

Abstract

The dramatic international events have been unfolding alongside the writing of the thesis. Earlier in August 2020, the Russian political dissident Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent; after surviving the poisoning and returning to Russia in January 2021 he was immediately imprisoned. At the beginning of 2022, Navalny was sentenced to another nine years in jail. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, war censorship was de-facto proclaimed on the territory of the Russian Federation by introducing liability for spreading false reports about the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and for discrediting the actions of the Russian government abroad. This cannot be seen, however, as a new development: the more than a two-decade-long chain of policy re-definition, directly or indirectly involving the media ecosystem, has contributed to the enabling of the Russian government to dramatically reduce the capacity of the communicative space to incorporate political diversity, disagreement, or dissent.

This thesis grows from the idea to look at the features of the Russian battleground on social media platforms, and it keeps an eye on both sides of the spectrum: the creative efforts to dissent, and the intelligent governmental activity changing shape to counterweight these efforts. The thesis unveils how political dissent escapes the over-restricted and over-repressed systems of communications, finding alternative channels such as YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram, finding alternative languages and forms, but how it still cannot leave the political system that is reproducing itself over these channels. To do this, this research program spreads in three strands: first, the platforms and the tentacles of user-trolls or astroturfers; second, YouTube discussions and arguments; and third, the languages of Telegram. The three papers, composing the core of the thesis, are part of a bigger research programme connected not only through the case but also showing three important aspects of the disturbed public sphere: the different channels of communication (YouTube and Telegram), the different modes of communication (videos, commentaries, public blogs), and different languages of communication.

This thesis starts with discussions on free speech and the context of the regulatory effort to limit freedoms; but it gravitates towards new, more elaborated and more timely relevant forms of social and communicative control. The regulatory framework is an important context, it is also one of the most tangible forms that is very clear and measurable and the thesis shows the whole timeline of these regulations. This work, however, takes the discussion further: not only has the government implemented regulatory machinery to choke the Russian political communicative space, but also the tentacles of the regimented discourse have evolved and developed to reach beyond the frame of the nationally defined broadcasting media structures to apply to social media platforms in the principle of a global range and away from the regulatory reach of the Russian governmental action. To do this, the thesis employs the concept of the public sphere, which is useful to describe the places where open discussion needs to be happening, but it requires re-definition and actualisation.

The overall aim of this thesis is to map the transformations across the Russian public sphere and demonstrate, first, the ways in which political dissent, and political activism, are finding the way out, and second, how and through which channels the hybrid system of media and politics

is shutting it down. The research explores how citizens in Russia find and use alternatives to express their political views outside and beyond the limits imposed by the governmentally shaped media ecosystem. This thesis, therefore, is about the media as the interface between the citizens and the governmental structures of the ordinance: after all, this is a thesis about the public sphere. But traditional media are under threat and under pressure because the government insists on using regulation as a desperate measure to reduce the visibility of disagreement. Citizens find alternative channels to express their critical views against governmental policies, or corruption. This thesis, thus, is about the public sphere as an emergency that overflows towards those alternative channels, and about the languages and the shapes of that disagreement. An overflowing public sphere that finds its way around the Russian hostile media environment.

The thesis case study is based in Russia and the theoretical background is also concentrated on the Russian case. But the results of these studies do not concern only Russia. The example of Russia is an extremely useful case for the study of hybridity in terms of political systems, but also in terms of media. Hybridity is what actually creates a disconcerting effect of equilibrium - or, as it is called by the author, *the freedom effect*. The neo-authoritarian regimes that build a facade of democracy instead of a "transition" to democracy, in reality, are transitioning in another direction, towards autocracy. There are these three dilemmas of hybrid regimes that are very important for the maintenance of power, and they are constantly solved, not in favour of democracy. This thesis proposes the ways in which non-democratic regimes extend their influence over the public sphere, the lens to approach their transitions through the signs of hybridity, the instruments and mechanisms that on one hand, the governments and the systems are using, but on the other hand the ways to escape it.

The thesis is a major contribution to the field of communication sciences, and in particular studies concerning the digital public sphere, in the following ways: first, through the collection of papers, the thesis shows how repressed media systems of hybrid and authoritarian regimes, enriches and updates the current understanding of the Russian political communication ecosystem. Second, it contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of the digital public sphere and its overflow beyond the physical territory and the institutional outlets. The thesis is built as an inductive process from the cases and the articles to the concept theory. Third, it helps expand the research on contemporary quasi-democratic scenarios and the communicative strategies of their legitimisation in the digital realm through the use of such mechanisms as astroturfers, which is especially important in the age of digitalisation of propaganda, disinformation and fake news. Finally, the thesis not only discusses the narratives, scenarios and strategies of this disturbance but also the form and rhetoric characteristics of the texts and the ways in which they are building proximity and the truth.