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Bodrunova, Svetlana S.; Koltsova, Olessia

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Editorial

Public Discussion in Russian Social Media: An Introduction

Olessia Koltsova [1,]* and Svetlana S. Bodrunova [2]

[1] Laboratory for Internet Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics, 192148 St. Petersburg, Russia; E-Mail: ekoltsova@hse.ru
[2] School of Journalism and Mass Communications, St. Petersburg State University, 199004 St. Petersburg, Russia; E-Mail: s.bodrunova@spbu.ru

* Corresponding author

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Abstract
Russian media have recently (re-)gained attention of the scholarly community, mostly due to the rise of cyber-attacking techniques and computational propaganda efforts. A revived conceptualization of the Russian media as a uniform system driven by a well-coordinated propagandistic state effort, though having evidence thereunder, does not allow seeing the public discussion inside Russia as a more diverse and multifaceted process. This is especially true for the Russian-language mediated discussions online, which, in the recent years, have proven to be efficient enough in raising both social issues and waves of political protest, including on-street spillovers. While, in the recent years, several attempts have been made to demonstrate the complexity of the Russian media system at large, the content and structures of the Russian-language online discussions remain seriously understudied. The thematic issue draws attention to various aspects of online public discussions in Runet; it creates a perspective in studying Russian mediated communication at the level of Internet users. The articles are selected in the way that they not only contribute to the systemic knowledge on the Russian media but also add to the respective subdomains of media research, including the studies on social problem construction, news values, political polarization, and affect in communication.

Keywords
public discussion; Runet; Russia; Russian media; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

Russian media, and in particular their online segment, have recently been (re-)instated as a focus of attention of communication scholars and computer scientists (Howard, Kollanyi, Bradshaw, & Neudert, 2017; Sanovich, 2017). This was a result of several scandals around the spread of various cyber-attacking techniques, such as email hacking, attacks of social media bots, and spread of allegedly pre-paid electoral advertisements. These techniques, in turn, have been repeatedly reported to have been used for meddling into the US elections and generalized by the term 'computational propaganda'. Computational propaganda can be defined as 'the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion' (Woolley & Howard, 2016, p. 4886).

Conceptualizing the Soviet (Communist), and later the Russian media in terms of them acting as a uniform system driven by a well-coordinated propagandistic state effort has been a long research tradition ever since the early post-war period (Lasswell, 1951). Although the ecosystem of the Soviet and later Russian media has always been richer than that, it is this propagandistic aspect that has been most visible for the international community, including the academe. A major reason for this is that propaganda may have—and sometimes does have—direct political effects on the international, particularly Western arena, while other aspects of the Russian media system are less influential and, therefore, less interesting.

The purpose of this thematic issue is to go beyond the 'computational propaganda' studies and to draw attention to a relatively narrow but important aspect of the contemporary Russian media system—namely, to the forms and content of discussions carried out by its audience, or users. In the last decade, several scholarly attempts have been made to show the complexities of the Russian media scene (Kiriya, 2019; Nigmatullina & Bodrunova, 2018; Toepfl, 2011), including the online media (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016; Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015), but no sustainable effort has been done to examine the nature of the Russian online public discussions.

Propaganda-centered vision of a media system that dates back to the times when the media in general were much more unidirectional, does not leave any space for channeling social feedback—either in media practice or in academic theorizing. Additionally, Soviet audiences stayed under-researched due to their unavailability for Western scholars and local restrictions on methodologies and interpretations. Thus, there is hardly any solid knowledge of how public discussions developed in the Soviet countries at the interpersonal level and how mass self-communication (Castells, 2007) via early Internet means affected public agendas in the Russia of the 1990s.

However, as new communication technologies have changed the global media system, user-generated content (UGC) in non-oral forms has not only found a place in nearly all societies but has already transcended its role of feedback. That is, it has become not only reactive but also pro-active, and has developed into a type of media content per se. This content has become an integral part of political life far beyond classical democratic societies. UGC blends together social phenomena that were previously distinct: professional journalism, direct political communication, amateur self-expression, inter-personal communication, and public opinion—in the latter case, hidden previously and now largely publicly available. It has also become a mass mobilization tool distinct from the previously known logics of organizations and movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Diani, 2000).

Russia has not only absorbed all these new developments in media; it has participated in their formation and has experienced a development of a vivid and, in a way, unique Internet-based media system. Russia is, arguably, the only country where national Internet companies have been more successful than their global competitors nearly in all spheres of Internet business, including search engines, mailing services, and social media. Unlike in China, where the closed Internet ecosystem owes most of its success to the policy of technical, political, and economic isolation known as the Great Chinese Firewall, Russian Internet industry has until recently developed without any protectionist barriers. The new, more protective policies are no more than a few years old. At the same time, Russia is not isolated from the rest of the world—in fact, it is more connected to the world than any time in its history but in its own specific way.

Russian social media are dominated by the Russian network VK.com (former VKontakte) that is far ahead of all its competitors, especially in terms of activity, but also in the absolute number of users. Facebook in Russia is a niche network; however, it is preferred by politically active citizens, especially by those with oppositional views (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016; for suggestive evidence, see Enikolopov, Makarin, & Petrova, 2018). But if the politically relevant divisions between social media platforms in Russia have at least gained some scholarly attention, the social representation, various aspects of digital divide, and non-political issue-oriented discussions are virtually absent from the view of academics.

Today, it is evident that the presence of foreign social networks in the Russian media landscape, as well as Russian-speaking video bloggers, has started to cast impact upon the state-owned and commercial 'traditional' media. The latter, rapidly losing young urban audience, have to adapt their content and style to this audience and to their views, to make the TV and newspaper content at least noticed. Likewise, Russian media aimed at foreign audiences, such as Russia Today (RT), customize their style of both news and opinion sections according to their vision of international standards *and* to the social-networking viral styles.

All these diverse types of media, including state-run, maintain their accounts in social networks and permit some form of comment sections there, or even host them on their websites (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018), thus becoming actors of the online deliberation. Unlike China, Russia has shown no evidence of developing a large-scale centralized censorship system involved in mass deletion of user messages (which is useless, given the availability of foreign social networks), although it has already introduced a limited blocking of international (LinkedIn) and Russian-language (Telegram) networking platforms. At the same time, Russia is known for a well-developed system of mass 'pseudo-user' content production. Combined with the activity of real users, this creates a specific form of non-democratic discussion, similar to authoritarian deliberation introduced by He and Warren (2011). In the Chinese context for which this term has been initially used, it means a set of institutions to articulate people's needs and later incorporate them into decision-making. In Russia, UGC-based discussions per se are mostly used for articulation of conflicting interests but, with growing evidence, also for shaping protest activity, thus changing the view towards Runet as 'the web that failed' (Fossato & Lloyd, 2008).

While, on the one hand, possibilities of inclusion of articulated grievances in Russia are limited, on the other hand, user content generates in a less isolated context than in China. Users from within and from outside Russia can 'cross-comment' on the sources from outside their countries of residence; they can interact, and even if they are divided by language barriers they are aware of each other's agendas through multiple channels. Finally, they can create agendas of their own using independent platforms. Thus, a research focus on UGC and political/social deliberation within it can bring to our attention a number of previously under-researched aspects of the Russian media. Furthermore, an in-depth research on specific discussions can produce results that contribute to a broader media theory beyond both propaganda model and the Russian context.

2. The Thematic Issue

Studies in UGC of the Russian social media are dominated by examining its role in political protest and civil activity (see, e.g., Goncharov & Nechay, 2018). This issue collects articles that address other political aspects of UGC, each with distinct empirical and theoretical focus.

Filatova, Kabanov and Misnikov (2019) directly address the issue of authoritarian deliberation by comparing Russian user messages about food destruction on both pro-government and independent platforms. Food destruction—a measure taken by the Russian government against import of newly banned products—is taken as an example of controversial counter-sanction policy. The authors predictably find out that the proportion of food destruction supporters is much higher among commenters on the pro-government media platforms. This conclusion is in line with earlier findings by Goncharov and Nechay (2018) who find that social media users clearly fall into oppositional and loyalist clusters. Even more interestingly, Filatova et al. (2019) examine the structure and the quality of deliberation on both pro-government and independent platforms, comparing such features as civility and validation. This contributes to the studies of authoritarian deliberation that includes spaces beyond control of the national political elites.

In a similar way, Koltsova & Nagorny (2019) examine reader comments in a space that, in theory, can be fully controlled—that is, comment sections of regional Russian newspapers. But, in fact, these are not controlled. This leaves readers some room to re-define the offered agendas, in particular, by problematizing the issues that were unproblematic for (or were deproblematized by) journalists. Moreover, issues reported as single events get generalized by readers to the level of social problems, sometimes in several competing ways. The authors propose a number of metrics for these phenomena and supplement them with qualitative text analysis. This article contributes to the studies of social problem construction and dynamic public opinion in non-democratic contexts.

Echoing with Koltsova and Nagorny (2019), Judina and Platonov (2019) go beyond showing the uneven distribution of commenting over topics and examine different news features (such as exclusivity, presence of conflict or follow-up character) that influence the volume of likes, comments, and reposts in news. Just like Filatova et al. (2019), they compare pro-government and independent Russian media. But, more importantly, they test the applicability of Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) taxonomy of news values to the Russian context and provide the critical analysis of this taxonomy, thus contributing to the theory of news values.

Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova and Litvinenko (2019), by studying Twitter user discussions on resonant ethnic conflicts, bring Russian social media studies into a comparative context that portraits Russian Twitter discussions against those in Germany and the US. Detailed cross-country comparison of social media content, in fact, rarely includes Russia (for a rare exception, see Filer & Fredheim, 2016). It is this comparative approach that allows the authors to contribute to the studies of political polarization in social media. They show that, first, the studied countries, despite their differences, share the relatively high level of interaction between users with different views, and, second, the divisions in all three cases are not binary. These divisions are driven by national political contexts and transcend the traditional left/right distinction.

Finally, Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019) study the effects of the Russian social media beyond the Russian audiences. Namely, they examine emotional reactions of English-speaking users on Youtube videos about the Syrian war featured by the Russian state channel RT. The topic of this work is in line with the recent interest in the Russian computational propaganda outlined above; however, the authors develop an entirely different focus on this issue. They build their analysis on the concept of affective investment (Solomon, 2014)—roughly, a process by which audiences relate themselves emotionally with political discourses thus allowing those discourses to resonate with their feelings and to exercise soft power. The irony is that Solomon (2014) has developed his concept to explain efficacy of American soft power and illustrated it with the examples from the US official discourse on the war on terror. Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019), however, do not compare Russia and the US explicitly—rather, they offer a universal conceptual framework that can explain, among other things, RT's ability to resonate with human emotions, but is widely applicable beyond RT and Russia.

Overall, in all the studies collected in this thematic issue, the focus on specific empirical problems going beyond the mainstream propaganda reasoning, allows for placing the empirical findings in a wider context and for explaining them by higher-level concepts not related specifically to Russia. This allows each team of authors to contribute to middle-range theories in their respective sub-fields of media and communication research, and those theories—to be enriched by empirical evidence from a non-Western society.

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About the Authors

Olessia Koltsova is the Head of the Laboratory for Internet Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia. Holding a PhD in Sociology, she advocates interdisciplinary problem-focused research based on rigorous analysis of big data. In the recent years, she has extensively published on new media's role for political participation, online communities and the methods of automated text analysis. She is also the author of News Media and Power in Russia (Routledge, 2006).

Svetlana S. Bodrunova is habilitated Doctor of Political Science and Professor at School of Journalism and Mass Communications, St. Petersburg State University, Russia. She has lead six research projects and published two books, several chapters, and over 80 research papers in Russian and English on Russian and European journalism, media and politics, social media, and ethnicity in communication. She leads the Center for International Media Research in her university.