent bloggers, or alternative news outlets found online.

Aidar was the only person who reported watching broadcast television, but even this was limited to mornings just before setting off for work. He and his wife watch the show Good Morning (*Dobroe Utro*) on *Pervyi Kanal* to see the weather and for some "white noise" as they are eating breakfast and getting ready. No one else with whom I spoke had even bothered to connect their TVs to the coaxial cables protruding from the apartments' walls. These now lay coiled away, vestigial fixtures of a passing era.

"The Internet is the last free thing"

My collaborators' use of news sources largely mirrored quantitative studies which show that young adults in Moscow increasingly rely on the internet and social media for news (Levada Center, 2018). However, it seems that this increasing use of online sources is not necessarily due to the quality of content online, but rather due to the poor quality

and obvious censorship of traditional media sources. As stated above, Maksim told me that he had turned to online sources not necessarily due to their quality, but because "the internet is the last free thing". Interestingly, this quote matches feelings expressed by Aleksei Navalny, who indicated that opposition politicians had been forced to use the internet because it was their only option (Shuster, 2012). This point of view challenges the idea that the internet is acting as a place in which the free flow of ideas is contributing to healthy discourse. Instead, it highlights that the internet is a last resort through which Russians attempt to formulate some understanding of their political environment.

This sentiment came up often both directly and indirectly during my interviews. Collaborators navigate the online space by treating it as a place in which one may receive alternative viewpoints; it is not necessarily a place where one may uncover an undisputed truth. The online space is treated with caution. It is a place to observe the perspectives of others from a distance, but these opinions are rarely taken too close to heart. Their view, perhaps rightfully so, was one of skepticism.

Perhaps for this reason it was difficult to get direct answers regarding which specific sources my collaborators use and trust. Often when I tried to ask which online sources in particular they use, they answered indirectly. I suspect that their hesitance to answer this question lies in the fact that they are not sure which sources are trustworthy.

They emphasized the importance of trying to verify information, but pointed out that this is a difficult and time-consuming task (one made more difficult by their often busy schedules). They often made a point of saying that all news sources have bias and that it is important to get a variety of perspectives before coming to a well-reasoned conclusion (*vezde nado proveriat*). Aleksei tries to do this, but acknowledges that he

often lacks the time or energy. This answer was repeated often with Marina (23, graphic designer) and Svetlana (27, Russian teacher) both saying that they use online sources, but that they found it difficult to verify information to make sure it was factual.

Though it was difficult to find out which specific sources collaborators find trustworthy, there was a patterned aversion to sources that are too opposition-oriented (*slishkom oppozitsionnyi*). I specifically asked if they found *Dozhd'*, which is a popular independently-owned online news source, to be trustworthy. More often than not they answered with a scrunched nose and a shake of their head, accompanied by a drawn out "no". To them *Dozhd* seemed to fall too far 'left' on the political spectrum. In their eyes it propagates western 'liberal' agendas. Unfortunately, I did not pursue further clarification on this issue. It would be interesting to know what specifically makes my collaborators suspicious of this 'liberal' agenda. However, I must point out that the aversion to this channel contrasts with other answers I received concerning support for Alexey Navalny and other opposition politicians. It seems that many are supportive of his anticorruption platform, but skeptical of other more socially 'liberal' aspects of his agenda, such as his support for same-sex marriage (Navalny 2017).

Maksim expressed this view. He identified the opposition channel *Dozhd'* as well as the internet in general as the main reason that opposition politicians such as Lyubov' Sobol' and Aleksei Navalny had been able to gain prominence. Concerning Navalny, who has his own successful social media following[13], Maksim said, "actually… Navalny… who is he? He is no one, just a lawyer who decided 'let's think about this' and

[13] As of the writing of this paper Navalny, who posts detailed videos accusing high-profile politicians of corruption, has 3.81 million subscribers. His most popular video, which claims that Dmitry Medvedev has directed funds from charity foundations to amass a real-estate empire, has garnered 35 million views (Aleksei Navalny, 2017).

he wrote a lot of blogs about corruption, but he wasn't a journalist. People believe him because he provides evidence that can be checked… now a lot of people are using YouTube to report what they see." In his experience, "all young people (who I know) use the same sources, we all watch the same bloggers… we all have a common enemy and this helps us to unite." Though he did not specify who the enemy was, it was clear it was those in power (*vlast'*).

Due to this nebulous and oversaturated information space in combination with their busy lives, many collaborators said they use news aggregators such as Yandex News, Yandex Zen, and Tinkoff Journal as their primary news sources. These news aggregators, now a common feature both inside and outside of Russia, are mobile applications that recommend articles across a wide spectrum of user interests. These interests can be identified manually by the user or recommended algorithmically based on the type of articles the user has read in the past. When pressed with which specific news sources these aggregators recommend, my collaborators were generally unable to say.[14] One answer, which is illustrative of the overall trend of how these aggregators are used, was from Aleksei, who said, "to be honest, I am not totally sure of which sources I read on these, just if I see something interesting then I will read it." In a follow-up interview with Aleksei, I asked him what he thought of people's reliance on news aggregators. Specifically, I wanted to know if he thought these were a trustworthy way to get news. He told me that, while he still does use them due to their convenience, he and his friends

[14] In her influential ethnographic account of the impact of the transition from state-run to free-market economy, Katherine Verdery notes that one symptom of capitalism is the compression of time (1996, 35). This compression is at the center of improving the system. I interpret this reliance on news aggregators as one such symptom manifest in the information space. It is ultimately a time-saving device for career-oriented individuals, but one that may come at the cost of choosing news sources with any real rigor.

had started to notice an absence of articles which reflect poorly on the federal government on the Yandex News aggregator.

Aidar was able to tell me about a few specific bloggers whom he trusts because their public reputation is connected to the quality of information they share. He prefers to "see opinions from those with authoritative knowledge... to see how knowledgeable bloggers think about the news." I took this opportunity to ask him how he defines those with "authoritative knowledge", to which he responded, "well, those such as Dmitry Gordon[15], a well-known TV-presenter who has guests on his show to discuss current events". He went on to explain that through this show he had found other bloggers, mainly interesting people who had been guests on Dmitry Gordon's show. One such blogger was Konstantin Syomin[16] who has his own YouTube channel, Agitation and Propaganda, has influenced Aidar's current perspective of the political environment. He is able to place trust in such people because their opinions seem to be based upon facts, and their manner of speaking is clear and somewhat infectious. He pointed out, "you start to use the same idioms as these people, to speak like them. However, he qualified this statement about their infectious speech by saying, "you know, it often sounds really good, but in reality you don't really know what you are talking about."

[15] Dmitry Gordon is a Ukrainian journalist, author, blogger, and musician. In May 2019 he announced his departure from the privately-owned 112 Ukraine TV station to pursue his YouTube channel.

[16] Konstantin Syomin is a Russian journalist, blogger, and musician who, between 2000-2019 hosted a variety of news programs on Kremlin-aligned television channels such as Russia-24 and worked as a correspondent for the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK). In 2019 he left Russia-24 citing dissatisfaction with the scheduling of his program early in the morning or late at night; he discussed domestic political issues.

The role of journalists

A critical element of the press is the individuals who report the stories. Within the Moscow context, how do young adults view journalism as a profession? In my interviews, although many identified the 'objective' presentation of facts as an ideal for journalists, this is not how they believe journalists behave in practice. The reasons for this departure from journalistic ethics varied, but generally centered around structural constraints imposed by the government in the form of censorship, or by the nature of for-profit media in the form of "attention-grabbing" or "infotainment."

Svetlana (Russian teacher, 27), who received her master's degree in journalism and interned at a TV station in Moscow briefly, described a jarringly negative view of established journalistic institutions in Russia. After her short-lived experience in the industry, she became disillusioned and decided to pursue another career path. She did not say specifically where she had worked, but indicated that she had left because only stories showing the government in a positive light were allowed to get air time.

Alexei pointed to structural issues at both the private and government sectors as reasons for his general lack of trust in journalists, saying, "ideally journalists should present the facts, but in Russia it is hard to do this for political reasons… I believe that any journalist can be bought." He feels that it is not a journalist's job to provide the most important stories to the public, or to serve the public interest, but to "write stories that get people talking."

Maksim and Sofia, while acknowledging these structural constraints, took a different view altogether. They questioned the very possibility of objective journalism. For these two, objectivity in journalism was an impossible ideal. Sofia said that ideally,

yes, journalists should strive to tell the truth, but that this is actually impossible. She explained, "well the term truth is very subjective… I would like journalists to provide my truth, but that is only one side of the story". Anton stopped short of such a broad postmodern critique, preferring journalists who are principled and who admit when they have made mistakes. He says they "should be able to change their positions… if they say 'I yeah I fucked up' then yeah I think that is good… they just have to be principled."

Silicon Valley and Liberal Bias

Perhaps the most intriguing perceived limitation of the networked public sphere, as identified by Maksim, Aidar, and Nikolai, centers around the implicit ideological bias of American social media platforms. All three were 30 years old during the time of the interviews and provided insight into how they feel social media has changed for the worse in recent years. They identify as staunchly pro-freedom of speech, even if this speech is not 'politically correct'. To them social media should function as an open platform for all ideas, not just those deemed acceptable by elites working in "Silicon Valley."

Maksim pointed out that, for him, social media has evolved from its original use – maintaining personal social networks such as friends and family, to "something much bigger…more like something where they change content that you can see… it has editors." To these three young men, social media has ceased operating as an open platform and is increasingly censored by a liberal[17] agenda born of, if I summarize their

[17] Liberal here refers to the American democratic party, not to be confused with classical liberalism.

thoughts on the matter, the self-righteousness of Silicon Valley and the American political 'left' in general. Due to its location in primarily democrat-leaning California and proximity to San Francisco, in combination with the fact that social media companies consist primarily of liberal employees[18], they feel that these companies censor conservative viewpoints.

In recent years such censorship has become a common talking point among American conservatives. There have been allegations from republican politicians (including Donald Trump) that social media companies perform 'shadow banning' on conservative American politicians' accounts. Shadow banning is when social media companies adjust their algorithm so that certain accounts are no longer recommended to other users. In this way, the user becomes essentially invisible to everyone else, without being outright banned or noticing any other changes to their account. However, there has been no evidence that social media companies perform such bans (Stack 2018). These three young men follow American politics quite closely and have found resonance with these allegations from conservative figures in some form or another.

Maksim told me that he uses social media to "live in his own personal virtual exile" and that he tries to ignore politics in Russia. He thinks the situation is too depressing and that it will simply never change. Instead he chooses to focus on American and European politics. When I met him for our interview he was listening to a Tim Pool podcast while playing some iteration of the Need for Speed gaming franchise on his PlayStation 4. Pool, a favorite of Maksim's is an independent American journalist who

[18] Social media companies such as Twitter do hire primarily 'liberal' employees, something CEO Jack Dorsey has admitted could be problematic (Vox 2018).

came to prominence on YouTube, Twitter, and other social media platforms; in recent years, Pool has claimed that conservatives are censored on social media (Al Jazeera 2019). Pool markets himself as an objective, fact-based journalist, something that appeals to Maksim. However, Pool's self-professed objectivity has been called into question. He is often criticized for his framing and choice of certain issues, such as his coverage of illegal immigration linked to increased rates of violent crime in Sweden and his giving interviews to alt-right groups such as Baked Alaska and the Proud Boys (Marantz 2017).

I asked Maksim why he personally felt this liberal bias existed on social media, to which he answered, "well it is because of the culture war… on the edge of this it is like the second American civil war… like for example it is not a crime to think that transgender athletes shouldn't participate in women's sports[19], but if you say this then Twitter will ban you." His comment was reminiscent of other public figures who are commonly associated with the alt-right such as Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro (though these two claim that associations with the alt-right are unfair). They both believe that the state does not have the authority to compel citizens to use gender pronouns which differ from and individual's gender which was determined at birth. They tend to frame this issue as an attack on individual freedom of speech by a coercive state (Jordon B. Peterson 2017). Peterson came to prominence thanks in part to this very issue. While working as a professor at the University of Toronto he refused to comply with the Canadian Bill C-16,

[19] Transgender women participating in women's sports with those who have always identified as women has become a contentious issue in America during the past few years. Supporters note that it is not fair to discriminate against these athletes and keep them from participating, while those opposed claim that transgender women have an unfair physical advantage (Guardian 2020). Regarding Maksim's comment, I have not been able to find evidence that Twitter has banned users due to their opinion on this issue.

which he argues *compels* individuals to use appropriate gender pronouns. Such arguments have found resonance with young men in Russia.

Maksim stopped short of saying that bias was the result of some consciously crafted conspiracy of social media CEOs, rather, he claims that it is an inadvertent side effect of liberal bias in company policy. He rejects what he sees as censorship of certain points of view and types of speech because such attempts are reminiscent of the ideological vanguardism of the communist party. He told me, "here in Russia we have tried limiting what is acceptable to say and to me American liberals and progressives are now trying the same thing."

Aidar shared this perception of liberal bias, but his reservations contained considerably more conspiratorial undertones. He observes that, "when you set up your account, for some reason there are these political bloggers who are recommended to you… for example on YouTube Navalny is recommended right away… I don't know who decides this." So, he claims, while it does connect people from different parts of the world and provide outside opinions, there seems to be an emphasis on liberal content. He notes that, "it seems to me there is someone behind these recommendations who wants to mold our point of view… you can never see stuff about communism, what I believe, at the top… at the top there are just [western] liberal ideas." Aidar is a supporter of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) whose leader, Gennady Zyuganov, is known for accusing Navalny of accepting funding from western intelligence agencies such as the CIA (BBC 2015). In a 2013 press conference, Zyuganov criticized the Kremlin for releasing Navalny, who had been arrested for organizing an unsanctioned protest, after only one night in jail. As part of this criticism Zyuganov stated, "I have a

feeling that there are two factions in the Kremlin, one of which works with American intelligence agencies through Navalny" (Kolesova 2013).[20] Thus, it seems that Aidar's lived experience of social media is imbued with meaning according to his already existing political beliefs.

Nikolai, also feeling that there is liberal bias on American social media sites, increasingly seeks anonymity online. This anonymity allows him to express his true thoughts, without risking his personal reputation, as often his opinions are not "politically correct" as he puts it. He noted that social media is a very important part of his life. It is a virtual space in which he can be himself, where "people can give you the warmth of their hearts without being there." He remembers life before the prevalence of social media and said, "before [social media] I was sitting at home a lot … like, where are my friends?" From our interactions, it seems that he has used social media to build a virtual community. He has been able to make these contacts primarily on 4Chan, a web forum that has gained notoriety for its laissez faire attitude to hate speech, and Telegram. It is noteworthy that his presence on these platforms dates back 10 years and 5 years, respectively. He identified that, especially on Telegram, he has been able to find a community through joining various channels. Personally, he uses only his username and enjoys this anonymity as it allows him to avoid judgement.

Over time he has been able to gain social capital on these chats solely on the basis of his knowledge and opinions. The anonymity of these sites allows him to hide his

[20] In November 2019, shortly after I concluded my interviews, Navalny's organization was declared a "foreign agent" by a Moscow Municipal Court. This is part of controversial restrictions on non-governmental organizations which officially seek to reduce foreign influence in domestic Russian politics, but is widely cited as a pretense for limiting the financial resources of civil society organizations (Tikhomirov 2019).

"professional appearance." Much like the other two collaborators, he pointed out that he was fearful of social justice warriors online who threatened to "destroy people's lives and careers without due process." As an example he pointed out Kevin Spacey,[21] saying, "he was really famous before all this stuff happened to him… he was found not guilty, but his career was destroyed." He feels that now "everybody is watching everybody" and that this is "like fascist propaganda in Germany… even if someone hacks your account and posts something horrible, most people will still think it was you." For him, social media's power is in its ability to unite people. However, this is also its main drawback.

I noticed both during my interviews and my time living in Russia that in general Russians are weary of liberals (*liberaly)* and certain movements that aim to promote human rights, specifically those relating to feminism and LGBTQ communities. This may be due to the Kremlin's increasing reliance on conservative rhetoric, which often frames the West as a place of moral decay and a "haven for homosexuality and pedophilia" while Russia is framed as the defender of Judeo-Christian values (Makarychev and Medvedev 2015, 45).

One example of such framing comes from a 2019 broadcast of the popular nightly news program Vesti at 10:00 P.M. (*Vesti v 22:00*). The host, Alexei Kazakov reported on the recent closure of a 'feminist café' in Saint Petersburg, which he claims was inspired by such cafés in Australia. During the segment introduction, Kazakov, with a seemingly objective and disinterested air, gave an account of the café's closure and its practice of "charging men eighteen percent higher than women" in an effort to address the wage gap

[21] Starting in 2017 American actor Kevin Spacey faced a number of sexual assault allegations, which were shared widely on various social media platforms. Due to these allegations Spacey has been removed from current and future roles in the entertainment industry (BBC 2019).

between men and women. However, the segment was spliced with interviews from former customers who variously describe their experience at the restaurant as unpleasant due to slow service, low quality of food, and "waitresses who gave off an unpleasant smell" (*istochali nepriiatnyi zapakh)*. Additionally, they interviewed a restaurant critic who dismissed the idea of such feminist cafés as a marketing ploy meant to "catch the eye of interested customers" (*mozhno privlech' klientov iskluchitel'no interesnyi na vzglad zadymkoy*). Thus the program and its host, while not explicitly taking a position, nonetheless clearly conveyed the a multifaceted message: feminists are rude, incapable of running a business, and smell bad. Additionally, including that such cafés were inspired by others in Australia, there is an implicit connection with such liberal ideas seeping in from a morally corrupt 'liberal' West. Finally, as evidenced by the higher prices they must pay, the segment conveys the idea that such cafés are part of a continuing attack on men (Rossiia 24, 2019).

While my interlocutors reported that they mainly avoid Kremlin-backed channels, there is evidence that young adults in Moscow may passively absorb such Kremlin narratives despite seeking information from a diverse array of sources (Szostek 2018, 80). Perhaps passive exposure may explain their predisposition to discount movements which are associated with 'liberals'.

This weariness of 'liberals' also manifests as suspicion of the #metoo movement and western society's condemnation of males in positions of power who are suspected of sexual abuse.[22] I asked Natalia what she thought of the #metoo movement and its

[22] The #metoo movement is a widespread voicing and recognition of the experiences of sexual abuse that many women have during their lifetime. Although it has not taken hold strongly in Russia, my collaborators have been watching these events unfold in America via social media.

prevalence on social media. Her initial reaction was one of distrust, telling me "people lie about these types of things, there is no way to know if they are telling the truth." However, she did recognize that often women's voices often go unheard. After thinking for some time, she characterized her view as "mostly distrustful of the way that people's careers and reputations are destroyed," but that she thought it was important that the conversation was getting started.

In addition to perhaps unknowingly being influenced by Kremlin narratives, perhaps their suspicion of the #metoo movement is a reaction to the character assassinations (the *Chernyi Piar* mentioned earlier) undertaken in the 1990s and early 2000s. Ledeneva details such takedowns of political or business opponents which she calls 'informal PR' or 'kompromat'. Those involved in kompromat made up an entire industry of journalists and media outlets that were effectively "for sale" (Ledeneva 2006, 35). Russian citizens often became aware of such character assassinations after their desired impact had already taken place, resulting in a lack of trust in such stories (41). According to one of Ledeneva's respondents who used to work in the kompromat industry, "a fact from the past, such as a criminal record, can be used… however in the absence of facts or documents, anything will do, a lie, or even better, a half-truth" (76). She notes that such tactics eventually became ineffective toward the end of the 90's because of the extent of their use (77). Russians no longer paid much attention to such attacks.

In this case, perhaps it is the decentralized nature of social media that make them suspicious of such movements, as anyone could, in theory, fabricate stories which could then be circulated widely and used to destroy people's reputations. In the case of the

#metoo movement, it is possible that my collaborators treat these stories as another type of kompromat, a way for competing factions of businessmen or politicians to effectively end people's careers, something they are all too familiar with from their country's recent past.

Trust and Political Change

As discussed earlier, one of the core functions of the public sphere (and now the networked public sphere) is in the rationalization of power to private citizens through public debate and eventual consensus. An additional function is in its power for organization and collective action. Due to the potential for low-cost user-generated content, social media is often touted for its ability to promote horizontal communication among like-mined people who can then organize around shared conceptions of positive political change (Enikolopov et. al. 2015, 2). Thus, a central role of the networked public sphere may lie in its ability to foster social movements which culminate in political change. I spoke with most of my collaborators about this potential, but framed the question as "do you feel that social media could help promote positive change in Russia?"

Many reported that social media is powerless against the interests of the Russian state. Any kind of major systemic change, to them, seemed to be near impossible. For example, Maksim noted that, "just because you have some iPhone and an application does not mean you can argue with military power… these people, they are not going to give up their power." For him, Russia lacks the democratic institutions to realize any substantial political change due to online discourse or organization.

Additionally, there was an underlying feeling that protest, or those who took part in protest movements, betrayed their national identity as Russians. For example, Natalia (26, athlete) pointed to her mom's opinion that protest went against her "Russianness." She told me, "when I was younger and we would see something bad [about Russia] on TV, my mom would say, Russians are patient, we sit and we wait… we do not protest." She explained to me that, many Russians think "it will be like it was in the 90's… when those people took power… they see the protesters and think, 'no you'll spoil everything!'" However, she went on to say, "but before there wasn't a platform for these people to organize on… now they can talk and agree that they are against certain things… then they can go to the protests." Although she did identify this potential, Natalia chose not to get involved in politics and even partially agreed with her mom's assessment that protesting defied her 'Russianness'. She described herself as apolitical and preferred to focus on more utilitarian issues in her life like financial well-being and success in her profession.

Such condemnation of protest is common. Natalia's answer offers a few possibilities as to why this is the case. Perhaps the most likely explanation relates to past experiences of rapid societal change. Natalia referred to the "90s… when 'those' people took power," a nod to the economic failures of the Yeltsin period and rapid attempts to privatize the economy known as "shock therapy". This transition, largely seen as mismanaged and unsuccessful, left many Russians in a desperate situation which they saw as "the darkest nightmare in living history" (Trudolyubov 2014). As Verdery put it, this turbulent and rushed transition which took place at nearly all levels of life was a time of "too much shock, too little therapy" (1996, 10). If there is one uniting belief in modern

Russia it is a dislike of Yeltsin and a desire never to return to the economic and general societal failures of the 90s. This experience, according to Natalia's answer, is still influencing the way the Russians, even young adults, view protest. Thus, even though the networked public sphere may offer a space for increased organization of those opposed to the Kremlin's policies, the experiences of the past limits their perceptions of the efficacy of protest.

While largely avoiding protest, many collaborators stated that they knew of examples of the government being held accountable for specific grievances. They pointed out that, while any major change seemed impossible, it was possible to garner support for specific, targeted issues. Svetlana said, "if we talk to people about these problems and coordinate their efforts… if someone writes about a problem and sends it to someone who can solve it then yes, social media can help… but there will not be some kind of drastic change."

Ksenia pointed to the recent imprisonment of a Russian investigative journalist working for Meduza as a concrete issue that was unifying people (Novaya Gazeta 2019). She said, "people do unite for some things to create change… like everyone knows that Golunov is innocent… now we see a lot of stuff about him on social media." This case did indeed garner widespread support for Ivan Golunov, who was later released after a Moscow police officer admitted to planting drugs in his apartment (BBC 2019).

2019 protests

The final section of my interviews was a response to largely unexpected protests, which allowed for a more targeted approach to how my collaborators perceived specific politically-charged events through social media. In the summer of 2019, the run up to the

quintennial Moscow City Duma elections became mired in controversy. Several opposition candidates, despite having gained enough signatures to be on the ballot, were denied entry by the city election commission on the grounds that the signatures were fraudulent. These claims were largely refuted by the Moscow public, resulting in large-scale protests. I asked a handful of questions to understand how my collaborators viewed these protests. Specifically, I asked if they had any acquaintances who posted information about the protests, how they had received information about the protests, and if they had seen information on social media that had changed their opinions about the protests. We then discussed their views on political opposition members such as Alexei Navalny and Lyubov Sobol'. This section was undoubtedly the most productive in terms of the interplay between social media and politics. Namely, answers seemed to uncover limits to the use of social media for garnering widespread support due to entrenched suspicions of politicians and those who seek political power.

When I taught in Moscow I often worked with middle managers with high proficiency in English. Our lessons were as much language maintenance as language learning. We often set aside the recommended textbooks in favor of discussing articles from sources such as the Economist, the New Yorker, and the Atlantic. It was exciting for both me and my students, as we could exchange often diverging views on pertinent topics. One student, a business manager at the Moscow headquarters for a European coffee company, whom we will call Stanislav (Slava for short), stands out to me from this time, as he always had such grounded and practical insights.

It was spring of 2018 and Telegram had just been banned by the government. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov justified this ban to the public because the

application, due to its end-to-end encryption of messages, was used by a terrorist group to bomb the Saint Petersburg metro that year. The government, they argued, was unable to prevent the bombing because they could not gain access to the messages.

I was curious what Slava's thoughts were on the matter, so I asked during one of our lessons. He told me that yes, he disagreed with the ban, but that he thought, in actuality, the CEO of Telegram, Pavel Durov, was working with the Kremlin. He explained that since the ban, the popularity of the application had soared and that, in his opinion, it was a clever bit of PR work. Now, I have my doubts about whether or not this is true, but it nonetheless provides an example of patterns of mistrust which I encountered while living in Russia. My friend Aleksei said he thinks that since this time Durov has worked out an agreement with the Kremlin to provide encryption keys so that messages can be deciphered and read by the federal government. These conspiratorial accounts point to a key issue in Russian society: lack of trust and suspicion of those in power.

When I was living in Moscow, I continually heard the phrase, "oh, it's politics, Kyle, you understand?" (note that *politika* is the Russian word for both politics and policy). The general feeling that I had when moving back to America was that many Russians are apolitical. Instead they feel it is more productive to focus on utilitarian issues, to concentrate on that which is within one's control. Based on the results from my interviews, it seems that this predisposition to suspicion of those either in or seeking political office manifests as either apathy to or disillusionment with politics and political movements. This is a critical cultural insight when discussing the public sphere, as it shows that while Russians do interact with political information online, it is usually not

done so with the intention of trying to influence the political system in some way. Instead, staying informed about current events is more a matter of "personal utility."[23]

Although all of my collaborators, with the exception of Sofia, noted that they first heard about the protests on social media, none indicated that their opinions of prominent opposition members had been changed by information from social media. Rather, they view protest as a recurring trend, a continual battle between the oppositionists and those in power. A recurring answer to this question is best summarized by Aidar, who said, "I kind of knew the opinions they have and so I am not interested when some kind of 'Navalny' goes on social media and says something that he has been saying for the past ten years." From my findings and general experience in Russia, Navalny's opposition platform is already well known among young adults in Russia, so these aspiring politicians backing a new wave of protests was nothing new. The protests were something of a background noise for my interlocutors, a recurrent part of their lives that may make headlines for a few weeks, may shut down a few city blocks for a while, but that would then fade without the materialization of any substantial change.

This feeling of detachment from the protests is best exemplified by an answer from Sofia, who is quite career-oriented and spends a lot of time on the computer and social media for work. When she gets home she just wants to occupy her time with other activities and to disconnect from social media. Her first knowledge of the protests came when she was on a walk with her boyfriend. She recalled seeing a large crowd of people running on the historic Sukharevskaia street. At first she thought, "oh look there is a

[23] This finding largely reflects those of Ellen Mickiewicz's work on TV news and viewership in the Russian Federation. Through a collection of focus groups in different cities in Russia she found that news is "for personal utility – to be better prepared for unexpected changes in the political and economic environment" (Mickiewicz 2008, 22).

running event… and the police are with them to clear the way, but shortly after I saw OMON beating a young man and realized something wasn't right." The way she recalled this was quite casual. It didn't seem to have made an impression on her, but was rather just another thing happening in the city that day.

Another trend adds depth to this point of view and suggests an overall pessimism in regard to those who seek political power. I asked specifically how my collaborators viewed opposition politicians who were attempting to run for city council. Many reported a distrust in those who seek political office. This lack of trust is one of the biggest roadblocks in the networked public sphere, as it seems that often my collaborators were willing to support ideals more than actual people trying to influence politics. While many reported being sympathetic to the causes supported by protesters, they stopped short of supporting oppositionists.

For Aleksei, it did not matter if the oppositionists claimed they were trying to change Russia for the better. To him, "almost any politician trying to get power is working for themselves." Although many of my collaborators have identified that they avoid Kremlin-backed news sources in favor of alternative online sources, it seems that once people seek political office, they cross the line from 'disinterested' provider of information, to self-interested politician. This sentiment was echoed a handful of times with Svetlana saying, "I think that most of them are there for money or status." Nikolai also reported that he did not support the protests due to a lack of faith in the motives of the leadership, however his reason was slightly different. He said that he does not know who exactly is "standing behind these protests" and that he "doesn't want to be a man who fights for another man's interests because he doesn't know what these interests are."

This lack of trust has deep historical roots. In Bukovskii's 1981 *Letters From a Russian Traveler* he writes, "we know that they [the Soviet government] always want to deceive us, and because of this we seek deception in everything" (1981, 43). More recently, with the fall of the Soviet Union, Nancy Ries points to the undoing of numerous societal myths put forth by the Communist Party. She explains that the fall of the Soviet Union made two paradoxes apparent to Russians – "the first was the paradox of the Soviet state and its massive internal contradictions; the second… was the paradox of perestroika and all [its] unintended consequences and disappointments" (169). During perestroika, information previously unavailable to the public such as were suddenly open to critique and become a dominant the discourse in the media. According to Ries, "the broad airing of these truths became a dominant mode of public discourse" which "reinforced social cleavages, deepened political apathy, and intensified a sense of despair and futility" (1996, 166-168).

Such feelings of political apathy and mistrust have continued and go deeper than public discourse. This is demonstrated by Caroline Humphrey's accounts of the Russian Mafia and widespread use of personal protection rackets (2002, 100). She details preference for personal protection rackets from the mafia in the 90's over reliance on the powers of enforcement of the comparatively weak Russian state. In this sense, a rejection of state services was a rational choice simply because such rackets were "more efficient than the state" (2002, 100). Though the influence of the mafia has declined in recent years, this rejection of the use of the state as means of personal protection is demonstrative of the lack of trust Russians have in their state institutions.

However, not all reported complete distrust of those seeking political power. Maksim and Ksenia both supported the motives of oppositionists such as Navalny and Sobol'. To Maksim, these people are martyrs who risk their personal safety to try and change something in Russia. He noted that, "they have a lot of courage… they are crazy… you risk everything when you do this." He believes that they are heroes standing for an idealistic cause, but pointed out that he doubted they would change anything in the country. Ksenia was the most politically active of any of my collaborators and was the only one who purposefully went to protests. She noted that she had been inspired by the level of organization of the Hong Kong protesters, which she had seen on the YouTube channel Satire without Positive (*Satir Bez Positiva*). She felt that YouTube channels such as this had helped her to figure out what was actually going on in the city and to see how protesters had been mistreated by OMON, the Moscow riot police.

They Can Turn it Off

The final note I would like to make about the protests comes from my experience in Moscow. It reveals an additional limitation of the networked public sphere, or, rather, the dangers of relying on social media as a force for organization and communication. I had been in the city for a few weeks and one of my friends asked me to accompany him for a small gig in a stylized simulacrum of an early 1920's American speak-easy. I play some guitar and was familiar with his songs, so agreed. However, I ended up being about an hour late because my phone suddenly lost connection to the data network. No internet, no phone calls, just a glorified iPod touch. What could it be? My pre-paid balance was full, the battery was full, I frantically turned the phone on and off, but it still wouldn't

connect. I couldn't connect to my maps application to find were the gig was located. I tried asking a few people if they knew where the place was, but no one was familiar. Using my phone was the only way I could find the place.

While rushing around what I thought was the general location of the bar, popping in and out of corridors and courtyards (*podezdy*), I started to notice the growing numbers of policemen on nearly every corner. It was suddenly clear what was happening. The government had shut off cellular data in a part of the city where there was a planned protest. This suspicion was confirmed both by Nikolai during our interview and later by several media reports. I, in my own small way, experienced a crucial choke point of the normalization of the internet as means for organizing protest (or, in my case, something rather common like finding a pub). That's the irony -- all over the world we are getting used to the convenience of telecommunications, but they can be switched off deliberately.

V. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to show aspects of everyday use of social media and the internet and how the networked public sphere is influenced by key cultural and historical themes in Russia. My collaborators' daily use is utilitarian and based upon maintaining existing social connections, while also occasionally checking in with either Russian friends who have moved abroad, or international friends. Though access to the internet is widespread and these Muscovites interact with a diverse array of media sources for news political information, its use as an alternative public sphere is constrained by a number of factors.

Exploring one of the central aspects of the networked public sphere, the potential for peer to peer interaction, I have found that such dialogic exchange is generally limited to already existing friend groups. By asking about my collaborators' use of comments sections to facilitate political discussions, I determined that arguing with strangers online is seen as mostly unproductive and rarely, if ever, resulted in coming to a shared agreement. Rather, such exchanges usually devolved into name-calling or personal attacks unrelated to the original topic of discussion. There was some fear of government surveillance and 'trolling' of comments sections, however this was not a central concern for most of my collaborators.

Regarding Kremlin-backed media, my findings indicate that young adults in Moscow have turned away from traditional media, preferring online sources such as bloggers and news aggregators. This pivot to online news has allowed them a relatively diverse media repertoire. Despite this change and the largely unrestricted nature of the Russian internet, there was evidence that it is difficult for my interlocutors to locate trustworthy sources. This was evidenced by their reluctance, or perhaps inability, to

identify which specific sources they find reliable. When they do rely on the internet for their news, it allows them greater access to political opinions, but information encountered online is treated with caution. In this sense, the internet is not a place in which they feel they can uncover some undisputed truth. Instead it is a space they feel they must navigate with some skepticism, often feeling the need to verify information if possible. However, this ability to verify information is constrained by the sheer amount of information present online as well as their busy schedules.

Journalism is generally not viewed as a 'fourth estate' as it often is in the West, mediating between the interests of the state, corporate interests, and the public. Rather, the media is viewed more as a political player which is constrained by structural limitations. These limitations were identified in both the corporate, profit-driven nature of the media, as well as constraints in the form of censorship from the federal government. Additionally, professional journalists are often regarded with some suspicion, with my collaborators often saying that they feel journalists self-censor or simply publish stories which garner the most views.

Regarding American media sources, three of my collaborator's explained that they feel liberal bias is imbedded in the American social media platforms they use. This view seems to be shaped by both domestic news stories, American conservative politicians they follow, and independent journalists and academics who frame certain social-justice causes, such as transgender rights and feminism, as an attack on masculinity and free speech. However, I note that this view is not shared by all of my collaborators. In my follow-up interview with Aleksei, he completely disagreed with the contention that liberal bias exists in American social media.

Finally, I pointed out that the upheaval of the 1990s has led to the breakdown of societal trust in governmental institutions. Such a breakdown in trust impacts collaborators' view of protest and politicians. This makes it less likely for them to organize or take part in protests, despite the possibility of being able to organize online. Further, the failure of the promises of both communism and capitalism makes them suspicious and doubtful of the possibility of substantial societal change. Instead, they feel that it is more productive to focus on utilitarian issues that are within their control.

At first glance parts of this account may seem bleak. There are tendencies to be suspicious of many different actors and sources of information. These young adults are quite critical of government sources, yet they hesitate to support Russian opposition sources, and a few doubts the openness of American social media sources. They often turn inward and become apolitical, or in some cases turn to conspiracy theories. They are hesitant to take political action and can be suspicious of politicians or opposition members who do try and change the status quo. Because of these themes, one may walk away from this manuscript with doubts regarding the democratizing potential of the networked public sphere in Russia. This would be partially correct, however, in closing there are a few matters which may assuage such doubts.

My sample may be unrepresentative of the entirety of young adults in Moscow. From a methodological standpoint, my sample consisted mainly of young professionals. The conclusions from a sample focusing on a different sector of Moscow society, such as an activist group, would likely be completely different. These young adults, often having moved to Moscow from provincial towns, have worked hard and found early success in

competitive business environments. Perhaps this career-oriented mindset frames their use of the networked public sphere, making it more utilitarian and apolitical.

I also want to point out that my collaborators show undercurrents of curiosity, open-mindedness, and an admirable commitment to self-improvement. There is a feeling that they are looking to the future. While this is evident in terms of their career ambitions, there is also a keen commitment to expanding their understanding of the world. Much of this learning takes place online and would not be as accessible without this space. They are asking questions about their political situation and actively trying to make sense of it, even if this does at times result in spurious or even conspiratorial conclusions. Although the political situation in the country is difficult, I would not say that my interlocutors feel hopeless or completely resigned to their current reality. Their curiosity is expressed by a desire for a diversity of opinions in their news and political information. Though this does, as mentioned, manifest as a weariness of "political correctness" which they associate with censorship, it is equally born of a desire for open and unrestricted dialogue about societal issues.

My final point is that perhaps aspects of their recent past have prepared them for this current "social media" moment. As discussed, the Russian press, rather than working for the interests of the public, has represented the interests of ideological or private gain in support of a particular political candidate or businessperson. This history of misinformation has prepared them for some of the challenges now facing the world in the age of social media. Their experiences may be, to use the Russian idiom, a bit of a 'two sided stick'. This leads at times to cynicism and detachment from political life, but it also leads to an acute awareness of the structural constraints of the mass media and even

social media. One of my key informants, Aleksei even expressed interest in looking at more non-profit media sources in order to eschew such constraints. An often repeated phrase during my interviews was “you always need to verify” (*vezde nado proveriat*). My collaborators are, perhaps, more aware of these constraints than average Americans, many of whom still digest partisan media with little skepticism. Of any criticism that could be leveled at these Russians, they could certainly not be called naïve.

APPENDIX: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

English Version

Section 1: Written Answers

1.1 Demographics

Age	Gender	length of Residence in Moscow	Place of Birth	Occupation	Highest Level of Education

1.2 Determining Sources of Information

- Indicate how much time you spend consuming news daily.

- Choose from the categories below to indicate where you get your news. Write the answer as a percentage of total time spent consuming news over the course of a day.
    - Internet
    - Broadcast Television
    - Friends, acquaintances, and relatives
    - Newspapers
    - Books

1.3 Preference of Social Media Sites

- Indicate how much time you spend on social media daily.

- Of your total daily time spent on social media, indicate which percentage of your time you spend on each site.
    - VK
    - Instagram
    - Facebook
    - Odnoklassniki
    - YouTube
    - Telegram
    - Viber
    - WhatsApp
    - Twitter
    - Other

Section 2: "Grand Tour" of Participant's Mobile Device.

- General understanding of how they are using the internet (or more precisely – mobile internet):
    - Why don't you show me how you use your phone. I am interested in all your favorite applications and why you like them. Tell me about the applications you use the most.
- What types of social media Russian youth prefer and how they use these technologies;
    - What about social media sites? Which of those do you use the most? Why do you use the one's that you do?
    - Can you show me how you use these applications? Which groups or channels do you follow? Which are your favorites right now?

Section 3: Determining Cultural Perspectives of Social Media (neutral questions designed to allow participants to answer according to their own personal use of social media, not according to implicit bias introduced from specific questions).

- How do you define social media?
- In your opinion, how is social media different from other/traditional media?
- What do you spend most of your time doing on social media?
- Do you use social media to organize social events? How?
- Do you have friends who use social media to organize social events?
- What is your favorite social media site? Why?
- Do you use social media when you want to find out more about subjects that interest you?
- Is social media an important part of your life? Why or why not?

Section 4: On use of social media for civic engagement

- Do you use social media to find out more about your city?
- Do you use social media to find out about local events?
- Do you take part in discussions about important events online? Why or why not? Can you think of any examples?
- Do you think that discussions about important events online are valuable?
- What do you think of *gorodskoi pablic* pages on VK? Why do people use them?
- Do you ever read comments sections under posts to see what varieties of opinions exist about such topics?
- Do you often post, comment, or share things on social media?
- Which types of posts, if any, do you interact with or are you most likely to interact with?

Section 5: Insight into how young adults are experiencing and thinking about use of and social media technologies

- How do you feel that social media is impacting the world?
- Has it changed the way you interact with information?

5.1 If/why social media are or are not a meaningful part of their lives

- Do you feel that social media is helpful to you? Would your life be greatly impacted without social media? Why is it important/not important?
- Do you think that these technologies are having an impact on Russian society?

5.2 Discrepancies between information received via social media and that received via broadcast television (how to they reconcile different media narratives)

- Let's talk about a little bit different subject now, if that's alright. Do you watch traditional or 'broadcast' media? Which channels?
- Which programs on these channels? Do you watch news programs on broadcast media? Which ones? Do you feel that these programs are trustworthy?

5.3 How they are influenced by narratives which contradict those on state-aligned media

- What about news from alternative sources, from online? Which sources do you use? Do you feel that these are trustworthy?
- Do you feel that journalists in general are trustworthy?
- Is it a journalist's job to provide the truth? Do they usually do this?
- What about citizens who aren't necessarily journalists, but who talk about their experiences online? Is this a trustworthy way to get information?
- What do you think about these types of stories, published by non-journalists, that 'go viral' online?
- Do you have any acquaintances who have posted about their experiences at the recent protests? What do you make of their experience there?

5.4 Whether or not youth see social media as a source for community-building and forming mutually shared views of the world

- Do you think that social media is used to bring people together in Moscow and to build community? If so, in which ways?
- Do you feel that your opinions are changed by posts, news articles, or other such information encountered on social media?
- What types of posts, if any, are you most likely to share or comment on?
- Do you ever engage in debates on social media? Have these resulted in coming to a common agreement about the subject at hand?
- How do you feel about debates on social media?
- Has information taken from social media or from these debates lead you to change some aspect of your life? If yes, which aspects? If yes/no, why do you feel this way?

5.5 Whether or not social media is perceived as a tool for reform, civic action, and valuable information or rather as a form of apolitical socialization:

- Do you think that social media has the ability to change people's opinions by sharing information that they would otherwise not have access to?
- Do you think that it there is the possibility to enact positive change in Russia by using social media technologies? If yes/no then why? Do you know of any examples of this happening?

Section 6: Questions about the recent protests in Moscow (summer 2019 about city council elections and who can register as a candidate):

- How do you get information about these protests?
- Have you been going to any of these protests?
- Has seeing posts on social media changed your perception of those involved with the protests (for example, protesters or protest leaders)?
-

6.1 Understanding if protest leaders (the opposition in Russian politics – eg. Those aligned with Alexei Navalny such as Lubov Sobol') have gained social capital through social media

- From what you have seen on social media, how do you feel about those trying to run for city council? Are they working for the greater good in Russia? Why do you feel this way about them?
- Has the information you have seen from them online made you become more sympathetic with their cause? Or maybe less sympathetic?

Section 7: Catch-all questions:

- Is there anything else you would like to add to the subjects we have discussed, or anything we may have missed?
- Or there any other issues or points that may have been excluded from this interview?

Conclusion and follow-up:

- Would it be alright if I sent you some of my conclusions and analysis from this interview so you can review them? It is often very helpful for the researcher to work with participants during the analysis stage of the study.
- Thank you again for your time. I appreciate you agreeing to be part of this study and hope it was an enjoyable journey of self-reflection for you.

Russian Version

<u>Раздел 1: Письменные ответы:</u>

1.1 Демографические детали

Возраст	Пол	Сколько вы живете в Москве?	Место рождения	Профессия	Уровень образования

1.2 Определить откуда происходит информация

- Указать сколько времени каждый день вы проводите читая или смотря новости

- Выберите из представленных ниже категорий, что бы узнать откуда вы получаете новости. Напишите ваши ответы в процентном соотношении всего времени, которое вы тратите на новости в день.
    - Интернет
    - Телевидение
    - Друзья, знакомые или родственники
    - Газеты
    - Книги

1.3 Предпочтительные социальные сети

- Укажите сколько времени в день вы проводите в соц. сетях.

- Укажите в процентном соотношении сколько времени в день вы тратите на каждый из этих сайтов
    - ВКонтакте
    - Instagram
    - Facebook
    - Одноклассники
    - YouTube
    - Телеграм
    - Viber
    - Twitter
    - Whatsapp
    - Другие (Укажите другие _____)

Раздел 2: “Большой тур” в мобильные телефон участника.

- General understanding of how they are using the internet (or more precisely – mobile internet):
    - Почему бы вам не показать мне как вы используете свой телефон. Мне интересно узнать о ваших любимых приложениях и почему они

вам нравятся. Расскажите о приложениях, которые вы используете чаще всего.

- Какие социальные сети молодые люди в России предпочитают, и как они используют эти технологии;
    - Что насчет социальные сетей? Какие из них вы используете чаще всего? Почему вы их предпочитаете?
    - Сможете ли вы показать мне, как вы используете эти приложения? На какие группы или каналы вы подписаны? Какие ваши любимые из них сейчас?

Раздел 3: Determining Cultural Perspectives of Social Media (neutral questions designed to allow participants to answer according to their own personal use of social media, not according to implicit bias introduced from specific questions).

- Что для вас значат социальные сети?
- По вашему мнению, как социальные сети отличаются от других/традиционные медиа?
- На что ты тратишь больше всего времени в социальных сетях?
- Используете ли вы социальные сети для создание мероприятий? Как?
- Есть ли у вас друзья, которые используют социальные сети для создания мероприятий?
- Какая у вас любимая социальная сеть и почему?
- Используете ли вы социальные сети, когда хотите узнать больше о вещах которые вас интересуют?
- Социальные сети занимают большую часть вашей жизни? Почему да или нет?

Раздел 4: On use of social media for civic engagement (More specific, but still relatively vague):

- Используете ли вы социальные сети, для того что бы узнать большой про свой город?
- Используете ли вы социальные сети, что бы узнать о местных мероприятиях?
- Принимаете ли вы участие в онлайн обсуждениях важных мероприятий? Почему да или нет?
- Считаете ли вы что онлайн обсуждения важных мероприятий полезно?
- Что вы думаете о городских группах во ВКонтакте? Почему люди их используют?
- Вы когда-нибудь читаете комментарии под постами, что бы узнать что думают люди?
- Как часто вы выкладываете посты, оставляете комментарии или делитесь ссылками в социальных сетях ?
- На какие посты вы, в большинстве случаев, готовы оставить комментарий или поделиться?

Раздел 5: Insight into how young adults are experiencing and thinking about use of and social media technologies:

- Как по вашему мнению социальные сети оказывают влияние на мир?
- Поменяли ли они то, как вы взаимодействуете с информацией?
- Have they changed the way you interact with information?

5.1 If/why social media are or are not a meaningful part of their lives;

- Считаете ли вы, что социальные ети помогают вам? Была бы ваше жизнь другой без социальных сетей? Почему это так важно или не важно для вас?
- Как вы думаете влияют ли эти технологии на общество в России?

5.2 Discrepancies between information received via social media and that received via broadcast television (how to they reconcile different media narratives):

- Не против ли вы, сейчас поговорить немного на другую тему? Смотрите ли вы традиционные или стандартные телевизионные каналы? Назовите эти каналы?
- Какие программы на этих каналах вы смотрите? Вы смотрите новости по телевизору? Какие? Можете ли вы доверять этим программам?

5.3 How they are influenced by narratives which contradict those on state-aligned media:

- Что насчет новостей из альтернативных источников или онлайн? Какими из них вы пользуетесь? Вы чувствуете что им можно доверять?
- Как вы считаете, можно ли доверять журналистам?
- Вы считаете, что работа журналиста заключается в том чтобы предоставлять правдивую информацию? Они обычно поступают так?
- Что насчет, простых граждан, которые не обязательно являются журналистами, но выражающие свои мысли онлайн? Стоит ли доверять полученной ими информации?
- Что вы думаете о таких историях, опубликованных не журналистами и ставшими вирусными в интернете?
- Есть ли у вас знакомые, которые написали посты об их опыте на прошедших недавно в Москве митингах? Что вы думаете об этом?

5.4 Whether or not youth see social media as a source for civic engagement (whether things seen on social media will lead to actual action).

- Вы считаете, что социальные сети направлены на сближение людей в Москве и на построение сообщества? Если да, то каким образом?
- Вы считаете, что ваше мнение может изменится в связи с постами, новыми статьями или другой найденной информацией в социальных сетях?
- Какими типами постов вы скорее всего поделитесь или оставите комментарий?
- Вы когда–нибудь участвовали в обсуждениях в социальных сетях? Привели ли они к общему соглашению?
- Как ты чувствуешь об этих обсуждениях в социальных сетях?

- Могла ли информация взятая из соц. сетей или из этих обсуждений привести к изменениям аспектов вашей жизни. Если да, то каким аспектам? Почему вы так считаете?

5.5 Whether or not social media is perceived as a tool for reform, civic action, and valuable information or rather as a form of apolitical socialization:

- Считаете ли вы, что социальные сети способны изменять мнение людей, обмениваясь информацией, к которой у них иначе не было бы доступа?
- Считаете ли вы, что существует возможность добиться позитивных изменений в России с помощью технологий социальных сетей? Если да / нет, то почему? Вы знаете какие-нибудь примеры этого?

Раздел 6: Questions about the recent protests in Moscow (summer 2019 about city council elections and who can register as a candidate):

- Как вы получаете информацию об этих протестах?
- Ходили ли вы на какие-либо из этих акций протеста?
- Изменили ли посты в социальных сетях ваше восприятие тех, кто участвует в акциях протеста (например, протестующие или лидеры протеста)?

6.1 Understanding if protest leaders (the opposition in Russian politics – eg. Those aligned with Alexei Navalniy such as Lubov Sobol') have gained social capital through social media

- Из того, что вы видели в социальных сетях, как вы относитесь к тем, кто пытается баллотироваться в городской совет? Они работают на благо России? Почему вы так относитесь к ним?
- Заставила ли информация, которую вы узнали от них в Интернете, стать более отзывчивой к их делу? Или может быть менее сочувствующим?

Раздел 7: Catch-all questions:

- Есть ли что-то еще, что вы хотели бы добавить к темам, которые мы обсуждали или что-то что мы, возможно, пропустили?
- Или есть какие-либо другие вопросы или моменты, которые могли быть исключены из этого интервью?

Conclusion and follow-up:

- Не против ли вы, если я отправлю вам некоторые свои выводы и анализ из этого интервью, чтобы вы могли их просмотреть? Исследователю часто очень полезно работать с участниками на этапе анализа исследования.
- Еще раз спасибо за ваше время. Я благодарен вам за то, что вы согласились принять участие в этом исследовании, и надеюсь, что это было приятное путешествие для само рефлексии.

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