

Russian State Narrative in the Digital Age: Rewired Propaganda in Russian  
Television News Framing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17

Paper prepared for the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting  
(Political Communication Pre-Conference at George Washington University)

Washington, D.C., August 2014

Sarah Oates  
Professor and Senior Scholar  
Philip Merrill College of Journalism  
Knight Hall  
University of Maryland  
College Park, MD 20457  
Email: [soates@umd.edu](mailto:soates@umd.edu)  
Phone: 301 405 4510

Abstract

This paper posits that an examination of strategic state narratives in the digital age can serve as a useful analytical vector in understanding evolving media ecology and political dissent in non-free states. Moving beyond the vague and unhelpful label of ‘online revolution’, this paper introduces the idea of ‘propaganda.’ This concept accelerates the intellectual trajectory that has increasingly rejected a traditional/online media dichotomy and moves to a more dynamic conception of how information communication technology changes the media ecology in non-free states. The rewired propaganda theory posits that the key challenge posed to authoritarian regimes by the internet is the way in which the online sphere challenges how the Russian state has traditionally dominated the information heights via television. While there has been compelling evidence of a gradual shift away from the power of nightly news as the key authoritative information source in Russia, the international attention on Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 generated significant challenges to the Russian state narrative. Yet leaping to the conclusion that the internet can effectively undermine the state narrative and create an alternative, authoritative national news source has not proven useful in the Russian case. In addition, this idea is essentially too crude to analyze the situation in other countries. Rather, the focus of the research (the dependent variable) should be the national narrative as expressed on state television, with change measured by how the state narrative is challenged by a particular event. The independent variables include alternative sources of information online, but the critical forces that shape the state narrative are far wider in scope and embrace the nature of the story, the coverage in the international media, cohesion among elites, citizen attitudes, the strength of the opposition, the state of online news, and state manipulation of online sources. This paper will focus on how *Vremya*, the flagship news program on the state-run First Channel in Russia, created a strategic narrative within a new media ecology in the week after the attack on Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014. This study uses the framing of the same event on one of the most popular worldwide news sites, BBC online, to highlight the challenge of fitting the Russian strategic narrative into the global media ecology created in the online age. This can help to construct the idea of a rewired propaganda model to apply it comparatively, providing a far more nuanced and useful understanding than the idea that information flow online will build to a particular critical mass and ‘overturn’ a

regime. This model will allow analysts to consider the relative power of the new media ecology in challenging an authoritarian regime by measuring control of the state strategic narrative.

## Introduction

This paper was initially conceived as a study of information flows among television and online sources in the 2011-12 election protests in Russia. This was designed as an attempt to usefully integrate online activism into existing theories and understandings about how political communication functions within non-free states. However, observations about Russia state-run television after the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 suggested a more timely consideration of the issue. Although the 2011-12 protests revealed how information disseminated online could somewhat challenge state television narratives (Oates and Lokot 2013), the airline attack highlighted how other factors are intermingled with online narratives. Most notably, the Malaysia Airlines missile strike revealed just how powerfully nationalist narratives shape discourse. While this is an unsurprising revelation, it is useful for showing the relative lack of power of online discourse. While the factor of online information flows is important and different from the Cold War days, it is not useful to think of the offline/online media dichotomy. Rather, the new media ecology driven by the online sphere must be considered within a range of other factors.

The idea of rewired propaganda builds on significant work in the field of political communication. It considers the work of Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) in their analysis of strategic narrative as a measurable and critical variable in international relations. In addition, the rewired propaganda theory relies on the utility of media ecology as discussed by scholars such as Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) and Chadwick (2013). Chadwick argues in *The Hybrid Media System* that one cannot rely on either the logic of online news or the dominance of the traditional media systems; rather the two work in tandem. The notion of rewired propaganda also addresses the idea of liberation technology, the concept that the communicative affordances of the online sphere inevitably challenge authoritarian regimes. While there has been compelling evidence to show the dangers of online engagement in non-free states – specifically that it reveals dissenters to the government and puts them at grave risk – the internet can still be a game-changer in terms of the power balance between repressive state and subject/citizen. However, defining, measuring, and analyzing just what that shift may be is a significant challenge that is not really helped by sweeping statements about Facebook or Twitter ‘revolutions’.

## What is Strategic Narrative and Why Does It Matter?

The idea of rewired propaganda relies heavily on the concept of state narratives. For example, in the case of strategic narratives, the narrative sets out “the story of why a state is involved in a conflict, who is with the state and against the state, and how the conflict will be resolved” (Roselle 2010, p. 1, citing Antoniadis, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2010). But what is a ‘story’ for a state? This refers back to the theories of instrumentalism in national identity, particular as expressed by Benedict Anderson and the idea of “imagined communities” (1991). This is the compelling idea that while citizens of states cannot personally know one another, they can share ideals and opinions via the mass media. While Anderson was discussing this in the context

of the rise of profitable print media in vernacular language, it is a powerful theory for conceptualizing the symbiotic relationship between media and national identity. While significant debate continues about the importance of primordial foundations of nation-states vis-à-vis instrumentalist nationalism such as that in an “imagined” community, there is strong evidence of how media systems reproduce and reinforce cultural norms. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of any significant nation-state that did not have a national identity consistently expressed via mass media outlets. That does not dismiss the idea or even the importance of primordialism, but it does show that media discourses and state identities are intertwined.

Yet, how much do state narratives matter? When put into the context of *strategic* state narratives, it is clear that narratives are both a reflection and a tool of state power. In her 2010 paper, Roselle focused on strategic narratives and alliance relationships, notably how allies feared entrapment and abandonment during protracted conflicts such as the wars in Afghanistan. She noted that strategic narrative could be studied in a range of settings, including “with the instrumental use of communication and/or rhetoric to legitimize policy (Roselle 2006) or to mobilize domestic publics (Brown 2005)” and “the (re)construction of identity claims in international relations (Hopf 2005). Thus, strategic state narrative is a useful proxy for the state’s intentions and terms of engagement with the world. It cannot deviate too radically from the reality of the state, but at the same time it both signals intentions and aspirations on the world stage.

What forms a state narrative? While Anderson highlights how the state narrative reflects and hence constructs a state identity, this is a broad theory. This paper argues that narratives on state-run television news serve as a reasonable proxy to signal authoritarian state strategic narrative within the context of propaganda (i.e. propaganda in the internet age). While this issue is more complex in democratic societies, all authoritarian regimes practice tight control of the mass media. The form and nature of this control can vary from overt, pre-broadcast censorship to self-censorship inculcated by sanctions against journalists who overstep understood limits. Authoritarian regimes also are characterized by a lack of an independent, trained journalistic profession (Pasti 2005, Voltmer 2000, Oates 2006). While agenda setting and framing form the basis of much of political communication research, the study of narratives gives an opportunity to make a closer link between media content and state intentions by measuring strategic narratives.

The concept of rewired propaganda rests on the assumption that we can accept the narrative on the main nightly news as a meaningful proxy for the state narrative. Russia presents a compelling case study for using media content as a proxy for state narrative because of the co-optation of the prime television channel by state interests. The First Channel (Channel has 51 percent of its shares in the hands of the state and 49 percent in the hands of enterprises. However, due to the fusion of state and commercial interests in the corrupt Russian state,<sup>1</sup> the Kremlin has control of the content of the main nightly news program, *Vremya (Time)* (Oates and Lokot 2013, for a more in-depth discussion of controls on Russian state television see Oates 2006).

---

<sup>1</sup> See Transparency International’s report on corruption in Russia, <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2013/results/>. Russia is ranked as a very corrupt country by this international organization.

*Vremya*, which airs at 9 p.m. Moscow time on the First Channel, has been significantly modernized since Soviet times in look and feel. The content, however, is extremely sycophantic toward those in power: President Vladimir Putin, his United Russia party, and the state bureaucracy. This is obvious in quantitative and qualitative ways: Putin and his administration receive an asymmetrically large amount of time on *Vremya* broadcasts and the leaders are framed in the most flattering light possible with little real discussion of policy or opposition (Oates and Lokot, 2013). Some subjects, such as corruption by state officials and challenges to the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, are not aired. The news program also actively participates in state *kompromat* (the Russian abbreviation for “compromising materials”) as a heady mix of misleading allegations, dubious film clips, and negative framing to attack regime enemies ranging from former U.S. ambassador Michael McFaul to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation to online dissident Alexei Navalny.<sup>2</sup>

It is not possible to say that the framing of events on *Vremya* follows an *exact* script from the Kremlin, although there is compelling evidence of heavy-handed news direction from the presidential administration. This is not limited to explicit directives given in regular meetings between news producers and the Kremlin. It is woven into the entire journalistic profession, in which the understood norm is that journalists work in the service of political or commercial factions (Oates, 2006; Oates, 2013). While there is variation even in the traditional news environment, mostly notably with outlets such as the liberal *Novaya Gazeta* (New Newspaper), state-run television is much more tightly controlled. Since the winter protests of 2011-12 over rigged elections, control of the traditional mass media has increased. It is not always possible to ascertain the exact direction of state policy or wishes via the *Vremya* broadcasts. However, in the case of critical matters of state importance – who has been anointed as the next head of the United Russia party, plans for escalation in military conflicts, important switches in state policy, who will win the next elections – the coverage on *Vremya* is unambiguous and directive. The state agenda and the news agenda on *Vremya* are the same.

### Political Communication and Internet ‘Effect’ in Regime Challenge

Wishful thinking about the power of the internet to change society tends to pervade discussions and theorizing about the internet (often outside of academia, but it affects academia as well). This is particularly apparent in the concept of “liberation technology” (Diamond 2010) that encourages the use of ICTs by individuals in non-free states in order to democratize their societies from within. Morozov (2011) has been one of the most prominent writers to warn of the dangers to citizens to attempt liberation technology in atomized and fragmented societies in which online engagement can make regime opponents vulnerable to attack by authoritarian leaders. The problem is that while the initial ideas about liberation technology were somewhat naïve and overly optimistic, there *is* evidence that ICTs make a significant difference in challenge to the regimes (Howard 2011). This was particularly true in that the street protests and articulation of alternatives to the repressive Egyptian leaders are directly

---

<sup>2</sup> Much of this is documented in the analysis of election news coverage by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

linked to activity online. At the same time, Egyptian television clearly lost control of the narrative.

This paper suggests that the loss of that narrative is a critical part of regime change that has been somewhat overlooked. In other words, there is no denying that Facebook groups played an important role in aggregating dissent and that the regime's poor understanding – and hence relative neglect – of online social networking was important to the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The main findings to emerge so far from research into the Arab Spring is that the internet mattered in the redistribution of power, but that its effects are difficult to predict (or replicate) because of the way in which the internet is embedded within political cultures (Howard and Parks, 2012; Heydemann and Leenders, 2011; Trombetta, 2012; Hamdy and Goma, 2012; Khamis and Vaughn, 2012; Lewinski and Mohammed, 2012). This was the overall conclusion by looking at the role of the internet in the Arab Spring as weighed against factors including cultural shift, elite behavior, interaction with the Arab traditional mass media, transnational forces for change in the region, rising levels of education, and generational change. We should switch the focus from discussing what people were doing online (and there is ample evidence from Egypt to Russia of political opposition online) to how the new media ecology (of which the internet is a key driver) changes the game. In particular, what happens to the information 'heights' of the state narrative (in this case on state-run television news)?

#### Media, Protest, and the Internet in Russia

Studies that have emerged about the Russian internet, particularly those that analyzed the election-rigging protest movement in 2011-12, provide insight into the role of internet in politics in Russia (see Oates, 2013, for an overview of Runet). Key points about the Russian internet are the sharp growth in usage, relatively low levels of control of the online sphere by the Russian state, and rising evidence of the role of the internet in articulating opposition after the 2011-12 protests. In Russia, internet use grew from low levels in 2000 to relatively high levels in 2013. According to Gallup, home internet access in Russia reached 70 percent of the population by late 2013,<sup>3</sup> representing the fastest internet growth of any major European country in the previous decade (Oates 2013). As internet use grew, so did the scope of the engagement, with a number of societal protests being linked to specific online websites or campaigns. However, there was little evidence that Runet engagement changed any fundamental aspect of Russian politics, which is marked by weak political parties and a lack of significant opposition to the Putin regime.

What is particularly interesting about the growth of internet use in Russia is that it was not initially accompanied by active regulation of online sphere. As with countries such as Egypt on the eve of the Arab Spring, scores for traditional media freedom were far worse than scores for freedom online according to reports by Freedom House ([www.freehouse.org](http://www.freehouse.org)). This opened up a significant opportunity for citizens to broadcast and aggregate interests online, an opportunity that was overlooked by authoritarian leaders. In both Egypt and Russia, state television was perceived as the

---

<sup>3</sup> According to a survey of 5,012 Russians in November 2013 conducted by Gallup for the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors, see <http://www.bbg.gov/blog/2014/01/08/bbg-research-series-contemporary-media-use-in-russia/>.

key medium for information control, although other traditional media outlets also were subject to significant pressures to conform to state news frames.

This paper already has touched upon controls on Russian state-run television, which are a reflection of the authoritarian model of the media at work in Russia. Until late 2011, Russian authorities mostly ignored the internet, which was clearly not considered to be a critical type of ‘mass’ media (Oates 2013). At the same time, the Russian state clearly valued the expansion of internet usage as a marker of economic and social development, estimating that virtually all of the population under the age of 40 would be online by 2015 (Russian Federal Agency on the Press and Mass Communication 2011). Much of this growth has been fueled by the less expensive and ubiquitous access supplied by smart phones, although thrifty Russians report that they use lower-tech phones to go online as well in relatively large numbers (Russian Federal Agency on the Press and Mass Communication). However, it is not just access and devices that have driven the popularity of the online sphere in Russia: Russians have been good at developing native language platforms that augment the experience online, such as the most popular search engine in Russia ([www.yandex.ru](http://www.yandex.ru)). Both the Russian version of LiveJournal ([livejournal.ru](http://livejournal.ru)) and Vkontakte (In Contact, a type of Russian Facebook) have proven to be lively, popular places to create and disseminate content. At the same time, legacy media outlets such as The First Channel have been slow to develop an online presence, allowing native Russian news websites such as [lenta.ru](http://lenta.ru) to dominate online news.

Russian authorities became much more concerned with extending control to the online sphere, particularly online media outlets and prominent bloggers, after the 2011-12 protests. These concerns have accelerated significantly since the Russian incursions into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in mid-2013. The 2011-12 protests were a watershed moment in post-Soviet Russian politics, representing the first significant street demonstrations since 1993. The protests were triggered by overt manipulation of December 2011 elections for the lower house of the Russian Parliament (the Duma). This followed some political unrest about Putin’s third run for the presidency. Although Putin has been a popular president in Russia, his decision to run made it clear that the Russian elites were closing ranks around him. In addition – particularly due to reports and videos purporting voter manipulation and falsification that were spread online -- many Russians became convinced of there was wide-scale fraud in the elections. In other work, I identified seven factors that were significant catalysts for these protests: 1) the failure of state censorship that relied on traditions of self-censorship; 2) an online sphere that was freer than the traditional mass media in Russia; 3) an explosion in internet use in Russia that eroded the dominance of state television; 4) lack of understanding about citizen attitudes and the online sphere on the part of Russian elites; 5) crowd-sourcing; 6) online political networks; and 7) the role of online social entrepreneurs (2013).

Prior to the winter protests of 2011-12, traditional media control in Russia relied heavily on systemic norms and example-setting rather than overt action on the part of the authorities. There was almost no control of the online sphere, although laws ranging from slander to anti-terrorism give the authorities useful tools to punish online dissenters as needed. While the traditional media experienced a slow, steady settlement into pro-Putin rhetoric, there were only a handful of prosecutions under laws relating to the online sphere even though the government had passed a range of

legislation on control and surveillance (Oates 2013). Even when online news sources, including lenta.ru, the online section of the Echo Moskvy radio station, and the online television station DozhdRain) were drawing in growing audiences with professional news stories, the authorities took mostly a laissez-faire attitude. It is not surprising that Dozhd, which surged in popularity during the 2011-12 protests, has effectively been taken off the air by authorities.

While the authorities were allowing the online sphere to flourish, were citizens turning away from traditional media and embracing the greater range of information online? By the first demonstrations in late 2011, the online sphere in Russia was prepared to play two key roles: mobilizing and informing citizens. Studies such as those by Greene (May 2012) show that information communication technology was important in organizing the protests, although people at the protests often cited influence from friends rather than the internet as a motivation to demonstrate in public. At the same time, surveys comparing the information sources and motivations of citizens at both anti-Putin protests and pro-Putin rallies found that there was not a complete split of the media spheres (Smyth and Oates forthcoming 2014). While anti-Putin protestors were more likely to consume news and discuss politics online, pro-Putin demonstrators also were going online. Everyone was still consuming traditional media, although anti-Putin protestors were less attentive to it and more likely to surf for information. Thus, there was no complete division of the public between anti-Putin/online and pro-Putin/offline; media consumption was far more mixed. This also suggests the need for more nuanced conceptions of the role of the internet in protests: The online sphere is not separate or completely authoritative in the lives of protestors. There is no stable and consistent information gap between regime opponents and regime supporters. While the evidence provides a clear path to protesting for some (a plurality of people), it was not a clear path for all (Smyth and Oates). Rather, the internet is woven into media consumption and preferences in a more complex way that cannot be captured by a model showing people becoming consistently more alienated from an authoritarian regime as their internet use deepens and widens. Internet effects in mobilizing regime challenge need to be understood, yet contextualized within the broader media ecology. In turn, the media ecology is part of what both creates and constrains the strategic narrative on state television.

#### Measuring the Russian State Strategic Narrative on *Vremya*

The dependent variable of this study is the state strategic narrative on *Vremya*, as measured by the news framing of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 attack. This will be measured by structured qualitative analysis of the content of the coverage as archived on the First Channel website as news transcripts that appeared as news between 9 pm and 10 pm from July 17 through July 23, 2014. All items that appeared in this time frame were scanned to check whether they related to MH17, Ukraine, or both. There were 106 story transcripts that were identified as relevant and downloaded.<sup>4</sup> These issues dominated the news. The stories varied from brief announcements to stories of

---

<sup>4</sup> News archives from *Vremya* from 1999 forward are available on the First Channel website at <http://www.1tv.ru/>. This project analyzes the transcripts as they appeared online. It is acknowledged that these transcripts may be incomplete although where the archived news clips were available online, a sample was viewed to confirm that the transcript tallied with the report itself.

more than 10 minutes in length, with an average of more than 15 items per day at the prime news hour.

The news items were coded by the author to identify the main topic, location in broadcast, whether they presented more as news or propaganda, whether there was information that easily be identified as false/deviant from Western news coverage, and assignment of blame. The material was organized by date and time to analyze the flow of the narrative (results discussed below). More detailed studies of Russian propaganda have included innovative citizen-led projects such as Stopfake (stopfake.org) in Ukraine and work by Russian activist Maxim Katz on coding Russian television propaganda.<sup>5</sup>

The news about MH17 moved very quickly, particularly in the first 24 hours. *Vremya* did incorporate the alternate narrative very quickly as well, i.e. that the West and Ukraine almost immediately ascribed blame to the pro-Russia militia. By association, the blame then rested with Russia for arming the militia (a point that the Russians have always denied, but not very plausibly). The Russian television news continued to provide what Herman and Chomsky (1988) would call ‘flak’ to the Western frame, broadcasting a barrage of counter-claims while trying to discredit the evidence of the pro-Russia militia’s military capability on the ground in Ukraine. These counter-claims and discrediting efforts morphed over the week to adapt to new evidence presented by others. Thus, there is a critical distinction between Soviet propaganda, which was able to control information flow to the point that challenging information was not broadcast, to the post-Soviet environment in which information flows are far more porous. In part, this is due to the limited freedom of the traditional mass media in contemporary Russia (especially liberal newspapers and radio stations) but the real challenge comes from online information.

What form does the online challenge take? There are two main challenges to the *Vremya* narrative that the online sphere provides: alternative domestic information sources and international news. The former is discussed in other work to a degree (Oates 2013, Greene May 2012, Smyth and Oates forthcoming 2014, etc.) and is not part of this analysis due to time and space constraints. The effect of international news is discussed via an analysis of coverage of the MH17 disaster on BBC Online. This project used the British or ‘home’ version of BBC Online ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)) in an attempt to show a Western, yet non-American view of the tragedy.<sup>6</sup> While Britain is a close ally of the United States, the British government and public are relatively skeptical about American intervention overseas (Oates, Kaid and Berry 2009). In addition, the British (and the BBC) are relatively Eurosceptic in comparison with the European media. No news outlet is objective, but the rationale for using the BBC in this study was that it would not parrot the American or even European Union narrative. Clearly, there would be far more distance between the American narrative and the Russian narrative for historical reasons, but this project does not seek to

---

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/net.propagande>, [https://vk.com/net\\_propagande](https://vk.com/net_propagande) and [https://twitter.com/net\\_propagande](https://twitter.com/net_propagande)

<sup>6</sup> According to Yandex, the BBC is one of the most popular sources for news in Russia and Russian traffic to the BBC homepage is relatively heavy. A future iteration of this project could compare the Russian-language stories on this topic. However, this project looked at the English-language stories.



contrast U.S. and Russian strategic narratives. Rather, this paper is interested in how perpetuation of a state narrative (what many would call propaganda) in the internet age is shaped and formed by the new media ecology among other factors.

In what ways does the new media ecology challenge strategic narratives and in what way can it actually support strategic narratives? While *Vremya* can ignore domestic actors who question the state online, it is more difficult to completely ignore powerful world actors such as the United Nations that are questioning Russian actions. For example, *Vremya* still felt compelled to carry the words of the U.S. president (including Obama's statement that the plane was shot down because Russia armed the militias in Ukraine). If you cannot ignore the events, how do you try to shape them to fit a strategic narrative? This takes a multi-pronged approach on the part of state broadcaster, which is outlined here.

*Vremya* consistently used episodic, rather than thematic, coverage of both the conflict and the MH17 tragedy itself. While episodic coverage of disasters and conflicts is quite standard (Iyengar 1991), it is interesting to note that episodic coverage of tragedy works well within the concept of rewired propaganda. If you ignore the inconvenient facts -- playing on the emotions of your viewers through harrowing images, touching stories of lost family members, tales of bombings in small villages -- episodic presentation of disasters is very useful in terms of connecting with the viewers. It stirs the emotions, giving the newscaster the ability to then direct the emotions with pro-Russia frames. Thus, if one can ignore the larger point that there would be no bombings in Eastern Ukraine if Russia had not armed the militia there, then it is relatively easy to ignite feelings of anger and disgust toward the Ukraine army. By extending this emotional connection, it becomes possible to fit into a broader frame of American imperialism by reporting that 'experts' (including some quite dubious Americans) will point to how the United States is controlling the Ukrainian government. In the swirl of emotions and graphic images -- from burnt plane wreckage to weeping survivors at funerals -- emotion becomes the raw material with which the television news can shape citizen attitudes.

That being said, the shaping of the frame is visibly challenged by the new media ecology. While viewers are emotional, they are not indefinitely irrational. Why would the United States want to influence Eastern Ukraine? Why would people who have lived peacefully in Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 suddenly turn on each other? Why would almost all the other nations in the world claim Russia is responsible for arming the militia? How do you account for the conversation between two militia members discussing that the plane they shot down appeared to be a passenger plane?

*Vremya* deals with all of this by a constant barrage of 'flak', finding points of refutation at each level. Ironically, *Vremya* (like news organizations around the world) both uses social media as a source (such as the Twitter account of Malaysia Airlines or the Facebook profiles of the victims) and criticizes others for also using social media in reporting. For example, the fact that the militia conversation about their 'mistake' was posted via a Ukrainian minister's Facebook page is used to discredit the information. Here, *Vremya* was able to play on the viewers' suspicions that evidence can easily be falsified, particularly online. *Vremya* uses national interest to discredit the information presented by the United States government that tracked the rocket's

trajectory to militia-held territory, pointing out that the information is suspect given the source. Later in the week, the ‘information war’ continues, with *Vremya* presenting data from the Russian government that there appeared to be another plane (evidently a Ukrainian fighter jet) next to MH17 when it exploded.

Overall, *Vremya*’s attempts to challenge the dominant, international news frame that Russia was responsible for the deaths of 298 on board MH17 can be summarized as:

- Failure to acknowledge or even really discuss that the conflict in Ukraine was caused by Russian intervention, especially in the arming of the Russian militia with weapons that included an anti-aircraft system that could destroy an airliner flying at 33,000 feet.
- Evidence that the militia launched the fatal rocket is dismissed because it is on social networks and was probably faked, it comes from the Americans, or it comes from the Ukrainians, who are also covering up their own military incompetence.
- The Ukrainian military has a history of shooting down commercial airlines by mistake with military weapons. The shooting down of a Siberian Airlines plane (killing an estimated 88 aboard) in 2001, a mistake that was not immediately acknowledged by the Ukrainian military, is brought up daily over the week on *Vremya*.
- Conspiracy theories, including that the flight was somehow transporting ill people or even corpses. Much of this discussion focused on the fact that the passports were gathered in one place. However, it is likely that this was done by someone on the ground (perhaps a militia member) trying to identify the bodies because each person or family would have been carrying their passports. By ignoring the obvious – someone had been tampering with the scene – it gives latitude to indulge in distracting theories about the plane.
- Constant episodic framing of the conflict plays into the strategic narrative by stirring the emotions of Russians without the inconvenient thematic discussion of why these events are occurring. One of the most recurrent examples of this is blaming the Ukrainian military (and government) for failing to secure the site. This is despite the fact that Western journalists reported it was the pro-Russia militia that acted in a threatening or obstructionist manner as observers and journalists tried to access the site. Also, due to the ‘fog of war’ it is difficult to know who is preventing access to the site or indeed who was even at the site in the beginning (and possibly removed belongings or desecrated bodies, etc.).
- The promotion of alternative theories, the most persistent of which is that there were one or two Ukrainian military jets in the sky when MH17 was destroyed. Various evidence offered for this theory include eyewitness accounts (although these are quite sketchy), the nature of the damage to the plane (although difficult when worldwide experts are saying the damage appeared to be consistent with a ground-to-air missile strike), the refusal of the Ukrainian aviation officials to release tapes or other information with ground-to-air communication on the day, that the plane deviated from its course slightly over Ukraine, and – most bizarrely – information from the Twitter account of a mysterious Spanish-speaking individual named Carlos who claimed to be involved in Ukrainian air traffic control and said there were Ukrainian fighter jets in the vicinity on the day. It is interesting to note that the

most untenable reporting, notably the odd story of this Carlos, is dropped quickly while the more plausible evidence (such as the lack of Ukrainian records of communication) are repeated throughout the week of coverage.

- When details are not helping a frame, a meta-narrative that ignores petty details and goes for an odd legal argument can be deployed. Putin repeated the idea several times that the country in whose airspace the disaster occurred must take responsibility. It doesn't matter that Russia sent the rocket launcher into Ukraine (which they continually denied over the week of coverage and attempted to produce evidence showing it belonged to the Ukrainian military).
- There is also propaganda aimed at the Ukrainian population, notably scare-mongering about the draft (*Vremya* reported that men up to 65 could be drafted), how the cost of the war will cut social services and pay in Ukraine, and the terrifying bombardment killing and injuring citizens in Eastern Ukraine.
- Overall, *Vremya* shows that Russia is sympathetic while not at fault. Rather, Russians are victims of a U.S.-backed plot to weaken Russian's economy. This is all part of the American quest to dominate the world, according to the Russian strategic state narrative. It is here that the narrative veers into a particularly strange space, in two segments reporting that there was evidence that the United States had faked at least part of the 9/11 attacks in order to perpetuate world domination by a new invasion of Iraq. This includes the bizarre statement that a 'tube of white powder' was used as the excuse to invade the Gulf anew. This would appear to be a reference to anthrax-laced white powder, which was sent to U.S. officials soon after 9/11, but the comment is deeply bizarre given that the widespread death and destruction was the popular justification for America's second invasion of Iraq.

### Comparing MH17 Coverage on the BBC to *Vremya*

This project downloaded and analyzed transcripts of 114 stories using the search term "Ukraine" and "Malaysian Airlines" on bbb.co.uk. As the BBC does not archive its news broadcast transcripts online, it was impossible to compare the *Vremya* transcripts to BBC evening news transcripts. However, this method gave a reasonable comparison of how material was framed and presented over the time period. The material was coded for the same categories by the author.

While the BBC provided a range of factual reporting about the downing of Malaysia Flight 17, the reporting became more analytical and nationalistic over the course of the week. The BBC was quick to report that the probable cause of the explosion was a missile launched from rebel territory in Ukraine. The news outlet went on to implicate Russians in this, in that the Russians would have needed to have supplied the rocket launchers and trained troops to get the missile to fire effectively. The BBC also relayed the evidence presented by the Ukrainian government that gave a recording of rebels apparently discussing how they had shot down a civilian plane by mistake. While the BBC did relay Putin's claims that the Ukraine military was to blame, this was done in a formulaic nod to 'balance' (a central tenet of the BBC). In particular, the BBC reported on significant convictions by American, British, and other world leaders that Russia had provided material support to the rebels and was, hence, responsible for the death of 298 people. At the same time, the BBC reporting had a repetitive, emotional focus on the 10 British victims in the disaster, including multiple

stories of the involvement of football fans as two of the victims were travelling to a Newcastle United pre-season game in New Zealand. The overall frames that emerged on the BBC were as follows:

1. The pro-Russian rebels were to blame for firing a missile at the plane, hence Russia was complicit in providing material, support, and motivation to the rebels. This stops short of Ukrainian accusations that the pro-Russian ‘rebels’ are in fact Russian mercenaries and mostly not locals.
2. The treatment at the crash site was chaotic and disrespectful, highlighting the lack of civilized behavior on the part of the pro-Russia rebels (and by extension Russia).
3. The personal sense of loss was highlighted, through stories from British, Dutch, Malaysian, and other families. There were fewer stories about trauma at the site for Ukrainians on the BBC than on Russian television, although there were some stories about escalating conflict in Eastern Ukraine. There was much more of a European focus, particularly on the British victims (unsurprisingly).
4. A shared sense of loss and grief, particularly as expressed through reaction of common citizens (via donations in name of British victims).
5. Concerns about geopolitical shifts, even a start to a “new Cold War” due to Russian intransigence. It wasn’t always clear whether this was coming about because of shooting down the plane or due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but was clear that the conflict had moved from regional to international with the shooting down of the plane.
6. Alignment with American, Australian, and other Western leaders in condemning Russian behavior.
7. No blame was attributed to the Ukrainian military.
8. Little blame attached to Malaysian Airlines for flying through a conflict zone; the airline was primarily framed as a victim.

### Strategic frames and the internet in perspective

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the evolving media ecology in the digital age is part of what affects key strategic narratives for states. Other factors include:

**1. International versus domestic frames.** As discussed above, *Vremya* was struggling to maintain a frame in the face of international news flow and counter-frames from influential global media outlets such as the BBC. Indeed, the frames were so divergent that there was little agreement on facts at all. This is a shift from the difference in frames of other key Russian crises. For example, the frame on the street demonstrations in 2011-12 in the U.S. and British media was about citizens voicing their anger over violation of democratic rights. *Vremya*’s frame also included coverage of citizen dissatisfaction, although emphasized it was not the majority of citizens and that it was unhappiness with the electoral procedures rather than with Putin or his government (Oates and Lokot 2013). In the case of the 2011-12 protests, that gloss was feasible, but the completely different narratives over Malaysia Flight 17 are not reconcilable.

**2. Nature and scope of news event.** This is related to the issue discussed in the point above, but scope is a slightly different variable than the international versus domestic

dichotomy. It would have been hard to design a more difficult news event to ‘spin’ in a positive way for the Russian involvement in Ukraine. The event is international in nature, with deep involvement with at least four countries (Malaysia, the Netherlands with the bulk of the victims, Russia, Ukraine) and the world’s attention already was attuned to the tragic fate of another Malaysia Airlines flight. The flight had an unusually high proportion of children. With little control of the crash site in the aftermath of the disaster, unfiltered and highly disturbing images flooded the internet. This video witnessing made ‘plausible deniability’ even more difficult for the Russian television news.

**3. Regime cohesion.** In an era of personalized politics and media coverage, it is easy to conflate Putin’s personal wishes with rule for Russia. Russian politics, however, are based on complex, shifting alliances that are typically opaque. One of the ways in which these alliances became apparent is in different media framing of politics and leaders by different media organizations. This was particularly apparent at the end of the Soviet regime, when reactionaries and reformers fought political battles in media outlets such as the newspapers *Soviet Russia* and *The Moscow News*. It has been apparent throughout the post-Soviet era as well, particularly in the struggle for authority between powerful Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov and Putin. The public nature of the struggle was helped by the fact that the City of Moscow controlled one of the national television channels at the time.<sup>7</sup> While power struggles among the elites in Russia will continue to shape policy, Russia currently has a relatively high level of cohesion behind Putin. This reduces the chance for media diversity.

**4. Regime oppression.** There are several well-established indices of regime oppression, notably the longitudinal studies by Freedom House. The Freedom House measurements, for its annual Freedom of the World compendium rely on scores for indicators of 10 political rights and 15 civil liberties. These indicators relate to the electoral process; political pluralism and participation; the functioning of government; freedom of expression and belief; association and organizational rights; rule of law; and personal autonomy and individual rights. By the Freedom House measurements, Russia’s level of freedom has declined steadily since the 1990s, with Russia now one of the 25% of the world’s countries ranked as not free in 2014. Russia’s freedom has declined, although Russia is not measured as being as oppressive as countries such as Belarus, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, or totalitarian states such as North Korea. The lack of freedom makes it relatively easy for *Vremya* to choose to frame events in the best interest of the elites – and much more difficult for opposition movements to coalesce, much less create effective alternative frames (via the mass media or even online). Recently the Russian authorities have become much more focused with controlling the internet, in particular by banning internet activist Navalny and requiring all bloggers with more than 3,000 unique visitors daily to register as mass media outlets with much higher oversight. In addition, Russia is looking at ways of regulating all those who use public Wi-Fi spaces.

## Conclusions

---

<sup>7</sup> Luzhkov eventually lost and was discredited, but not before joining political forces with Putin.

This paper has used a discussion of state strategic narratives as a way of thinking about the media ecology in a more evolved manner. This study rejects a zero-sum game model that the internet can replace or mount a symmetrical challenge to the strategic narrative in a non-free state. At the same time, this project is interested in how the new media ecology – a huge part of which is online – affects information leviathans such as the prime news program on state television in Russia. This is only one element of the model. As noted in the final section above, there are a range of other factors that affect the media ecology – from rising internet regulation to domestic sources of information online – but this paper considers solely how the shape of the strategic narrative can be affected in the new media ecology. Nor does this paper engage with the important arguments about the way in which the internet offers not only opportunities to citizens to try to shape narratives, but arguably gives asymmetrically powerful opportunities for state authorities to co-opt the online sphere. There is evidence that Russia is moving quickly to attempt the latter, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

This study suggests that the new media ecology, for the most part, constrains the Russian strategic narrative and forces the Russian state to rewire its propaganda. Many classic elements of Russian propaganda as noted over time are present, yet in the case of MH17 the narrative had to shift and change due to pressures of information from international sources (represented by the BBC coverage here). Thus, the idea of a band of Russian citizen-journalists and witnesses challenging the state narrative is not strictly true. There has been evidence of this in the 2011-12 protests, however it was not in evidence here although more study is needed. *Vremya* was not citing, even to denigrate, citizen protest or concerns over the Russian involvement in the MH17 attack or even in Ukraine. Rather, the energy expended by the First Channel was primarily in weaving and dodging to maintain a plausible Russia-first narrative in the face of world condemnation. Information available in the online sphere, measured here as news coverage from a different perspective, does change the game. However, it doesn't make it a winner-take-all game; rather, the effect can be seen in a shakier, albeit still nationalist narrative.

It must be said that this shifting, sometimes illogical narrative is not yet taking its toll on Russian support for the Putin regime. Unsurprisingly in the face of external condemnation and threat in the form of sanctions, the Russian public has rallied around their president. According to a study by the respected public opinion organization the Levada Center in Russia, support for Putin jumped to 90 percent by August 2014, up from a more typical level of 60 to 65 percent.<sup>8</sup> Even the State Duma and the government, generally not universally popular with Russians, are enjoying a rise in popularity in the current situation, according to the Levada Center. Some of the population is concerned that Russia will become isolated over the Ukrainian conflict or sanctions, but only 38 percent report this concern with a far greater number (58 percent) saying they are not concerned.

This could leave us with the conclusion that Russians support their government even though government actions are leading to a military conflict with Ukraine that could

---

<sup>8</sup> This information is from an interview on August 11, 2014, with Alexei Levinson, head of socio-cultural research at the Levada Center. See <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2542566>

be costly in terms of sanctions and lives of Russian soldiers. That conclusion, however, fails to take into account the pressures that the new media ecology bring to the Russian strategic narrative. As we can see from the analysis of the *Vremya* coverage, in comparison with the BBC coverage, the state must rewire its propaganda to deal with global information flows. This is a significantly more difficult task than traditional propaganda carried out within a single authoritarian state that could control information flows. This paper, while using state strategic narratives as a way of examining how the media ecology can challenge the ‘information heights’ of state-run television news, acknowledges that this is one piece of the puzzle of the role of information in regime change. This paper has not engaged in other intriguing areas of this, notably domestic information production, exchange, and aggregation in the online sphere. Yet thinking about information heights and state narratives is a way to bring further depth and nuance to understanding media ecology and regime challenge in the digital age. We know that the idea of a Facebook revolution is too broad and naïve. Yet, we wake up and find that authoritarian regimes do lose control of the narrative and fall. In thinking about strategic narratives, we may well find a better way to identify, measure, and analyze how critical change happens in information regimes. If authoritarian states must create rewired propaganda, we can measure the shape and nature of those attempts by looking first at the strategic narrative.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. 1991. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised and edition). London: Verso.
- Antoniades, Andreas, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin. 2010. *Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives* (CGPE Working Paper). Brighton: Centre for Global Political Economy, University of Sussex.
- Brown, Robin. 2005. Getting to War: Communication and Mobilization in the 2002-03 Iraq Crisis. In P. Seib (ed.) *Media and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave, pp. 57-82.
- Chadwick, Andrew. 2013. *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Diamond, Larry. 2010. *Liberation Technology*. *Journal of Democracy* 21(3), pp. 69-83.
- Greene, Samuel A. May 2012. *Twitter and the Russian Street: Memes, Networks & Mobilization*. Moscow: The Center for New Media and Society.
- Hamdy, Naila and Ehab H. Gomaa. 2012. Framing the Egyptian Uprising in Arabic Language Newspapers and Social Media. *Journal of Communication* 62, pp. 195-211.
- Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Heydemann Steven and Reinoud Leenders. 2011. Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience. Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening.' *Globalizations* 8(5), pp. 647-653.
- Hopf, Ted. 2002. *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hoskins, Andrew and Ben O'Loughlin. 2010. *War and Media*. London: Polity.
- Howard, Philip N. 2011. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Howard, Philip N. and Malcolm R. Parks. 2012. Social Media and Political Change: Capacity, Constraint, and Consequence. *Journal of Communication* 62, pp. 359-362.
- Iyengar, Shanto. 1991. *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Khamis, Sahar and Katherine Vaughn. 2012. 'We Are All Khaled Said': The potentials and limitations of cyberactivism in triggering public mobilization and promoting political change. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 4(2-3), pp. 145-163.



- Lewinski, Marcin and Dima Mohammed. 2012. Deliberate Design or Unintended Consequences: The Argumentative Uses of Facebook During the Arab Spring. *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8(1): 1-11.
- Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013 *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York and Milton Park (UK): Routledge.
- Morozov, Evgeny. 2011. *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*. London: Allen Lane (Penguin).
- Oates, Sarah. 2013. *Revolution Stalled: The Politics Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oates, Sarah. 2006. *Television, Elections and Democracy in Russia*. London: Routledge.
- Oates, Sarah, Lynda Lee Kaid and Mike Berry. 2009. *Terrorism, Elections, and Democracy: Political Campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Russia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oates, Sarah and Tetyana Lokot. 2013. *Twilight of the Gods?: How the Internet Challenged Russian Television News Frames in the Winter Protests of 2011-12*. Paper presented at the Post-Socialist and Post-Authoritarian Communication Working Group International Association for Media and Communication Research Annual Conference.
- Pasti, Svetlana. 2005. Two Generations of Contemporary Russian Journalists. *European Journal of Communication* 20(1), pp. 89-115.
- Roselle, Laura. 2006. *Media and the Politics of Failure: Great Powers, Communications Strategies, and Military Defeat*. New York: Palgrave.
- Roselle, Laura. 2010. *Strategic Narratives of War: Fear of Entrapment and Abandonment During Protracted Conflict*. Presented at the American Political Science Association Meeting, Washington, D.C.
- Russian Federal Agency on the Press and Mass Communication. 2011. *Internet v Rossii: Sostoyanie, tendentsii I perspektivy razvitiya (The Internet in Russia: Conditions, Trends and Perspectives on Development)*. Moscow: Regional Public Centre for Internet Technology. Available at: <http://www.fapmc.ru/magnoliaPublic/rospechat/activities/reports/2011/item6.html> (last accessed August 15, 2014).
- Smyth, Regina and Sarah Oates. Forthcoming 2014. Minding the Gap: Lessons on the Relationship Among the Internet, Information, and Regime Challenge from Russian Protests. *Europe-Asia Studies*.

Trombetta, Lorenzo. 2012. Altering Courses in Unknown Waters: Interaction between Traditional and New Media during the First Months of the Syrian Uprising. *Global Media Journal* (German edition but printed in English) 2 (1), pp. 1-6.

Voltmer, Katrin. 2000. Constructing Political Reality in Russia: Izvestiya – Between Old and New Journalistic Practices. *European Journal of Communication* 15(4), pp. 469-500.