

Don't Get Tagged on Social Media in Russia

By [Andrew Bogrand](#)

December 31, 2014



Anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny at an opposition rally.

The Russian government's excessive control over social media made international headlines last week. The state media oversight agency, at the request of prosecutors, forced the popular social network Facebook to block a support page for a Russian opposition leader and prominent anti-corruption activist, Alexei Navalny, who is on trial in a case he has called politically motivated.

But that is only the tip of the iceberg. Many social media users are finding themselves in trouble with the Russian authorities for joining groups, getting tagged, and sharing content on social media sites.

Who among us has not been tagged in an unflattering photo or an offensive post? It might lead us to wonder why we took that group picture after midnight or raise some eyebrows at work. It might also make us regret the evaporation of privacy. But it should not lead to legal

trouble with the authorities. Yet this is precisely what happened to a woman in Perm, Russia.

In September, Yevgeniya Vychigina was prosecuted and fined for being tagged by a friend in a so-called "extremist" video on the Russian social media site VKontakte. Featuring interviews with self-styled "partisans" who attacked police officers, the video was undeniably controversial. Yet Vychigina was no partisan. She was neither in the video nor supported the video's message.

Her friend simply wanted her to watch it, and she claims to have accepted the tag without watching the video. After she accepted the video, it appeared on Vychigina's Vkontakte page, leading a court to fine her for "disseminating extremist materials." The case reveals the absurd and alarming scope of Internet censorship in Russia.

Getting tagged did not always get you in trouble. Only in the past two years have the Russian authorities "gone digital" with their crackdown against independent voices. Successful online organizing around the world has undoubtedly shaken them, so now they are using a range of vague laws, such as Russia's 2002 anti-extremism law, to police the net.

In 2012, the Duma passed an Internet censorship law that gives authorities the power to extrajudicially block websites that feature content prohibited in Russia, including "extremist materials" - the definition of which is left up to prosecutors to decide.

The law tasks Roskomnadzor, Russia's state agency for media oversight, with maintaining a blacklist of banned sites and ensuring that Russia's Internet-service providers block access accordingly.

The authorities' grip over the net tightened this year, when the Duma passed a personal data law requiring all Internet companies to store Russian users' data within the country's borders by September 2015. Just how this will work for companies based in places like California is anyone's guess.

A series of amendments to Russia's anti-extremism legislation was also passed this year, including a law requiring bloggers to register with the authorities if they have over 3,000 visitors to their site a day. Another amendment increases sentences for those found guilty of broadly and vaguely defined "extremist activity," which the authorities have made clear applies to those who might post, like, share, or get tagged in provocative content online.

In March, Russia blocked three major opposition news websites (EJ.ru, Kasparov.ru, and Grani.ru) and the popular LiveJournal blog of Alexei Navalny. Critical voices across the political spectrum have been targeted - not just the most prominent. In February 2013, a nationalist in Kazan was fined for publishing anti-Tatar comments and criticizing local authorities on the social network Moi Mir.

People who do not even intend to criticize the government have also found themselves caught in this online crackdown. An amateur political researcher in the Urals, for example, was prosecuted for simply sharing a video by Pravy Sector (Right Sector), a far-right wing Ukrainian group that shot to fame in the Maidan protests, on his VKontakte page. He claims to have shared the video for the purposes of his research and said he did not support its message.

At times, the authorities have gone so far as to block entire websites for minor content infractions. In addition to these bans, companies must also navigate the impending data law. It's not just dissidents who are affected, it's businesses too: Google and Microsoft have already partially closed operations in Russia, and Adobe has left entirely.

Some of Russia's regulatory steps appear valid. Websites advocating acts of terrorism or featuring child pornography may be validly blocked. A major problem, however, is that there are no limits to material that might be considered "extremist," which, unsurprisingly, has led to violations of free speech. This February, a woman in Bashkortostan was fined for posting inflammatory "extremist" comments on Facebook about Russian sunbathers in Turkey. In 2013, a YouTube video showing viewers how to apply Halloween makeup was banned for "promoting suicide." Almost 10,000 pages and sites have been banned since 2012.

Despite the cost and impracticalities of online censorship, the Russian government is committed to expanding it. The Interior Ministry is offering 3.9 million rubles (about \$ 65,000) to anyone who can identify and analyze users of Tor, a server that allows anonymity in browsing and circumvents firewalls. Tor is designed to protect people like political dissidents who risk reprisal unless they speak anonymously, but Russian authorities put its users on par with criminals.

Russia should be guaranteeing the rights of free speech and conscience by loosening censorship and ensuring its law enforcement agencies are pursuing legitimate security concerns online, not wasting time harassing activists – or those who simply happen to get tagged in an unfortunate video.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/12/31/dont-get-tagged-on-social-media-in-russia-a42654>