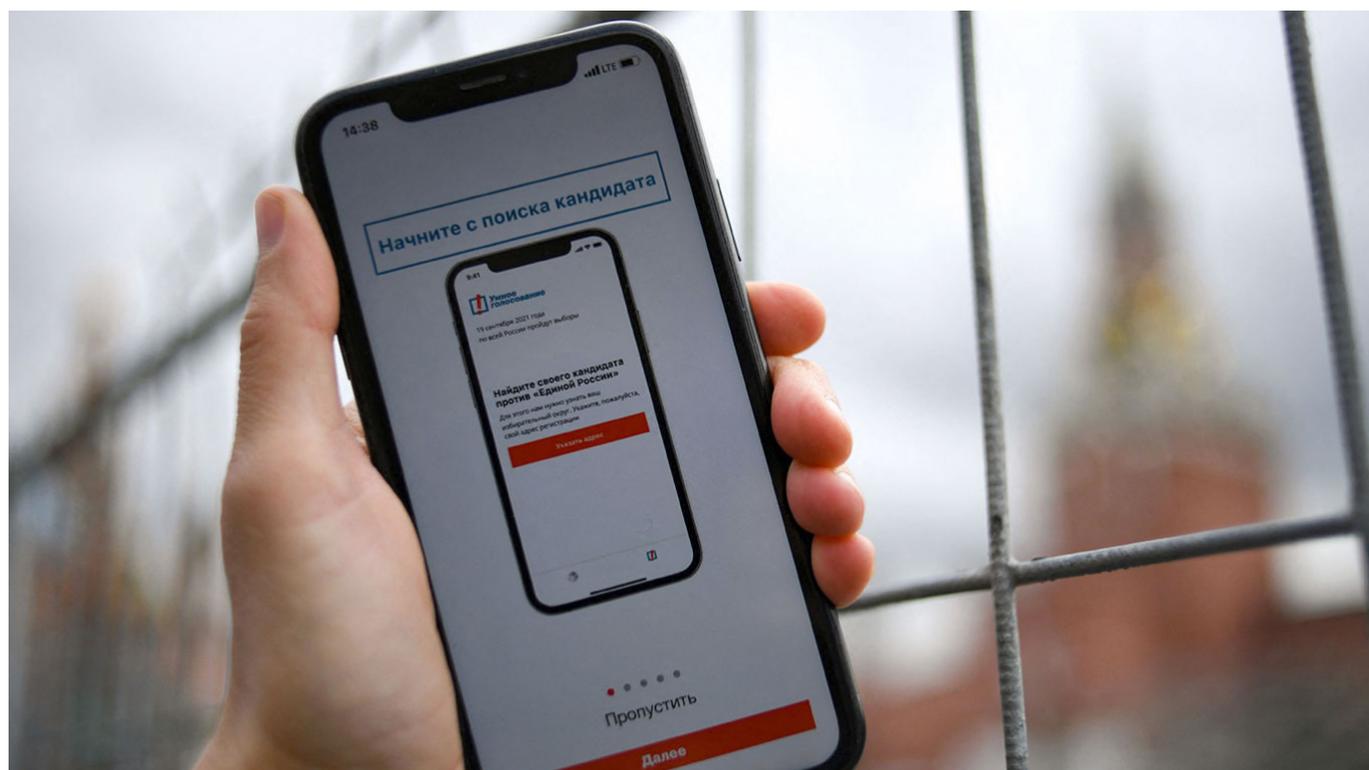


We Can No Longer Expect Google and Apple to Fight for Internet Freedom

Since the backlash over Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election, global tech giants have become replaceable parts of national infrastructure.

By [Andrei Soldatov](#)

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Natalia Kolesnikova / AFP

The news of Google and Apple finally succumbing to Kremlin pressure and taking down Navalny's app caused confusion and understandable anger among Russian liberals. But it was hardly surprising.

The idea that there is a substantial, almost ideological difference between the way tech and internet giants do business and, say, energy companies like BP or Shell, is based on the idea that tech giants' business models are based on winning and maintaining the trust of their customers. The assumption is that while BP users have a choice — there is a competition

between gas stations after all — they don't much care which gas station they drop by to fill their car.

Gas stations are part of the infrastructure we are used to seeing around us, and only hard-core activists might believe that boycotting global corporations like BP, which are part of that infrastructure, could prompt change. Activists never get enough people to sign on for such initiatives, and that makes all the difference.

Related article: [Google Blocks Russian Opposition Voting Recommendations](#)

For decades, the Internet giants existed believing public trust was an integral part of their business model. That all ended in 2016. The backlash that followed the Russian interference in the presidential election in the United States, primarily targeting Facebook, was massive, unprecedented and never actually stopped

The non-stop Congress hearings, scandals, whistleblowers coming out with the most damaging accusations about manipulation of users' data, promoting hatred and divide, even helping hostile states and malicious populists with horrible agenda, all of that would have killed the company if Facebook's business model still involved public trust.

Zuckerberg's creation would have been dead by now after hemorrhaging its users. But that never happened.

Facebook's monthly users have been on the rise since 2016 — reaching 1.86 billion in the fourth quarter of 2016, and 2.89 billion in the second quarter of 2021. New platforms like Parlio and Quora have seen some success and popularity, but never became popular alternatives to Facebook.

That taught tech giants and governments an important lesson.

Companies learned that they should care much more about governments than the public, just like BP and the like. And indeed, ever since 2016 we've seen governments increasing pressure for more regulation of the global Internet giants. This has been happening everywhere — in the U.S., but also in Europe, and of course in countries with authoritarian regimes like Russia.

Governments realised that the public is incapable of protecting tech giants. You might have billions of users, but if the local government decides to attack your company very few of them will do anything about it. The days of protesters in Moscow waving Facebook flags in front of the Presidential Administration building on Staraya Ploshchad are long gone.

What is also gone, thanks to the post-2016 backlash in the West, is the idea that in countries with repressive regimes tech giants can be a force for good when it comes to Internet freedom. In Western society the thought that global platforms might still present an opportunity, not just a threat, seems very bizarre these days. Nobody expects huge popular outcry abroad about a decision that affects Russian users.

Replaceable platforms

In countries like Russia, global tech companies could have believed they had become part of

the national infrastructure, thereby gaining protection from outright blocking, but the way Internet usage changed over the past five to seven years ruined these hopes.

These days, we use our social media on our smartphones, not laptops. The problem with mobile Internet is that the ordinary user doesn't visit YouTube's homepage to check on the latest hot videos, they are bombarded by links sent by friends via WhatsApp or Telegram, and nobody cares anymore whether the source was YouTube, TikTok or RuTube, the much promoted Russian analogue of YouTube. The Internet has become part of the national infrastructure, but global platforms are replaceable.

The tragedy of Google and Apple and Twitter is that this dramatic change in public and government perception happened so quickly that the companies are still run by the people who launched them. We expect them to keep fighting for privacy, integrity, and the Internet freedoms which made their business possible in the first place.

In the book "The Red Web," Valery Bardin, one of the Soviet Union's internet pioneers, who was in charge of maintaining the first Soviet Internet network, Relcom, explained why he decided to keep the line open during the 1991 August coup, despite personal risks.

"We were already on the losing side, just because information exchange is what Relcom was all about. We would be the enemies of the regime anyway, no matter what we did."

But today, exactly 30 years later, the Internet is more, and less, than it was in 1991 — it is part of the country's infrastructure.

We don't expect gas stations to go on strike, do we?

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