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# Making Sense of the News in a Hybrid Regime: How Young Russians Decode State TV and an Oppositional Blog

Abstract

The past two decades have seen an increasingly intense debate on how the rise of internet-mediated communication has impacted politics in (semi-)authoritarian regimes. Previous works have adopted a wide array of approaches. Yet, to date no major study has investigated how citizens in these regimes are making sense of political messages they encounter online in the new, more fragmented media environments of the internet age. In an initial attempt to fill this gap, this explorative study juxtaposes how young Russians make sense of a liberal-democratic blog entry and, by contrast, a news broadcast from state-controlled TV. Based on findings from 20 in-depth interviews, the article discusses promising avenues for future audience research in hybrid regimes.

*Keywords*: audiences – hybrid regimes – political communication – Russia – decoding – cultural studies – blogs – non-democratic regimes - democratization

# Making Sense of the News in a Hybrid Regime: How Young Russians Decode State TV and an Oppositional Blog

The past two decades have seen an increasingly intense debate, both in academic journals and the mass media, on the impact of internet-mediated communication on politics in non-democratic regimes. Until the late 1990s, it seemed to be short of a "conventional wisdom" that "the Internet poses an insurmountable threat to authoritarian rule" (Boas & Kalathil, 2003, p. 1). In the early 2000s, with authoritarian regimes all over the globe swiftly adapting to the "technological challenge", more skeptical views took hold (Howard, 2001). Currently, there seems to be wide consensus that more complex and multi-faceted pictures need to be drawn (Howard & Parks, 2012; Lynch, 2011) and that the internet should neither be regarded a "technology of liberation" nor one of "control" (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010). In contributing to this emerging body of literature, scholars from various disciplines have adopted a wide array of approaches, including computerized link analysis and hand coding of thousands of blogs (Etling et al., 2010), comparative studies of how authoritarian regimes filter and censor online contents (Deibert, Haraszti, Palfrey, Rohozinski, & Zittrain, 2010; MacKinnon, 2008) and case studies on how politicians, parties, and social movements make use of internet-mediated communication to pursue their goals (Lynch, 2011; Toepfl, in press).

One area of communication research, however, has received notably little attention in this academic debate: the role of media audiences. Aside from internet penetration rates, traffic metrics of selected websites, and findings from a series of studies based on survey data (Norris & Inglehart, 2010; Lei, 2011; Nisbet, Pearce, & Stoycheff, 2012; Norris, 2011), we know little about how and with what consequences citizens in (semi-)authoritarian states receive political news in the new, more fragmented media environments of the internet age (for recent overviews of interpretive approaches to news audiences in western and non-western contexts, consider Bird, 2011; Michelle, 2007; Morley, 2006). Most notably, no major study to date has investigated the micro processes by which citizens in non-democratic states make

sense of political news they encounter online. Yet, in many of these regimes, messages published in forums, blogs or oppositional online media are currently presented in interpretive frameworks that starkly diverge from those continuously reproduced by local mainstream mass media, respectively from those traditional to these cultures (Etling et al., 2010; Boas & Kalathil, 2003; Hallin & Mancini, 2011; MacKinnon, 2008). This phenomenon can be expected to be particularly salient in the media environments of so-called "hybrid regimes" – a form of rule that combines authoritarian and democratic elements and is seen by political scientists as increasingly common in the contemporary world (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Voltmer, 2011).

How are citizens in the new media environments of today's hybrid regimes navigating these dissonant streams of political news? How much do they "believe" or "trust" in different sources? What stocks of knowledge do they use to make their judgments? These are questions that have barely been raised in the academic literature to date. This explorative study attempts to make a first contribution to fill this gap by juxtaposing how a specific group of Russians (the young, urban, and educated) construct meaning of two news items: a news broadcast from state-controlled TV and an entry to an oppositional blog. The project focuses on Russia as a high-profile example of a hybrid, relatively closed regime that pursues an open internet policy (Levitsky & Way, 2010; see also Etling et al., 2010; Toepfl, 2011; Vartanova, 2010). Unlike in China (MacKinnon, 2008), in Russia, internet content is currently not being technically filtered. The study focuses on the specific group of the young, urban, and educated primarily for two reasons: Firstly, this group can be seen as one of the most fully immersed in the new media environment in contemporary Russian society: All participants of this study accessed the internet several times a day. Secondly, as research on "biographical availability" (McAdam, 1986) in western contexts suggests, members of this group are particularly likely to participate in political protest and pressure for social change.

To fill the gap in the literature outlined above, I first review extant works on internet

use and media effects in non-democratic regimes. Subsequently, I introduce Hall's (1973) classic encoding/decoding model as the theoretical perspective of this study. I then adopt this perspective to develop a novel view on the contemporary Russian media landscape. The method and discussion sections are followed by a paragraph that proposes a number of promising avenues for future research on audiences in Russia and other hybrid regimes. In the conclusion, I relate my argument to the broader "liberation vs. control debate" outlined above.

**Internet Use and Media Effects in Non-Democratic Regimes**

The majority of studies on internet audiences in non-democratic regimes are based on survey data collected in structured interviews. These studies typically ask how internet use in non-democratic regimes (operationalized most often as access vs. non-access) is correlated with attitudes conducive to democratic development. For instance, these authors conclude that internet use in non-democratic regimes is associated with higher levels of democratic aspirations (Norris, 2011, p. 174), support for the norms of democracy (Lei, 2011), or commitment to democratic government (Nisbet et al., 2012). However, depending on the selection of countries and the conceptualization of variables, some studies find also negative correlations between internet use and democratic attitudes. Norris and Inglehart (2010), for instance, in a comparative analysis based on survey data from more than forty countries, conclude that in countries with a restricted media environment those citizens who regularly follow the news on the internet (just as those who regularly follow the news on radio or TV) show less support for democratic principles.

How can these conflicting findings be explained? In designing their studies, these scholars had to make highly consequential decisions regarding at least two crucial issues. Firstly, they had to conceptualize a variable that taps the democratic attitudes of citizens. The main problem here is that democracy and related concepts mean widely different things to different people in different cultures (Bratton, 2010; King, Murray, Salomon, & Tandon, 2004). To illustrate this with an example, survey respondents in Vietnam – a country that is com-

monly regarded as one of the most authoritarian regimes in the contemporary world – report higher satisfaction with the "democratic performance" of their country than respondents in most Western European countries (Norris, 2011, p. 90). A second problem these researchers face is the coarse-grained data that is typically available on the dependent variable "media use". Norris and Inglehart (2010), Norris (2011), and Lei (2011) base their arguments largely on data of the World Value Survey. Yet, in the 2005/06 questionnaire of this survey, the only relevant item that captures media use asks respondents to indicate "for each of the following sources […] whether you used it last week or did not use it last week to obtain information: Daily newspaper / News broadcasts on radio or TV / Printed magazines / In depth reports on radio or TV / Books / Internet, Email / Talk with friends or colleagues" (World Value Survey 2006, p. 17). Each of these seven variables is coded dichotomous. Obviously, this item generates data that lack information of great interest to audience researchers. Do the respondents, for instance, use the internet to follow political news or merely to send emails and play games? What specific news sites and formats are accessed? And what are the respondents' attitudes toward different sources and formats of news?

By contrast, Bailard (2012) bases her study of media audiences in Tanzania not on survey data but on a field experiment. Her study finds that citizens who had internet access in the two months before the 2010 presidential elections not only judged the – obviously rigged – electoral process as less fair but were also less likely to vote. While Bailard (2012) could avoid some of the typical weaknesses of the survey studies cited above and test causal relationships, the neglect of media content remained a problem. Her field experiment did not track which sources of news participants were following on the internet. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to shift the focus of interest to the – to date largely neglected – micro processes of interaction between media audiences and internet content in a politically highly relevant hybrid regime.

**Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model**

In western media research, one highly visible approach to explore the micro processes of interaction between audiences and media content is "audience reception research" in the tradition of British cultural studies (for recent overviews of this literature, see Michelle, 2007; Morley, 2006; for a critical résumé, consider Barker, 2006). Drawing on this literature, the present paper will bring to bear a slightly adapted version of Stuart Hall's (1973) classic encoding/decoding model. In his seminal working paper, Hall (1973) maintained that news on British TV was "encoded" from a specific ideological perspective. By the term code, Hall understood "'maps of meanings' into which any culture is classified" (Hall, 1973, p. 13).

Hall was mainly interested in how members of the audience would decode the news discourse as it was presented to them on British TV. He distinguished three positions from which decodings could be made. In a slight adaption of Hall's (1973) model, this article operates with the following three possible positions of decoding: (1) affirmative, (2) negotiated, and (3) oppositional. Individuals, who decode a message affirmatively, operate within the reference code in which it was encoded. They take the connoted meaning of the news item "full and straight" (Hall, 1973, p. 16). The second type of negotiated decodings contains a "mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" (Hall, 1973, p. 17). It acknowledges the basic structure of the interpretive framework in which the message was encoded while, "at a more situated level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions" (Hall, 1973, p. 17). Negotiated decodings are thus likely to be "shot through with contradictions" (Hall, 1973, p. 17). Thirdly, viewers can make sense of messages from an oppositional position; they can embed the new pieces of information in a completely different ideological framework, interpreting it in a "globally contrary way" (Hall, 1973, p. 18).

Hall's model was adopted prominently in Morley's (1980) seminal study on how British viewers decoded the current affairs program "Nationwide". In the 1980 and 1990s, a "boom" of studies of active audiences followed (Morley, 2006, p. 102). Most recently, however, Morley (2006, p. 102; cf. Barker, 2006) sensed a backlash of research in the tradition,

with more and more scholars regarding work of this type as "pointless populism". This paper seeks to reinvigorate the debate, adding fresh theoretical thought and empirical data by, for the first time, exploring how citizens in a non-western, non-democratic regime decode oppositional political messages they encounter in social networks online; and by, for the first time, simultaneously investigating how individuals make sense of news items encoded in two antipodal ideological codes. The paper can thus be seen as a response to recent calls of leading scholars to "explore how tried and tested ideas about audiences" can be applied to the new media ecologies currently emerging with the rise of the internet (Livingstone, 2004, p. 79).

**Making Sense of the News in Hybrid Regimes**

In Hall's theoretical perspective, we can conceive of the media landscape of Russia's contemporary hybrid regime as differentiated in a number of "spheres". In each of these spheres, news (and social reality as such) is encoded in a disparate code. In the specific Russian case, it may make sense to distinguish the following spheres: (1) a sphere of official media that transports the ideology of the hybrid regime (consisting of state-controlled TV cannels, radio channels, newspapers, internet sites, and politicians' blogs like that of President Dmitry Medvedev); (2) a sphere of mainstream commercial media that reports slightly critical but largely loyal to the regime (for instance, leading yellow press newspapers and internet news sites owned by businessmen with close ties to the Kremlin); (3) a sphere of liberal-democratic media (oppositional internet TV channels, radio channels, news sites, and blogs of political activists); and two smaller clusters of media outlets (newspapers, news sites, and blogs) that we can think of as (4) nationalist and (5) communist media spheres.

While these five spheres can be seen as characteristic for the media landscape of Russia's contemporary hybrid regime, it appears plausible to assume that similar distinctions can be made in regard to other semi-authoritarian regimes. Even in authoritarian China, for instance, Stockman and Gallagher (2011) distinguish between "official" and "commercial" segments of the media landscape; they note that, while "individual media sources may not al-

ways fit neatly into these categories, […] these distinctions refer to general tendencies" and help citizens "make sense of this complicated environment" (p. 441).

A second feature that appears characteristic for the Russian media landscape – as well as for those of other contemporary hybrid regimes – is that the "official" media sphere is clearly dominant in terms of audience reach (Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Oates, 2006; Stockman & Gallagher, 2011; Vartanova, 2010; Voltmer, 2011). In contemporary Russia, the three most-watched TV channels belong to this sphere, with 92 percent of Russians saying they rely mostly on TV to get political news (FOM, 2011). By contrast, the weights are reversed in the segment of social media. Investigating the Russian blogosphere based on link analysis of millions of blogs and hand coding of more than thousand blogs, Etling et al. (2010) identified strong "nationalist" and "democratic opposition" clusters, while pro-government bloggers were not "especially prominent" (p. 3). With a view to the segment of printed newspapers, in Russia, publications representing all spheres (with the exception of the nationalist) are widely sold at newsstands in urban centers. A similar diversity can be found on the radio market (for detailed information on the contemporary Russian media landscape, consider Becker, 2004; Koltsova, 2006; Mickiewicz, 2008; Oates, 2006; Toepfl, 2011; Vartanova, 2010).

A third important feature of the media in hybrid regimes – and less so in more authoritarian states – may be that the ideological diversity of news content, somewhat paradoxically, exceeds that in most developed democratic societies. While media discourse in Western democracies is based on a consolidated liberal-democratic consensus, the Russian media landscape, for instance, features significant clusters of nationalist and communist media outlets. Moreover, the official and mainstream spheres produce hybrid encodings that break with what would be considered acceptable in Western democracies. Only in the marginalized liberal-democratic sphere, social reality is portrayed in a way that most Western observers would decode affirmatively. It is this ideological diversity that has led scholars like Becker (2004, p. 156) to observe already ten years ago that the segment of Russian print media is "extremely

diverse, exceeding that of many liberal democracies."

With the rise of the internet in the past decade, in Russia, non-official news discourses have been gaining new audiences (Etling, 2011; Toepfl, 2011). Against this backdrop, the question arises: How are Russian citizens making sense of the news in the new, more fragmented media environment? How are they decoding dissonant news from different spheres? To address these questions, this project starts out by exploring the interactions of a specific group of Russians with two news items taken from two different spheres: a news broadcast from state-controlled TV (representing the powerful, official sphere) and an entry to an oppositional blog (representing the marginalized, liberal-democratic sphere). The two news items report on the same topic, a value-laden key issue of contemporary Russian politics: the fairness of political competition in the hybrid regime. Alternatively, also an entry on this topic to the blog of President Medvedev (representing the official media sphere) and a report of the radio station Ekho Moskvy (representing the liberal-democratic sphere) could have been used.

## Method

The study is based on 20 in-depth interviews of on average 1.5 hours length with Russian students from leading research universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

### Sample

When selecting participants, a strategy of purposeful sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) was employed that would guarantee that all interviewees were students at universities in Russia's urban centers St. Petersburg and Moscow (criterion sampling) and that the sample would include individuals differing widely in terms of their political world-view, age, gender, and course of study (maximum variation sampling). To recruit participants, an announcement was posted to two mailings lists, reaching all students of a department of Economics in Moscow and a department of Sociology in St. Petersburg. 22 students replied to the announcements. Further participants were recruited by asking interviewees to pass on the information to friends (snowball method). This resulted in a pool of over 40 participants. Interviewees

were offered a moderate compensation of 200 rubles (approximately 5 Euro).

Before scheduling an interview, I asked interested individuals to provide their age, their course of study, and – literally translated – "their political views or the absence of such". Roughly one third of the students stated that their political views were "indeterminate", "mixed", or "peculiar". Another large group said that they had "no political views". A third group declared they were "conservative". A fourth group said that they advocated "democratic" or "liberal" views. Interviewees were selected from these four groups approximately in this proportion. Moreover, I tried to meet with participants that varied in gender, year of study, and course of study. As outlined above, media discourse featured significant "nationalist" and "communist" spheres. However, it took me considerable effort to make out students who self-identified in these ways. In the end, I could recruit one "nationalist" and one "leftist" participant. I stopped interviewing when each position of decoding had been produced by at least four individuals and new participants did not bring up significant amounts of new themes and arguments in their decodings (theoretical saturation, cf. Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

In selecting interviewees, the Russian cultural context turned out to be challenging for at least two reasons that are closely related to the problems that the above mentioned survey studies are struggling with. Firstly, not a single student in a pool of more than forty self-identified by referring to a political party. This illustrates how poorly the party landscape of the Russian hybrid regime is currently connected to the political consciousness of young citizens. Secondly, self-identifications provided before the interview turned out to be weak predictors of the political word-views that participants would then reveal in the in-depth interviews. For instance, students who self-identified as "democratic" could be straight-forward supporters of Putin and Medvedev, as they understood the public self-identification of the party of power (*United Russia*) as "democratic" literally. Other students self-identifying as "democratic" were outspoken opponents of the regime. Similarly, "conservative" could mean longing for the good all communist times to some – and advocating political stability and

support for the current regime to (most) others. However, having adopted the strategy of selecting participants described above, it is plausible to assume that the individuals in the interviewed group covered the broad range of political world-views that could be observed at the time of research amongst Russia's young, urban, and educated youth.

In the end, the interviewed group consisted of 12 male and 8 female students, varying in age between 18 and 26 (median: 21). 14 lived in St. Petersburg, 6 in Moscow. Due to the fact that the initial announcement was posted at two social science faculties, the selection was biased towards this field: 7 participants studied sociology, 6 economics, 4 political science, 1 psychology, 1 logistics, and 1 land surveying. Before the interview, participants signed an informed consent statement that outlined the background, conditions and purpose of the project. Interviewees were guaranteed anonymity (all names cited in this article are changed) and reminded that they were free to leave the interview at any point of time.

**Interview context and structure**

All interviews were conducted in Russian in person by the researcher. I am a 35-year-old, male German. The data thus emerged in a social situation that I would say most interviewees perceived as an informal yet civilized conversation with an interviewer (of slightly greater age and higher social status but easy-going) from a foreign (but generally friendly) country who showed genuine interest in understanding how young Russians think. In all interviews, rapport was quickly established, understood as a situation in which interviewer and interviewee show mutual respect for each other's viewpoints, while not necessarily agreeing on all issues (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 194). I did not have the impression that participants (with the exception of the "nationalist" student) intentionally held back any interpretations of the two news items in fear of consequences of any kind. On the contrary, I felt that most interviewees tried their best to make their trains of thought understood to the foreign interviewer and produce elaborate and sophisticated decodings.

The conversations were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were

structured as follows: (1) In an introductory section, I asked participants for basic personal data (age, gender, nationality, course of study, and political world-view). (2) Second, I established in detail the availability and the forms of access to different types of media. Did participants have access to TV, radio, newspapers, desktop computers, or smart phones? How and where did they typically use this type of media (TV when visiting their parents, internet on a mobile phone or on a desktop computer at university)? (3) In a third section, I reconstructed together with the interviewees their pattern of political media use on a typical week day. Were they watching TV news when having breakfast – and if so, on what channels? Where they reading newspapers in the metro – and if so, which? In the evenings, were they regularly checking specific online news sites or political blogs? (4) In a fourth section, I tried to map out the political world-views of participants and the stocks of knowledge they had on the Russian media landscape (to be reported separately). (5) Crucial to the present study are the data that emerged from the fifth section. At this point, when in all interviews rapport was established, I showed the two news items. I started out the discussions with the question "What do you think about this?" In the emerging conversations, I tried to follow the specific lines of thoughts on which the interviewees embarked, encouraging them to elaborate on their arguments. Only when interviewees ran out of ideas, I started to bring up alternative concepts, enquiring for instance if they deemed the news item "trustworthy", "independent", or "objective". Towards the end of the discussions, I began suggesting alternative interpretations on both sides of their own ideological position (for instance, more in favor vs. more critical of the powers-that-be), using formulas such as "many Russians say" or "others participants told me". I started out with showing the state TV report, as the oppositional blog entry portrayed Russia in a rather negative light, unsettling some participants. Yet, as rapport was firmly established at this point, in all interviews, a friendly and positive atmosphere was maintained. The conversations about each news item lasted typically between 5 and 15 minutes.

**Materials**

For matters of illustration, the contents of the two news items will be outlined in the results section where they can be immediately followed by the decodings of participants.

## Results

### Making Sense of State TV: Medvedev Opening the Election Campaign

**The news item.** The first piece of news that the participants viewed was a 3:14 minutes broadcast taken from the 6 pm evening news program *Vremya*, aired on August 29, 2011 on Russia's *First Channel* (Perviy Kanal, 2011). The *First Channel* is Russia's most-watched TV channel, with *Vremya* being the most-watched news broadcast (Oates, 2006; Mickiewicz, 2008). In the last week of August 2011, *Vremya* achieved viewing rates of up to 22 percent of Russians watching TV at that time (TNS, 2011). The original clip and full transcript of the broadcast can be viewed online, with English subtitles added by the author (see online supporting materials). The news item was introduced by the anchor as follows:

> Today, Dmitry Medvedev officially opened the election campaign in Russia. The President signed a decree that established the date of elections to the State Duma. The polling will be held on December 4, as the Head of State announced at a meeting with representatives of political parties. (Perviy Kanal, 2011)

The news item then continues with showing the leaders of the Kremlin-loyal, so-called "systemic" opposition parties waiting for, shaking hands with, and listening to President Medvedev. In extensive close-up sequences, Medvedev announces that several amendments to the electoral law were introduced in order to guarantee a maximum of "fair competition":

> As president and guarantor of the constitution, I can say that our country is prepared to hold elections […] To be sure, an election campaign is always a fight. It always comes with a splash of emotions, with claims. This is normal, and, as a matter of fact, has to be that way. Otherwise, this would not be a democracy. […] For us, two things are equally unacceptable: administrative arbitrariness of officials, who try to tamper with elections, and unsubstantiated accusations of falsification, which rather frequently arise

> on the side of those who loose. Both, one and the other are manifestations of notorious law nihilism. One must be able to win honestly, and to loose honestly. That's how life is. (Perviy Kanal, 2011)

*Vremya*-correspondent Alexey Petrov reinforces this statement of the President by adding that to "exclude the possibility of electoral fraud, even hypothetical electoral fraud, the electoral commission is currently being equipped with new technology". The leaders of the systemic opposition parties are extensively shown but are not given a voice. In the following, I will outline the three types of decoding as they were produced by interviewees.

**Affirmative decoders.** A first group (8 participants) answered the opening question by more or less reproducing the narrative of the President and the Vremya journalist. These participants took the message full and straight. They said that the news broadcast was about the election campaign being opened, about the law having been improved to guarantee fair competition, and about political parties that would now fight for power. For the purpose of illustration an interview fragment is presented. The following opening sequence is taken from the interview with Yulia (18, 2nd year BA Sociology, self-identifying as "apolitical").

> Interviewer: What do you think about this? What was this video about?
>
> Yuliya: About elections being held in our country. People will vote for a party, from which a president will be selected. At least I think so. The parties will compete for who gets the first place in the state. […]
>
> Interviewer: Do you think this broadcast was well done?
>
> Yuliya: Yes, this was independent information, that's immediately visible.
>
> Interviewer: Objective information?
>
> Yuliya: Yes. The First Channel is objective. I do not know about the others. But what is shown on the First Channel, is all objective.
>
> Interviewer: Why do think that this is objective? What tells you that?
>
> Yuliya: Because this is our central channel. If this was not objective information, we

would not have a democracy. There would not be freedom of opinion.

In a similar way, also the other participants in this group were convinced that the state TV news broadcast was "truthful", "objective" and "independent".

**Negotiated decoders.** A second group (4 participants) produced negotiated readings of the news broadcast. Their accounts featured a wide variety of adaptive and oppositional elements, often "shot through with contradictions" (Hall, 1973, p. 17). A typical negotiated reading is put forward by Iosif (21, 1st year Economics, "probably conservative"). Iosif is fully aware that, contradictory to what is said in the report, "there will be no major competition". Yet, this may not only be due to pressures on the campaign but also due to the fact that most citizens want to "play it safe and vote for those whom they already know". Iosif is fully aware that Russia's *First Channel* is "a tool of those in power", just "like any other media organization anywhere in the world". He at least partly approves of this, saying that "probably not everybody has to know what happens". However, he then reflects that this attitude of his might be due to "Russians being used to strong rulers". And he immediately brings up the counter-argument that strong rule might also come with "negative consequences" like corruption. Decodings like Iosif's, partly repeating elements of the official code and partly including conflicting frames were characteristic in this group of participants.

**Oppositional decoders.** A third group (7 interviewees) decoded the newscast from an explicitly oppositional position. When asked what they think about the clip, these participants did not bother to repeat what was reported. Rather, they immediately started out to counter the encoding of the newscast by saying, for instance, that what they saw was "another little spectacle" (Daniil, 22, 1st year MA sociology, "socialist, conservative"), an attempt to "create the impression of political competition" (Sasha, 23, 3rd year BA Applied Political Science, "undetermined"), or meant to assure citizens "that the electoral system makes progress" (Tagir, 21, 1st year MA Economics, "tries not to express his opinion, outside any ideology").

These participants deconstructed the newscast by referring to prior stocks of

knowledge: Some contended that they do not know "one single person who has voted for United Russia" (Daniil, Tagir), others had read about or learnt through friends of electoral fraud (Dmitry, 19, BA Applied Political Science, "nationalist"; Vera, 22, 1st year MA Economics, "undetermined"). Two interviewees complained about Medvedev's poor rhetorical skills (Tagir, Vera). Most of the participants in this group considered the newscast "typical" for the First Channel. Masha (18, 2nd year BA Sociology, "undetermined"), for instance, said that on state TV, the president always says a couple of nice things and then tells off selected officials for their shortcomings. Some participants were following foreign media and pointed out structural differences (Tagir, Masha). To sum up, it is characteristic for this group of students to fully reject the encoding of social reality presented on state-controlled TV and reframe it in a fundamentally disparate ideological framework.

**Making Sense of a Liberal-democratic Blog: Yashin's Arrest**

**The news item.** The second piece of news the participants viewed was an entry to the blog of Il'ya Yashin (2011), a leader of the liberal-democratic oppositional movement *Solidarity* (Russian: Solidarnost'). In the blog entry posted on 1 June 2011, Yashin reports about how he was arrested the day before, while speaking at a protest meeting. An amateur video of his arrest is embedded. A translation of the blog entry and a subtitled version of the clip are accessible online (see online supporting materials). The 1:14 minute clip shows Yashin cutting his way through a crowd of protesters and journalists on Triumphal Square in Moscow. In the midst of a group of photographers, Yashin halts and starts out to speak:

> Friends! Today we have gathered once again on Triumphal Square to express our protest against the continuous and systematic violation of the constitution of our country. To attain our right to free assembly, we have met here for more than two years, and we will meet here until the constitution will be respected in our country. […] All these two years, they have beaten us, arrested us, chased us away… (Yashin, 2011)

At this point, Yashin is seized from behind by a group of policemen in black helmets

and dragged into a police van. A girl screeches. A few seconds later all is calm.

The meeting was part of the so-called *Strategy 31*, a series of protests that had been held every 31st day of a month in Moscow and other Russian cities since 2009. *Strategy 31* was supported by a wide variety of political groups, united mostly by the goal to attain the right to free assembly. Even though this right was formally granted by article 31 of the Russian constitution, authorities rarely issued permissions for protests in city centers, requesting protesters to meet in the outskirts. Supporters of *Strategy 31* oftentimes disregarded these bans and met in the centers. The video on the blog shows an unsanctioned meeting on May 31, 2011 in Triumphal Square in Moscow with approximately 100 participants. The protest was dispersed. 26 individuals, mostly political leaders were arrested but released a few hours later. Prior protest meetings of *Strategy 31* had ended similarly in the two years before.

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections 2011, a number of members of *Solidarity*, including Yashin, joined the larger coalition *People's Freedom Party – For Russia without Lawlessness and Corruption* (PARNAS). PARNAS attempted to officially register as a party and participate in the elections. However, the Russian Ministry of Justice denied PARNAS registration, claiming that the submitted member lists of the party included fake names of non-existing individuals. In the interviews, I asked students to read the first two paragraphs of the blog entry and then watch the 1:19 minute video that was embedded at this point. I started out the discussion asking "What do you think about this?"

**Affirmative decoders.** A first group (7 participants) produced affirmative readings of the blog. Thus, what these students saw was a young man standing up for his rights to free speech and free assembly, guaranteed by the Russian constitution. They saw the police acting "brutally" or "violently" to suppress dissent, on the orders of the powers-that-be. A typical decoding was produced by Vladimir (21, 5th year diploma Psychology, "undetermined"). According to him, the clip showed a peaceful man who did nothing wrong but merely "expressed his opinion". The police "dispersed the meeting brutally".

> Vladimir: This shows that we do not have a democracy at all. These people came to defend the constitution, the most important document, guaranteeing rights and freedom to individuals. And what follows is, of course, arbitrariness. This must not be that way.

**Negotiated decoders.** This group (7 students) produced negotiated readings of the blog entry, adopting a mix of affirmative and oppositional codes. Most of these interviewees saw police "violence". They disapproved of that violence and of the regime suppressing oppositional thought. However, they also disapproved of the protesters' decision to take to the street and, equally, of their goals of setting up a liberal-democratic state. Some interviewees stated that the protesters' behavior was "useless" or "financed by the West to take everything apart" (Aleksandr, 19, 3rd year BA Political Science, „undetermined"). Most participants in this group were skeptical of liberal-democratic values. Some also showed tendencies towards alternative non-democratic ideologies, i.e. communist or nationalist ideas.

Sasha (23, 3rd year BA Political Science, "undetermined"), for instance, strongly disapproves of the behavior of the police, complaining that Russia is a "police state". He has extensive background knowledge on *Strategy 31* but has come to the conclusion "that these meetings are always very loud, but not very much comes from it". Yet, this clip is a proof that complete freedom of opinion does not exist in Russia. And, "of course, some of the people, who speak out for full freedom in our country, work for some Western organizations, but that's already something that you can never get rid of". Similarly, "leftist" Anatoliy sees "violent" behavior of the police, which reminds him of protests he has participated in when he was a member of the communist youth. However, he says that, recently, he has come to the conclusion that it is better to "actually do something", i.e. become a doctor or work for government, than to simply "cry out something in the streets".

**Oppositional decoders.** This group (6 participants) produced explicitly oppositional readings of the blog entry. In the clip, these students see a young man breaking the law. They do not speak of protesters but of "rioters", oftentimes making comparisons to recent youth ri-

ots in England and France. Some interviewees stress that the reaction of the police was clearly "adequate". Others even conjecture that the arrest might have been staged by Yashin for publicity reasons. All agree that, if these unrests were not suppressed, "chaos" would be the consequence. There would be economic decline, maybe even a collapse of the state – things that happened after the October revolution in 1917 or the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

One of the most sophisticated and fully elaborated oppositional readings is produced by Kyrill (22, MA in Economics, "close to liberal views, but not very sure"). Being well informed about *Strategy 31*, Kyrill starts out with arguing that this event, from a juridical point of view, was illegal. Consequently, the police had the right to proceed as they did. Yashin's speech was "only for show", he is a professional politician. Kyrill says he does not understand why the police arrested Yashin exactly at this symbolic point of his speech and suspects that Yashin might have paid a policeman for this. Yashin profits from the fact that he is exactly arrested in this very moment. Moreover, at the meeting "there were more journalists than people". Kyrill does not regard the people on the square as a "real opposition": While Yashin works to "cultivate a specific image of his", a real opposition would aspire to change something. By contrast, Yashin behaves like "a film star who invites paparazzi to take pictures of him", so people would later buy his discs. These people can give nice speeches in front of cameras, claiming that they are victims. But, if they break the law, how can they call upon the government not to break the law? In the USA, Kyrill knows, even bigger protests were dispersed on Wall Street – even though people there did not even aim to topple the government.

**Patterns of Decoding**

As the previous two subsections exposed, with regard to both news items, each of the three positions of decoding were taken by substantial numbers of students. In decoding the state TV news broadcast, 8 students operated fully within the code of the semi-authoritarian regime; 4 produced negotiated, and 7 oppositional readings. In the discussions of the liberal-democratic blog entry, 7 affirmative, 7 negotiated, and 6 oppositional decodings emerged.

The data thus clearly evidence a yawning "interpretive divide" that ran through the interviewed group. Moreover, 3 participants produced affirmative decodings of both items. These participants, when carefully pointed to the logical contradictions that were inherent to their readings, started feeling uncomfortable and tried to cut off further discussions. Finally, 4 interviewees produced negotiated readings of both news items; one participant decoded both items from an oppositional position.

**Predictors of Positions of Decoding**

An intriguing question is now whether, in the group interviewed for this study, we can identify factors that predicted how an individual would decode the two news items. Personal characteristics like "gender", "age" or "course of study" did not appear to be associated with any specific pattern of decoding. Establishing a meaningful variable reflecting the "political views" of participants turned out to be unfeasible. While "party identification" or "support for ideologies" designated with specific labels (for instance "liberal", "conservative", or "social-democratic") may provide useful clues in Western contexts, no comparable fixed ideological anchors seemed to be present in the consciousness of the interviewed group. Even basic agreement on the meaning of key terms like "democratic", "nationalist" or "conservative" was widely lacking. Navigating the ideologically strongly fragmented media environment of the Russian hybrid regime, many interviewees had developed highly individualistic understandings of certain concepts and views on political reality. This seems in line with claims of Russian researchers that only about one third of adult Russian citizens are currently able to "characterize their political leanings more or less definitely" (Kolocharova, 2011, p. 10).

However, in the interviewed group, one strong predictor for the code in which an individual operated could be identified: his or her regular pattern of media use. In the third section of the interview (see methods), I mapped out the daily practices of media use of each participant in detail. In the end, however, an excellent dummy variable for a highly relevant pattern of media use turned out to be the simple fact if a participant had heard of *Strategy 31* before

the interview (yes or no). At the time of research, protests under the label *Strategy 31* had been taking place in Russia every other month for more than two years. The protest actions were regularly covered in all spheres of the Russian hybrid media landscape – except in the official sphere. Consequently, if individuals had not heard of *Strategy 31*, they were obviously either solely relying on official media to receive political information or they were not following political news at all. By contrast, to know about *Strategy 31* required at least an occasional checking of the news discourse in other spheres. In this study, the dummy variable "knowledge about *Strategy 31*" (0/1) can thus be used to divide the interviewed group in two clusters: A cluster 0 of politically narrowly informed students that relied exclusively on official media or did not follow the news at all; and a cluster 1 of broader informed students that regularly checked media beyond the official sphere. 13 of 20 participants had heard of *Strategy 31* before the interview (cluster 1). Seven had not (cluster 0).

**Patterns of media use and decodings of the state TV report.** It is now interesting to see that all seven students of cluster 0 produced affirmative readings of the state TV broadcast. As this finding suggests, relying exclusively on official media or not following political news at all seemed to be short of a necessary precondition for making sense of state TV in a purely affirmative way. By contrast, students in the broader informed cluster 1 produced – without exception – either oppositional or negotiated decodings of the state TV report.

**Patterns of media use and decodings of the liberal-democratic blog entry.** In the case of the liberal-democratic blog entry, none of the three positions of decoding seemed to be similarly linked to one of the two clusters of students. While three of the seven narrowly-informed individuals produced affirmative decodings, others were able to create oppositional (2 interviewees) or negotiated decodings (2). Nonetheless, students in cluster 0 were obviously the ones more startled and emotionally touched by receiving the video of Yashin's arrest. The information shown in the clip was new to these students, and many clearly struggled to bring the dissonant message in agreement with their previously held beliefs. By contrast, stu-

dents of cluster 1 knew that oppositional protests were regularly dispersed by the Russian police. The impact of the oppositional blog entry appeared thus strongest on narrowly informed individuals with low levels of political interest. However, in the context of the Russian hybrid regime, these individuals were also the least likely to receive such oppositional messages in their everyday lives, as they were not following political discourses beyond the sphere of official media.

## Discussion: Making Sense of the News in Hybrid Regimes

What tentative conclusions can we draw from the findings of this explorative study in regard to media audiences in contemporary Russia and in other hybrid regimes? And what do these conclusions suggest for future research on audiences in hybrid regimes?

### The Young Russian Audience

If we accept the interviewed group as at least roughly representative of Russia's urban and educated youth, the conclusion is that, at the time of research, a yawning "interpretive divide" was separating the young, urban, and educated audience of Russia's fragmented media landscape. While a large proportion of this group made sense of official TV exactly in the way intended by Russia's ruling elites (affirmative decoders), at the other end of the spectrum, we can assume another large group that explicitly rejected the official discourse (oppositional decoders). In regard to the liberal-democratic media sphere, we can suspect a roughly reversed pattern of media reception. These findings, to a certain degree, can be seen as challenging previous focus group research on Russian audiences that arrived at the rather optimistic conclusion that Russian viewers "with any level of education are impressive, with a formidable armory of ways to get at the news", showing "remarkable abilities […] and unique motivation" (Mickiewicz 2008, p. 206).

### Media Audiences in Hybrid Regimes

Based on the broader argument of this article and the interview data, I would like to put forward the following preliminary hypotheses on media audiences in contemporary Russia

that might also hold true in other contemporary hybrid regimes. These hypotheses could be tested in future research. (1) Audiences in hybrid regimes are – just as the media landscapes in these states – ideologically highly fragmented. While substantial proportions of the citizenship of a hybrid regime may operate in the official code, significant other proportions may not. (2) In predicting the code in which an individual operates, regular patterns of media use (i.e. reception of different media spheres) seem to be of crucial importance. (3) The code in which an individual operates can be seen as strongly mediating his or her news reception. It can be imagined as a type of "last filter inside the head" that can function just as effectively as traditional forms of internet control (Deibert et al., 2010; MacKinnon, 2008). (4) As the findings of this explorative study suggest, in hybrid regimes, only narrowly informed individuals (defined as not following news discourses beyond the official sphere or not following the news at all) tend to operate fully in the official code. By contrast, broader informed individuals decode official media discourse either from a straight-forward oppositional or at least from a negotiated position. (5) In hybrid regimes, extremely low informed individuals (particularly those who are not following the news at all) will tend to make sense of any of the dissonant discourses "full and straight", i.e. in the way intended by the encoder. (7) Finally, in the interviews conducted for this study, it was striking to observe how specific frames that dominated the official media discourse also surfaced in many negotiated and oppositional decodings of the liberal-democratic blog-entry. For instance, in oppositional readings of the blog entry, many students brought up the frame that the *Strategy 31*-protesters were "rioters", explicitly associating the clip with recent youth riots in Europe and violent protests against social cutbacks in Greece. This specific frame cannot be regarded as deeply rooted in Russian culture, as violent youth protests in Europe were a phenomenon of rather recent origin. On state-controlled Russian TV, however, pictures of street "riots" in Europe were omnipresent during the four weeks I spent in Russia to conduct the interviews. In a way, it thus appears that Russia's ruling elites are very aptly employing the news discourse in the powerful sphere of offi-

cial media to spread or foster specific interpretive frames that "immunize" individuals against oppositional messages disseminated in liberal-democratic media or blogs.

**Suggestions for Qualitative Studies of Audiences in Hybrid Regimes**

As indicated above, the – to date only – previous study on how Russian audiences are making sense of specific news items (Mickiewicz, 2008; see also Oates, 2006) arrived at more positive conclusions regarding the abilities and motivations of Russian citizens. Why do the findings of this study suggest a slightly different picture? Firstly, the results of the two studies are difficult to compare as Mickiewicz adopts a completely disparate theoretical lens. She develops her argument against the backdrop of the predominantly US-American literature on political cognition and TV viewers' use of "mental shortcuts" and "heuristics", i.e. techniques to extract meaning from low-quality media discourse (Crigler, Just, & Neuman, 1992). Secondly, however, Mickiewicz also adopts a different method. While the present study is based on one-to-one interviews, Mickiewicz commissioned focus groups. In focus groups of 10 individuals, it appears likely that more knowledgeable individuals will dominate the discussions, while we will learn less about the less sophisticated and contained. These imbalances might distort our views on audiences in certain respects – a tendency that should be explicitly reflected by researchers in their choice of method for future studies.

Moreover, Mickiewicz (2008) conducted her focus groups nearly ten years ago and focused exclusively on TV audiences. Against this backdrop, it seems particularly intriguing to expand on the research design tested in this explorative study, which has produced promising findings in the highly fragmented media environment of a contemporary hybrid regime. In the specific case of Russia, data collection could be easily extended in several directions: First and foremost, interviewees could be included from other social backgrounds (blue and white-collar workers, pensioners, villagers, etc.) and from different regions (outside Russia's urban centers). In addition, more news items from each media sphere could be presented to interviewees to investigate how consistent they are in their decodings of one sphere. Thirdly, me-

dia content from other marginalized media spheres (for instance, the nationalist or communist spheres) could be incorporated in the research design; by doing so, researchers could explore to what degree these ideologies resonate with different groups in Russian society. Finally, the research design could easily be adapted to study audiences in other (semi-)authoritarian regimes in Asia or the Arab world.

**Suggestions for Quantitative Audience Research in Hybrid Regimes**

**Conceptualizing the variable media use.** As outlined above, the majority of current survey studies on audiences in (semi-)authoritarian regimes are based on questionnaire items that measure media use according to the channel of communication, for instance internet use vs. no internet use. However, the findings of this study suggest that in the converging media environments of economically developed hybrid regimes, these distinctions have lost in importance. Instead, it might make sense, wherever the research design allows for this, to distinguish between different spheres of the media landscape according to the "code" in which they operate. A simple solution might be to distinguish between spheres of "official" and "non-official" media. As this study illustrated, a reliable short-cut to find out about relevant patterns of media use might be to test an individual's knowledge about key events or key issues that were regularly covered in one sphere but not in another. This shortcut also avoids problems that are connected to having to rely on self-reported data on media use.

**Incorporating decodings of news items in quantitative surveys.** Moreover, an intriguing path for future research might be to incorporate short news items taken from different media spheres in quantitative surveys. Based on the interview experience in this study, I assume that it is possible to establish the position from which an individual decodes a news item not only in an unstructured interview, but also by a small number of multiple choice items in a questionnaire. If this approach is feasible, it would allow a representative study on how different segments of the population of a hybrid regime relate to different spheres of their media landscape. The emerging findings could help to rethink and reframe two long-standing prob-

lems of both survey and focus group research on audiences in non-democratic regimes: the conceptualizations of media "credibility" and "trust" (Oates, 2006; Moehler & Sing, 2011). These terms have shown to have widely different meanings to different people in different cultural contexts. One alternative here could be, for instance, to assume that affirmative decoders of the state TV newscast in this study "trusted" or "believed in" the reporting of this channel on the election campaign, whereas oppositional decoders did not. This, again, would shift the mode of measurement from self-reporting to observed interaction between media content and audience members.

**Using the decoding approach to "anchor" survey research.** In recent literature on survey methodology, the use of so-called "anchoring vignettes" has been hailed as a new way to generate more accurate measurement of complex notions such as democracy, freedom, privacy, and corruption across different cultural contexts (King et al., 2004; Bratton, 2010). To do so, short sketches ("vignettes") of hypothetical cases are included in survey questionnaires to find out how a respondent understands a core concept. This data is then used to re-evaluate or rescale answers on other survey items and thus increase interpersonal comparability. In a similar way, confronting survey respondents with short news items and establishing in which code they operate could not only reveal their understanding of an isolated core concept like "democracy", but it would even give us an idea about their more complex, cohesive pattern of thinking. For instance, the information whether an individual operates in the official or liberal-democratic code can be used to interpret his or her answers to other survey items.

## Conclusion: The Last Filter inside the Head

In this article, I argued that the media landscape of Russia's contemporary hybrid regime is fragmented in a number of spheres that are encoded from different ideological positions. Subsequently, I explored how young, urban, and educated Russians were decoding messages taken from two of these spheres. In in-depth interviews, I investigated how 20 students decoded a report from state-controlled TV (representing the official media sphere) and

an oppositional blog entry (representing the liberal-democratic sphere). The interviews revealed how crucially the way participants made sense of the liberal-democratic blog entry depended on the code in which they operated, i.e. on what we might call the "last filter inside the head". To pass this last – and in Russia's hybrid regime oftentimes: the only – filter inside the head, political messages published on (liberal-democratic) blogs must be decoded by individuals in the (liberal-democratic) code of the encoders. As the findings of this study suggest, in contemporary Russia a significant proportion – even of young, urban, and educated citizens – are currently not operating in a liberal-democratic code. This is why even political messages presented in sharply oppositional interpretive frameworks, such as the video of Yashin's arrest, can be freely available online to an ever increasing share of the population – without seriously damaging the legitimacy of the ruling elites. At a more abstract level, the line of argument presented in this study can thus also be seen as helping to understand an observation that continues to surprise political observers (Boas & Kalathil, 2003; Lynch, 2011; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011): the astonishing stability of many contemporary (semi-)authoritarian regimes that pursue rather open policies towards the net.

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