

Reviews

Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere, by Sarah Oates. Oxford University Press, 2013, pp 225, GBP £35.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-973595-2. Language: English

It is a well-worn tradition for those peering into Russia's nature to confront a paradox, and the topic of the internet in the post-Soviet sphere fortuitously affords one for Sarah Oates: 'From a distance, Russia provides a communications paradox in that there is so much information and so little democracy' (p. 12). Oates, in her wonderfully thorough and multifaceted analysis leads us closer to unravelling the unique dynamics of the internet in the context of Russian political communication. Reasonably, the author locates herself as navigating the gulf between 'cyber-optimism' and 'cyber-pessimism': 'online communication is not a "magic bullet" that can empower citizens and change regimes', she acknowledges (p. 2). Yet, finding a middle ground does not stop her from asking the big question: Will a revolution fostered by new media technology fundamentally transform Russia?



The 'revolution' referenced in the title of *Revolution Stalled* refers to the 'Moscow Spring' that followed the winter elections of 2011 – a protest movement that 'failed to turn into a Maidan' (p. 180). What qualifies this movement as revolutionary and links it to other forms of social contention documented on the pages of this book? For many, the term 'revolution' in the context of Russia would bring to mind the mass mobilizations of the 20th century (1905, 1917, *perestroika*) that had transformative effects on national politics.¹ For Oates, however, the term has more contemporary antecedents: political 'regime change in non-democratic states', as in the 'orange revolution' in Ukraine (p. 40); and, more saliently, the 'nothing short of revolutionary' potential of internet technology to bring positive changes to society, as predicted by cyber-optimists and reconsidered by scholars following the Arab Spring (p. 30, p. 185).

¹ For instance, *perestroika* serves as the reference point for Michael McFaul's book *Russia's Unfinished Revolution* (2001), the title of which Oates perhaps evokes in her own.

Cyber-optimists, as Oates reminds us, argue that the basic qualities of the internet (a.k.a, the ‘virtual sphere’ and the ‘online sphere’) that offer potential for democratization include its interactive features, the ability to cheaply distribute information to a potentially limitless audience and relative freedom from national media restraints. Theoretically, it is these features of the internet that should allow citizens ‘to circumvent barriers via news cycles, news norms, ownership controls, access, editorial issues, censorship, and other filters in order to communicate more freely with one another’ (p. 11). What counts most for democracy, Oates emphasizes, is the internet’s ‘low-cost ability to aggregate interests’ (p. 14).

Yet, Russians are consistently said to fail to aggregate interests online. This failure is what motivates ‘national context’ as an important explanatory framework: ‘Is there something distinctive about the Russian internet that is preventing it from becoming an effective tool for democratization and political mobilization?’ (p. 14). In answering this question, Oates avoids cyber-pessimist predictions about the state’s power to ‘colonize’ the online sphere (p. 40), turning instead to an even-handed argument about the importance of ‘national media and political systems’ in shaping the internet (p. 26). Her perspective reflects a commitment to having the Russian case help us in ‘understanding how, why, and even when the online sphere becomes an overwhelming catalyst for protest and change in non-free states’ (p. 1).

In the acknowledgement section, Oates mentions that the book reflects the contributions of a vast range of scholars and analysts – including the journal of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media (Digital Icons)*. (She summarizes several discussions from the journal’s pages, crediting these with incisive analyses of the activities of Runet users.) Despite a generous (though, at times, adumbrative) engagement with highly divergent points of view – including those of the cyber-pessimists and cyber-optimists – the author’s own argument steadily emerges. The complexity of her position can perhaps be inferred from the conclusion that in Russia, the internet-driven democratic revolution remains ‘stalled rather than stopped’ (p. 197).

Each chapter of *Revolution Stalled* could stand on its own, as a targeted report on a topic in Russian internet studies. However, the book works much better as a whole, painting a colourful map of the scholarly terrain (useful for navigation even without all the regions filled in). The ‘Introduction’ (Chapter One), lays out a framework for discussing the internet and its role in democratization, and provides a concise background on the Russian media. Chapter Two, ‘The National Borders of the Internet’, covers research on information, media and democracy conducted in Russian, U.S. and other national contexts. The media discussion would have been more helpful, perhaps, if Oates engaged ‘the information hegemony of the Kremlin’ with more of the complexity that the concept of ‘hegemony’ affords (following Gramsci, for example), rather than as a looming spectre of ‘neo-Soviet’ manipulation (p. 189). For example, in Chapters Six and Seven, the mass media is shown to act as a crucial ‘catalyst’ to online-mediated social activism and offline protests (p. 194). There is sufficient data in the book to suggest that the status of the Russian mass media as ‘a charade of democratic interaction’ deserves rethinking in the context of a political culture transformed by internet communication (p.13).

In Chapter Three, ‘One Nation, Two Audiences’, the audiences to which Oates refers are split according to whether they incorporate ‘internet’ or ‘television’ citizens. However, in the end, any divide between these citizens is not clear-cut: ‘the habit of surfing the internet and watching television at the same time [is now] particularly prevalent’ (p. 61). While the chapter mainly reports on basic facts about internet use in Russia, interesting conclusions are drawn from a 2010 attitude survey of 2,017 Russians. The survey showed that those who used the internet more regularly were somewhat more positive towards ideas we typically associate with a Habermasian public sphere, while also more cynical about certain aspects of Russian society (such as state television and government) (p. 74). However, regular internet users did *not* show any more ‘political consciousness’ or engagement than the general population (p. 77). If the meaning of these survey results is mixed, at best, it may perhaps come as a surprise that Oates repeatedly sounds a cyber-optimistic note when referring to the analysis in this chapter: ‘online citizens are more liberal and engaged than average Russian citizens’ (p. 187).

Chapter Four, ‘Internet control in Russia’, addresses the legal aspects regulating the use of the internet by citizens and the state. The chapter’s focus is on the new ‘networked authoritarianism’, although there is an overview of the 2010 Russian Supreme Court Resolution 16 that could pave the way for increasing protection for online communication. One aspect of the Russian system of state control that Oates covers extensively is the prosecution of online journalists. She writes: ‘there is enough detection and pursuit of those labelled cyber-dissidents to create an atmosphere of repression for citizens wishing to mount a serious challenge to the Russian state’ (p. 23). A more substantiated explanation of what constitutes a ‘serious challenge’ and an ‘atmosphere of repression’ in Russia today would have been helpful to this line of argument.

Much of the discussion of the repression of ‘cyber-dissidents’ draws on cases reported by the Agora Human Rights Association. Let us consider just one example from the Agora report: legal action taken against Novosibirsk cyber-dissident and performance artist, Artem Loskutov. Loskutov faced a trumped up charge of marijuana possession, a month of police custody and a fine – ostensibly for his cultural activism. It is to Oates’ credit that she was able to cover in some detail such cases of administrative pressure against content producers. Yet, drawing conclusions about an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship from expert-compiled reports necessarily leaves out of the picture local social dynamics, such as the incredibly active, politicizing and successful campaign to free Loskutov.² This campaign brought together a cohort of activist youth that is still a vocal presence on the Novosibirsk political scene. (Loskutov’s exemplary project, the *Monstration*, subsequently received a *state* prize for innovation in art, pointing again to the complexity of factors that determine the meanings of ‘state censorship’ and ‘cyber-dissidence’.³)

Drawing attention to cases of repression without qualitative data about their social impact does little to further our understanding of the practical realities of ‘internet control’. Of course, this is not entirely the author’s fault. The difficulty this book has in answering ‘how representative of the Russian political and social sphere is the activity on Runet’ lies in the

² ‘Sazhaite derev’ia, a ne xudozhnikov’, 2009. See also: Mazur 2010.

³ ‘Pobediteli konkursa v nominatsii’, 2010. See also: Morsin 2013.

limited nature of the studies Oates has at her disposal (p. 187). Most of the studies do not go far past Runet, or opinion surveys about Runet, to inquire into offline Russians political and social practices *involving* Runet.

Chapter Five, 'Russian Parties Online' involves content and link analysis of the websites of the four largest political parties in Russia today. Link mapping conducted by Oates' team indicated that United Russia (*er.ru*) and the largest opposition party, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (*kprf.ru*) 'shared very different informational locations on the internet' and thus were 'not helping to create a 'public sphere' for party politics in Russia' (p. 129). While this cannot come as a surprise, Oates acknowledges that 'this study has not provided an analysis of "second spaces" of political communication on social-networking and blogging sites in particular' – spaces that could perhaps shed more light on the life of party politics outside formal internet content (p. 129). I would add that the study also leaves out a vast number of 'first spaces' of party politics, in the form of online content and social media networks created by regional organizations under the national party umbrellas.⁴ Notably, this regional party presence reveals that Russia is never as politically centralized as it appears to those who only study the content produced in Moscow.

Looking beyond centralized politics for productive and powerful citizen organizing is another strategy necessary in the Russian context, which Oates engages in later chapters. She reflects:

Russians often have a more practical approach to the nature of rights in their society, using rights-based approaches to resolve concrete problems. By searching for clues of internet activism in a more specific way that reflects the nature of engagement in Russia, this project will be able to provide a better analysis of the role of the online sphere in political engagement in the post-Soviet context (p. 24).

Chapter Six, 'Parents and Patients', holds the promise of this kind of 'better analysis', and, indeed, it is the most interesting contribution to the book. Oates used human coding of online content and discussions to investigate the rise of online communities 'energized by specific concerns about the status and treatment of people with health issues' (p. 187). These communities coalesced around the closure of a dialysis centre in Rostov-na-Donu and the treatment of children with disabilities by the media and state organizations. Oates notes that '[a]lthough there would seem to be relatively little interest and engagement with formal political institutions, there is passion, persuasion, and evidence of political action through these causes' (p. 24). In each of the social movements, activists used social media to organize and successfully lobby the state to change its practices. While this is presented as 'striking evidence that Russians will use the internet to aggregate interests when faced with difficult personal issues, particularly relating to health', the health issues considered are far from personal (p. 3). Additionally, though Oates mentions that these cases of activism seemingly depart from 'poli-

⁴ For some examples, see the following Novosibirsk KPRF websites and social media groups: <http://kprfnsk.ru>, <http://vk.com/kprfnsk>, <http://vk.com/lksmnsk>.

tics as usual’, forms of social contention around concrete problems are, arguably, highly visible in the Russian media.⁵

Unfortunately, the positive descriptions of civic culture that lie at the heart of Chapter Six are not used to reframe the discussion of the relationship between the Russian state and society in the rest of the book. Each introduction and conclusion is weighed heavily towards tracing ‘important markers such as human rights and liberal values’ (p. 194). One wonders again and again – important for whom? Not the majority of Russians who, according to Oates, fail to generalize their rights-claiming to the level that would enable democratization. Note the caveat about applying the label ‘political’ to Russian social contestation: ‘You can find impassioned, angry Russians citizens who use the internet to aggregate and fight for their rights, but these rights are not generally defined in broad philosophical terms or even in terms that many people would consider “political”’ (p. 3) This statement seems at odds with the author’s observation that, for power imbalances to be redressed, citizens would have to fight for rights *they* see as more important: ‘the type of challenge launched in the online sphere would have to develop from the relatively small causes [...] to fundamental concerns in Russian society – the right to fair elections, the right to effective political parties, the right to free speech, the right to fair trial, the right to rule of law’ (p. 192). The discussion would be more consistent if Oates considered citizens’ actual strategies of claiming rights when evaluating whether online and offline communicative practices are leading to more or less freedom, democracy or justice.

Chapter Seven, ‘The Winter of Discontent’, uses previously published research to discuss the role of social media in the 2011–2012 protests. The chapter traces the evolution of the ‘discontent’ as it was linked to the Runet, electoral falsification and ‘online social entrepreneurs’. (One key factor in mobilizing protesters was said to be the Kremlin’s newly disrespectful tone toward ‘the masses’ as opposed to specific political groups (p. 175).) Oates usefully considers different analytic approaches to the protests, noting where these converge or diverge in their assessments (‘political flash mobs’ vs. highly coordinated actions). Drawing together the seven chapters in the ‘Conclusion’, Oates summarizes: ‘This book argues that the collision of online factors (growth, content, networking, online social entrepreneurship) with the political catalyst of election falsification marked a significant new era in political communication in Russia’ (p. 186). Oates qualifies this assertion by questioning whether this new era in communication will actually lead to ‘a *fundamental* political change’ (p. 186). (Identifying essential trends towards a ‘transparent and democratic system’ is the bottom line for the kinds of conversations in which this book aims to participate. Just one indicator of this is that ‘fundamental(ly)’ appear five times in two paragraphs on pp. 192–193, to somewhat stultifying effect.)

The stated goal of *Revolution Stalled* is to help ‘social scientists, policy-makers, citizens and political leaders’ predict the impact of the internet on politics. To do this, Oates proposes a model of the 5Cs for analysing the relationship between the online sphere and society: ‘a study of online content, networked communities, catalysing events, state co-optation, and government control’ (p. 2–3). I hope that in some future iteration of this model, ‘social contention’ be added to the 5Cs – contention of the kind that is illuminated in Chapter Six, and is

⁵ Such forms of visible contention are described in, for example: Robertson 2009 and Evans 2012

linked to rich Soviet traditions of claiming rights, ‘public letter-writing’ and mass media criticism of the state.⁶ An acknowledgment of traditions of contention other than those articulated in terms of liberal values would be a useful corrective to area studies approaches that tend to presuppose a ‘passive Russian public’ (p. 17).⁷ Democratization paradigms, such as the one employed in this book, often entail a vicious cycle of cultural reproduction. Resistance to the state is sought in the ‘aggregation’ of already formed individual preferences and interests. Yet, individual values are said to be shaped by a culture that precludes the expression of truly ‘political’ interests. Oates writes: ‘The failure to aggregate interests online is not isolated. Rather, it reflects a widespread attitude that permeates much of Russian political culture’ (p. 17), ‘an ingrained sense of self-censorship on the part of Russian ‘netizens’’ (p. 27), the post-Soviet ‘tradition of oligarchic rule’ (p. 2) and ‘undemocratic notions’ (p. 12). What is missing in this picture is that these undemocratic attitudes, senses, traditions and notions are part of a political culture pierced with alternative legacies of contention.

Nevertheless, any limitations imposed by the democratization paradigm on the arguments of this book do not detract from its usefulness to researchers conducting qualitative or quantitative studies of Russian new media and political communication. The encyclopaedic overview of research provided in this volume is bound to be invaluable to anyone interested in the field.

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⁶ For discussions of this tradition of contention, see, for example: Fitzpatrick 1996 and Henry 2012

⁷ Another good candidate for the 5Cs – and the flip side of contention – would be ‘consensus’, seen as a project of social groups rather than an inferred property of communities.

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