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ANALYSIS

Area Studies Online? Opportunities and Challenges When Researching "Digital Russia" during the War on Ukraine

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of how do we conduct ethically sound research in the context of an increasingly violent regime? One possible solution is digital tools since the Russian part of the internet is generally open and there are fewer data protections than found elsewhere. This situation presents ethical questions that must be addressed. Most importantly, while users may communicate openly and "publicly" online, they might still expect this communication to be kept private. Studying Russia's online space also requires addressing issues of censorship and efforts to manipulate information flows.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has left the field of Russian studies in a state of tremendous shock, prompting broad scholarly discussion about how to carve out a research agenda capable of capturing the new realities (Gel'man, 2022). One strain of this discussion relates to ethics: How do we conduct ethically sound research in the context of an increasingly violent regime, where much research data (along with the institutions and people producing it) emerges from, or contributes to, the regime's oppressive machinery? This question is pressing not least for those of us who rely on anthropological approaches:[1] How do we study human activity when this activity might either be fundamentally distorted or put people at risk of persecution?

Another line of debate is more pragmatic and methodological in nature: How do we *practically* conduct immersive research on a Russia we are no longer able to visit? A practice so central to the production of rich, culturally situated knowledge as classical fieldwork is no longer feasible for most Western scholars. As Putin's Russia cuts political and academic ties with the outside world, previously dominant methodological and analytical frameworks for social research are falling short.

In a context where traditional fieldwork seems inconceivable, qualitative digital methods, notably web-based ethnographies (Caliandro, 2016),[2] are enticing. Various initiatives with a view to creating a Chinese-style "sovereign internet" (Epifanova, 2020; Sivetc, 2021) notwithstanding, the Russian-language Internet, or RuNet, remains a comparatively open and accessible source of rich social data. This fact can be explained by two interconnected factors. First, the Russian digital sphere long slipped under the government's radar. Lack of regulation allowed for the development of a politically and culturally vibrant new media sphere that was significantly freer than Russia's traditional mediascape (Etling, Roberts, & Faris, 2014; Konradova, Schmidt, & Teubener, 2009; Malinovskii, 2013). Second, Russian social network sites (SNS) have historically been characterized by far lower levels of concern with data protection and privacy than their international—notably American—counterparts (Koltsova, Porshnev, & Sinyavskaya, 2021). Thus, the scope, volume, and variety of data available to those studying the Russian segment of the Internet far exceed that which is available to Internet researchers operating in Western contexts.

The apparent ease, efficiency, and endless potential of web-based fieldwork can, however, be deeply deceptive. Through my own study of public debate on the Russian-language Internet, I have found that fieldwork in cyberspace comes with its own set of ethical, theoretical, and methodological challenges—ones no smaller or less significant than those encountered in traditional, site-based fieldwork. In my research, I combine digital ethnographic and discourse-analytical approaches (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Myles, 2020) to make sense of Russian user-driven information influence online, specifically surrounding the topic of neighboring NATO member Norway. Building on the knowledge that internet discourses are inherently dispersed and distributed (Airoldi, 2018), I explore how the story of Norway is told *through* and *by* Russian online networks, with the participation of multiple voices in multiple digital contexts. In my time working within this complex and notoriously elusive fieldsite, I have had several realizations

1 For a more in-depth discussion on the role of ethnographic methods in Russian area studies during times of war, see Morris (2022).

2 While digital ethnography has emerged as "the dominant label" for internet-based interpretive research, qualitative digital methods (QDM) encompass a broad range of qualitatively-oriented approaches to digital settings and/or data (from interviews over Telegram to visual analysis of Instagram posts). QDM can obviously also be combined with quantitative and computational methods. The present discussion nevertheless focuses on qualitative, notably digital ethnographic, approaches to Russian area studies.

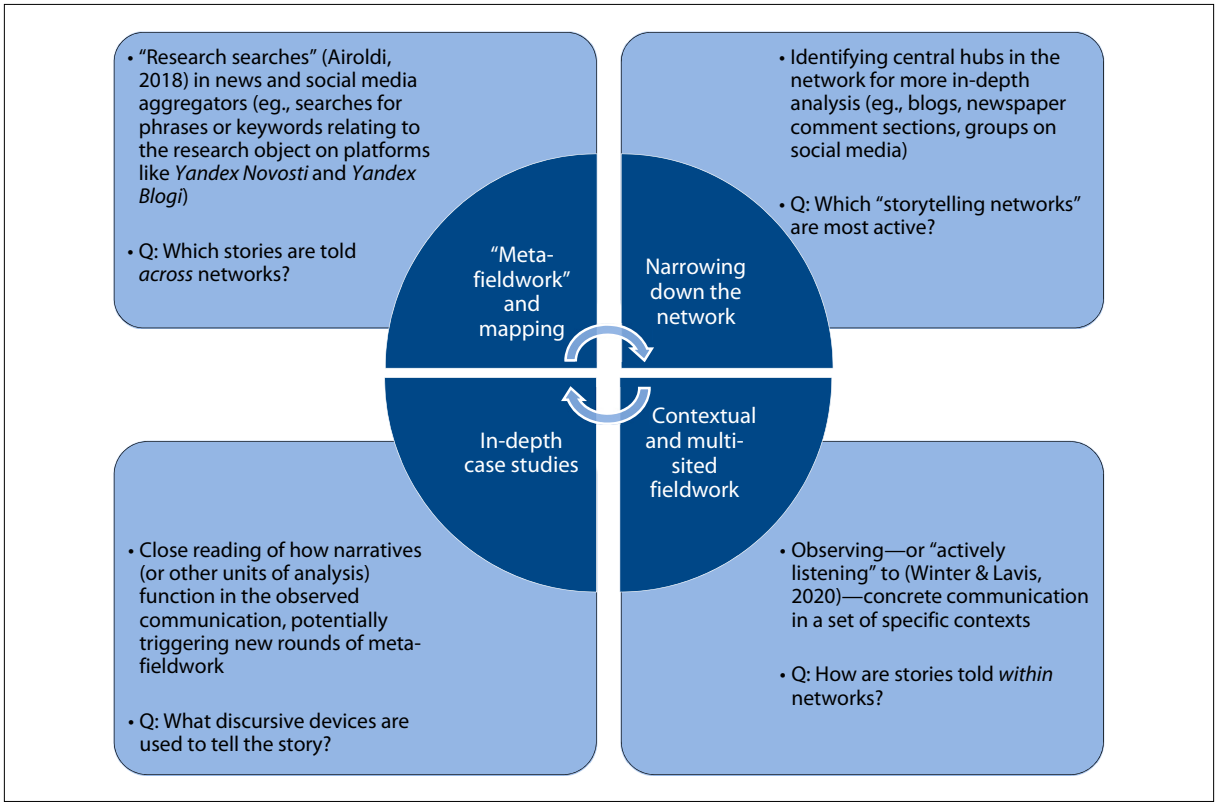
about the possibilities, challenges, and limitations of conducting (qualitatively oriented) *Russian studies online*. For the remainder of this essay, I will sketch out some of these realizations.[3]

Constructing the Field

Social media and the participatory web have fundamentally challenged the notion of a field site. Certainly, the idea that cultures can be studied within a strictly bounded space, as something homogenous and consistent, has proven illusory (Burrell, 2017). The quality of the Internet as "fundamentally and profoundly antispatial" (Mitchell, 1996, p. 8) goes even further in disrupting traditional approaches to fieldwork. While all research sites are, to some degree, constructed, the researcher herself an active participant in the construction of her research objects, this fact becomes infinitely more apparent in online environments. In the words of Annette Markham (2005, p. 259), "the boundaries of the field become more a matter of choice than in physically located spaces." *Choosing* how to demarcate one's field when studying digital culture, which is inherently nondemarcated and networked, is thus a question not only of methodological, but also of ethical considerations.

In constructing my own online research field, the insights of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) have played a crucial role. Centered around "chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations" (Marcus, 1995, p. 105), this ethnography relies on the practice of *following* people, conflicts or stories across settings, with the goal of unpacking complex, contextually contingent cultural phenomena. Building on Marcus' initial work, internet researchers have since demonstrated the possibilities of "networked" (Burrell, 2017) and even "un-sited" (Airoldi, 2018) ethnographies. Through the data collection process, I move between mapping the "meta-fields" of dispersed communicative content aggregated by search engines and social media news feeds, and engaging with the concrete contexts where a specific conversation is taking place (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Example of the Research Process in Discourse-Centered Digital Ethnography When "Following" the Story of Norway on the Russian-Language Internet[4]



3 The scope of this essay does not permit me to discuss at length all possible implications of using qualitative digital methods —specifically digital ethnography— in the field of Russian studies. Rather than a thorough review, the essay should be read as a potential starting point for future scholarly reflection.

4 For a more detailed description of this process when researching the story of Russia's espionage conviction of Norwegian citizen Frode Berg in 2019, see Kalsaas (2021). 9

I have found this mobile, fluid approach especially valuable when rethinking how *propagandistic communication* functions in Russia's new information environment. Frequently conceived of in terms of the Soviet-era media monolith, where influence efforts were controlled and orchestrated from above, my findings instead point toward a far more decentralized, networked, and participatory practice (see also Asmolov, 2019). This contribution to knowledge relied on moving *with* the dynamics of online communication, adapting to the affordances of the Internet (just like users themselves do) beyond the demarcated field site—not just *following the story*, in Marcus' (1995) terms, but also *following the medium* itself (Rogers, 2013). The importance of not "simply" transposing traditional approaches to digital contexts but being mindful about how *the digital itself transforms the object under study*—such as Russian information influence—cannot be overstated.

The Private/Public Conundrum

The new media landscape challenges another central concept in social research, namely "the public." The Internet "blur[s] the lines between public and private spheres," (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 3) to the point that some scholars argue that, in digital spaces, privacy itself is lost (Trufanova, 2021, p. 1). This concern is at the heart of internet research ethics: While users may communicate openly and "publicly" online, they might still *expect* this communication to be kept private (franzke & Researchers, 2020, p. 7). This conundrum has been codified in ethical review guidelines across the Western world, where "expectation of publicity" is defined as a key principle for working with social media data (eg., National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH), 2019). There are, however, no directions as to *how* this concept should be operationalized, much less as to how different cultural settings might influence it.

When working in the Russian online context, the private/public conundrum is complicated by several factors. Scholars have long argued that Russia's authoritarian legacy and other cultural specifics have prevented the development of a public language—or even a public sphere (Kharkhordin, 2011; Vakhtin, 2016). While the Russian Internet (especially the flourishing blogosphere of the 2000s) could at one point have been argued to serve as an "alternative public sphere" (Etling et al., 2014), the regime's move toward informational autocracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2020)—and, more recently, unabashed repression of online expression (Freedom House, 2022)—make the situation much more bleak. Westernized, liberal-democratic understandings of the public/private divide are thus not easily applicable to Russian (or other non-Western) online settings. The global "gold standard" for internet research ethics, the guidelines by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), were authored by scholars from American, German, and Scandinavian universities (franzke & Researchers, 2020, p. 1). Although built on a commitment to "[…] ethical pluralism and cross-cultural awareness" (franzke & Researchers, 2020, p. 2), these guidelines thus emerge from a very specific context, one with its own set of affordances and assumptions.[5] Internet researchers operating outside that context might feel themselves to be in something of an ethical blind spot, particularly when it comes to privacy protection: Can we truly approach online information-sharing in individualistic (eg., American) and more collectivistic (eg., Russian) social systems in the same way?

The previously mentioned disparate trajectories of American and Russian platforms when it comes to the "publicness" of social data are, I would argue, not a mere "lapse in judgement" on the part of the latter. Rather, they reflect substantial differences in (digital) culture: Russian internet users likely have significantly higher "expectations of publicity" than their American or Norwegian counterparts.[6] The characteristics of Russian digitally mediated communication, then, might offer tremendous opportunity to internet researchers—data that, in a Western context, would be not only practically impossible but also unethical to collect might be far more easily and ethically accessed in Russian online spaces.

What Is Real and What Is Fake? Inauthenticity, Censorship, and "Information Warfare"

When doing qualitative research on Russian Internet discourse, a perpetual concern is whether—or, rather, how—the communication under study is affected by inauthentic activity and other manipulation efforts. This concern is admittedly shared by internet researchers across contexts, as content moderation, censorship, and control measures (at the hands of multiple actors) increasingly shape digital culture. This presents a fundamental ontological challenge and complicates the very notion of empirical observation: What is "real" and what is "fake" online?

5 When mentioning digital platforms where internet research takes place, for instance, the guidelines tellingly highlight Facebook, Snapchat and Google (p. 15) — none of which dominate Russian markets.

6 Not least is this due to the aforementioned legacy of RuNet as a space of political communication (see Malinovskii, 2013 for more in-depth discussion).

I would nonetheless argue that this question is especially pressing when researching the Russian online context, which has spawned what is arguably the world's leading social media manipulation industry (NATO StratCom COE, 2018). Authenticity is a definite concern when studying communication surrounding neighboring NATO member Norway: Reports have shown that Russian-language discussions about NATO in Russia's near abroad on certain social media platforms can be all but dominated by bots (Fredheim, 2017). Global social media platforms continue to struggle to identify and remove Russian industrialized influence efforts (Bay & Fredheim, 2022).

On Russia's native social networks as well, information warfare is a key concern for users, platforms, and the authorities. Especially since the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing lawfare against "fakes about the military operation" (Jack, 2022), efforts to control online expression have gained massive momentum. Digital discourses are increasingly subject to censorship, surveillance, and blatant attacks. More than a government-coordinated crackdown, the Russian Internet is facing a form of participatory information warfare (Asmolov, 2021): The attack on free expression has taken on a viral dynamic, with a vast range of "ordinary" users fighting to protect the Kremlin's discursive dominance online.

The digitally mediated information war puts obvious constraints on the forms of research that can be conducted on Russian online discourses. But it also opens new avenues for inquiry: What does "crowdsourced" censorship truly look like? How does it affect the authorities to lose control of the propaganda apparatus? How are critical voices adapting and finding new strategies of resistance under digital authoritarianism? These are only a few of the questions the contemporary Russian online environment could allow us to explore. Rather than always attempting to filter out the omnipresent manipulation efforts in pursuit of the ever-elusive "genuine" communication, online information warfare can itself be a valid and fascinating field of research.

A Way Forward

In the wake of war, increased interest in digital spaces as an avenue for Russian area studies brings both excitement and concern to those of us already in the field. On the one hand, there is no doubt that "digital Russia," as an emerging area of research (Gritsenko, Kopotev, & Wijermars, 2021), merits more scholarly attention. We need a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, methodological approaches, and research questions in order to make sense of it. As my own research has highlighted, however, we must be very careful to avoid treating digital sources and methods as an "easy out" of the current restraints on "traditional" Russian Studies. Web-based research comes with its own complex of ethical and methodological challenges, which deserve no less consideration than those in other areas of the humanities and social sciences. As current circumstances encourage us to move forward with an expanded research agenda for Russian area studies online, this insight must be kept at the forefront.

About the Author
Johanne Kalsaas is a PhD candidate at the University of Bergen.

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