The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

No Arab Spring in Russia, Yet

By Peter Rutland

February 23, 2015



A lively debate has been under way for several years about the impact of the Internet on political life around the world. Some argue that the web enables opposition movements to get around state-controlled mass media and organize protest movements — with the Arab Spring being a prime example.

Others point to the Great Firewall of China, behind which the state uses the new technology to track down and suppress dissent, while flooding the Internet with pro-regime propaganda — from state-run websites to hiring bloggers to troll social media and newspaper chat rooms.

The percentage of Russians using the Internet has doubled in the past few years, rising from 29 percent in 2009 to 64 percent in 2013. During that period the level of protest activity at first rose, until mid-2012, but has sharply fallen since then.

A new report released by Erik Nisbet, "Benchmarking Public Demand: Russia's Appetite for Internet Control," for the Center for Global Communications Studies in Philadelphia, helps explain why.

The report, based on a nationwide survey of 1,600 Russians conducted by state pollster VTsIOM, makes it clear that only a small minority of Russians — about 10 percent — rely on the Internet as their primary source of news information.

Eighty-four percent of Russians list the central state television channels among their top three news sources, followed by regional television (46 percent) and national newspapers (30 percent). In contrast, only 29 percent listed the Internet among their top three news sources. These findings echo similar results in polls conducted by the Levada Center.

Remarkably, nine out of ten Russians (including 84 percent of heavy Internet users) trust the news on the central television channels. It is hard to explain why ordinary Russians are so credulous of what the authorities are telling them.

Whatever the explanation, it seems to be a fact of life that the spread of the Internet has done nothing to dent.

This is despite the fact that opposition figures like Alexei Navalny made extensive use of the Internet, using it to post documents about government corruption, to show photos of lavish villas of government officials, and to raise money for their cause.

A year ago, the independent television station Dozhd was shut out by most Russian cable television providers, but lives on as a web-based broadcaster. However, this may all have played into the government's narrative of the Internet as a vehicle for those who seek to "weaken" Russia.

While Russians trust television, many of them do not trust the Internet. The Russian government has pushed the line that the Internet is a tool of foreign governments and a source of social instability, promoting everything from gay sexuality to suicidal thoughts. In April 2014, Putin said that the Internet "emerged as a special project of the CIA."

Forty-nine percent of respondents in the Nisbet survey agreed with the statement that information on the Internet needs to be censored. Forty-two percent trust the government to regulate the Internet. Ten thousand web pages and sites have been banned in Russia since 2012, and a new 2014 law requires any blogger with more than 3,000 hits per day to register with the authorities.

However, there are some grounds for optimism, as the percentage agreeing with censorship amounted to less than half the population. Putin's current sky-high approval rating will not last forever. At some point, Russians will stop believing what the television is telling them.

When the government's popular support does start to wane, the Internet — beyond the control of the state — could well emerge as a vital platform for future opposition mobilization.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/02/23/no-arab-spring-in-russia-yet-a44146