

Florian Toepfl

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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Toepfl, Florian (2013) Four facets of critical news literacy in a non-democratic regime: how young Russians navigate their news. [European journal of communication](#). ISSN 0267-3231 (In Press)

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Four facets of critical news literacy in a non-democratic regime:

How young Russians navigate their news

Florian Toepfl

London School of Economics and Political Science

Article forthcoming in the *European Journal of Communication*

(This is a post-peer review version. The original article will slightly deviate. Before citing this version, please check if the article has already been published at

<http://ejc.sagepub.com/>)

Author Note

Florian Toepfl, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics, UK.

This research was supported by a Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship sponsored within the 7th Framework Program of the European Union and a research fellowship of the Thyssen Foundation. Moreover, I owe thanks to the Russian students who participated in the project, to Natalya Yegorova for typing the interview transcripts, and to Sanja Kapidzic for proof-reading the English manuscript.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Florian Toepfl, London School of Economics, Department of Media and Communications, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: f.h.toepfl@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

Fuelled by the Arab spring, the question of how the rise of internet-mediated communication affects authoritarian regimes has received unprecedented attention within the discipline of communications. However, in this debate, scholars have not yet turned to the concept of literacy and addressed the role of citizens' knowledge about political media in any greater depth. This is surprising since the concept of literacy as 'emancipatory knowledge' has a 'long and proud history' (Livingstone, 2008: 60) of being linked with processes of enlightenment, political empowerment, and democratization. The present study contributes to filling this gap by suggesting four highly consequential facets of critical news literacy in contemporary Russia, a high-profile hybrid regime. Conceptual development is grounded in western literature and 20 in-depth interviews with young, urban, and educated Russians.

Keywords

Political communication, global media and social change, literacy, audience reception, Russia, non-democratic regimes

In the wake of the Arab spring, the academic debate on how the rise of internet-mediated communication affects authoritarian regimes has received unprecedented attention within the discipline of communications. Special issues or sections on the topic have been published by major journals such as the *Journal of Communication* (Howard and Parks, 2012) and the *International Journal of Communication* (Allgui and Johanne, 2011). However, one classic field of communication research has to date received astonishingly little attention within this literature: the study of audiences. Aside from findings from a number of works based on coarse-grained survey data (Lei, 2011; Norris and Inglehart, 2011), we still know surprisingly little about how internet users in today's non-democratic regimes navigate and make sense of the political news that they encounter in their new, now largely internet-based, information environments.

However, this is precisely where a set of intriguing questions for audience researchers arise. With regard to traditional media environments dominated by television, a number of excellent studies have investigated how citizens of non-democratic regimes think about and process political news (with respect to Russia, consider for instance Oates, 2006; Mickiewicz, 2008). However, these studies have not explored new media audiences. Questions that have barely been raised to date include: in the new information environments of today's non-democratic regimes, *what* specific stocks of knowledge do citizens need in order to critically navigate and evaluate political news? And *how* will different stocks of such media-related knowledge impact the ways in which citizens of these regimes navigate and make sense of their news?

With regard to western democracies, cognate issues have recently been extensively discussed and investigated, very often by scholars interested in the concept of *literacy* (for recent overviews of this literature, consider Buckingham, 2005; Coiro et

al., 2008; Hobbs, 2011; Livingstone, 2008; Martens, 2010; Potter, 2010). However, these scholars have developed their arguments mostly against the empirical backdrop of western democracies (for exceptions in this regard, consider Fedorov, 2011; Freire and Macedo, 1987; Leung and Lee, 2012). Thus, while scholars concerned with the impact of the internet on non-democratic regimes have barely turned to investigating the role of audiences or to the concept of media literacy, scholars of media literacy have barely considered the specific conditions of critical literacy with regard to political news in non-democratic regimes. Against this backdrop, the primary aim of the present article is to link these two academic debates by proposing four facets of critical news literacy that are highly consequential in the internet-based information environment of contemporary Russia.

From a global perspective, starting out with a focus on Russia appears intriguing since the country is often considered a prime example of a so-called ‘hybrid regime’, combining elements of authoritarian and democratic rule (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 186-201). More specifically, Russia can be regarded as a relatively closed regime that pursues an open internet policy (Toepfl, 2011, 2012; Oates, 2006, 2007). In sharp contrast to its Chinese counterpart, the Russian internet is currently not being systematically filtered (Etling et al., 2010). In this semi-controlled environment, the news literacy of citizens can be assumed to be a particularly crucial factor affecting what news internet users come across. However, while conceptual development in this study will be grounded in empirical data from Russia, it is intended that the conclusions will also have a certain heuristic and explanatory value with regard to other (semi-)authoritarian regimes.

Within Russia, this explorative study starts out with a focus on young, urban,

and educated citizens because this group is considered in some sense a ‘digital avant-garde’ of Russian society: its members can be regarded as most fully immersed and versed in the new, internet-based information environment. Focusing on this specific group, the project will seek to answer primarily two research questions. (1) What are the crucial areas in which these young Russians need knowledge (= facets of media literacy) in order to critically navigate and evaluate political news? (2) And, secondly, how do different stocks of knowledge in these areas impact how they navigate and make sense of their news?

To work towards answering these questions, the rest of the article is structured as follows. The paper first briefly reviews the recent academic literature on media literacy and cognate concepts. It then gives an overview of the Russian media landscape and subsequently presents the methods adopted in this study. The next section – grounded in western academic literature and 20 in-depth interviews – develops and illustrates four important facets of critical news literacy in contemporary Russia. Finally, there is a discussion of how the findings of this study might contribute to and advance the recent academic literatures on (1) media audiences in Russia, (2) media literacies in western democracies, and (3) the impact of internet-mediated communication in non-democratic regimes.

Western research on media literacy and cognate concepts

According to a definition cited widely throughout the literature, media literacy is best understood as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993; Livingstone, 2008; Martens, 2010). This umbrella definition is adopted in a wide array of works encompassing the most diverse epistemic and disciplinary perspectives (for recent overviews of the literature, consider

Buckingham, 2005; Hobbs, 2011; Martens, 2010; Potter, 2010). Moreover, in the past decade a vibrant strand of literature on various forms of media-related ‘new literacies’ has emerged, with such frequently discussed concepts as cyberliteracy, internet literacy, information literacy, digital literacy and computer literacy (Coiro et al., 2008; see also Buckingham, 2005; Das, 2011; Hobbs, 2011; Livingstone, 2008; Martens, 2010; Potter, 2010). One of the central claims of this new body of research is that in the highly mediated societies of the internet age citizens need a wider range of skills and knowledge than before in order to cope with their now more complex media environments.

One way of structuring this vast and interdisciplinary body of literature is to distinguish between the two traditions of ‘media literacy’ and ‘information literacy’ research (Livingstone et al., 2008). Information literacy research has its origins in the fields of cognitive psychology and human-computer interaction. It emerged primarily in relation to digital media and, typically, attends more to questions of access. By contrast, media literacy research originated in media studies and education contexts. It emerged in relation to traditional audiovisual media and attends more to questions of critical understanding (cf. also Freire and Macedo, 1987). Recently, however, it appears that the two traditions have been converging (Livingstone et al., 2008: 108). Within this framework, the present study can be seen as rooted in the media literacy tradition, since it will focus more on the question of critical understanding. However, somewhat in the information literacy tradition, it develops its argument in relation to an internet-based, multimedia environment.

A further specific of this study is that it focuses specifically on citizens’ literacy with regard to political news. By contrast, in the academic literature critical *media* (not *news*) literacy is typically discussed as referring to knowledge and skills in a wider

range of areas. In a comprehensive survey of 165 articles using the concept, Martens (2010) finds that most authors regard knowledge and skills on four facets of the mass media as essential aspects of media literacy (media industries, media messages, media audiences, and media effects). The 5th edition of Potter's (2010) popular textbook *Media Literacy* contains chapters on privacy issues, violent content, media industries, media ownership, advertising and entertainment, alongside only one chapter specifically focusing on political news. In the chapter on news, Potter posits as important elements of news literacy citizens' knowledge of the working conditions of journalists, their knowledge of the influence of media ownership, and their familiarity with such concepts as framing, news bias, objectivity, and balance.

In a further alternative approach, Kellner and Share (2005) outline five core elements of media literacy that demand, for instance, awareness of individuals that 'all media messages are constructed' and that 'different people may experience the same message differently' (for still other conceptualizations, consider Buckingham, 2005; Hobbs, 2011). While the different foci of these western approaches cannot be covered in detail here, conceptual development in this article has implicitly drawn heavily on this literature. The discussion section will compare and contrast the four facets of critical news literacy as they are suggested here for non-democratic regimes with frequently cited western conceptualizations.

Research on media literacy in non-democratic regimes

With the rise of the internet in the past decade, vibrant academic debates on new forms of media literacy education have also emerged in non-democratic states like Russia, China, and Singapore (Fedorov, 2011; Liao, 2008; Phang and Schaefer, 2009). In Russia, even an academic journal dedicated specifically to *Media Education (Me-*

diaobrazovaniya) has been published since 2005. However, in non-democratic regimes these discourses are mostly not oriented towards the goals of promoting active citizenship and critical approaches to political messages (cf. Fedorov, 2011). Instead, they focus on fostering technical skills and aesthetic and moral judgment, as Liao (2008) argues for China. Moreover, these debates are at present barely reflected in major international journals. The few studies of media literacy in non-democratic regimes that have been published in major journals largely avoid the thorny ideological terrain of political news. These studies mostly originate in what Livingstone et al. (2008) refer to as the information literacy tradition (cf., for instance, Leung and Lee, 2012; an exception to some extent in this regard is the work of Phang and Schaefer, 2009).

Fragmented in Spheres: The Contemporary Russian Media Landscape

A characteristic feature of the Russian media – and also of media in other hybrid regimes – appears to be the co-existence of different spheres that encode social reality from starkly disparate ideological perspectives (Toepfl, 2013). In contemporary Russia, it makes sense to distinguish at least five spheres: (1) a sphere of official media that transmits the ideology of the hybrid regime (consisting of state-controlled TV channels, radio channels, newspapers, internet news sites, and politicians' blogs); (2) a sphere of mainstream commercial media where reports are slightly critical of, but largely loyal to, the regime (including, for instance, leading yellow press newspapers and news sites controlled by businessmen with close ties to the Kremlin); (3) a sphere of liberal-democratic media (consisting of oppositional internet TV channels, radio channels, news sites, and blogs of political activists); and two spheres of (4) communist and (5) nationalist media, consisting of smaller clusters of online news sites, newspapers, and blogs (for more detailed information on the Russian media landscape, consider Toepfl,

2010, 2011, 2013; Etling et al., 2010; Mickiewicz, 2006; Oates, 2007, 2008).

A second important characteristic of the media landscape of Russia's hybrid regime is that the official media sphere is overwhelmingly dominant in terms of audience reach. At the time this research was conducted, the three most-watched TV channels were tightly controlled by the ruling elites and represented the powerful core of the official sphere (cf. also Oates, 2006, 2007). By contrast, the reach of the other four spheres remained extremely limited. Asked in a survey 'what is the medium you most often get your news from?', 92 percent of Russians answered TV. 23% said print media, 19% online news sites, 19% radio, 16% talking with friends, and 6% blogs, forums, and social media (Fond Obshchestvennoe Mneniya, 2011).

However, at the time the research for this article was carried out, this status quo was threatened by technological change. While in 2003 no more than four percent of Russians went online at least once a week, the number had grown to 48 percent by early 2012 (Fond Obshchestvennoe Mneniya, 2012). In the new, internet-based information environment, traditional state-controlled TV and sharply oppositional news sites are now separated only by a mouse-click. Political messages from all five spheres can be easily accessed on the same device – at no additional cost, anytime, anywhere, and without fear of consequences. In this specific environment, it depends almost exclusively on the intentional decision of an individual to follow a specific source of news – or to avoid it. This intentional decision, in turn, has to be taken on the basis of specific knowledge about political mass media. It is precisely these stocks of knowledge of young Russians that the following sections will set out to explore.

Method

Participants

In selecting participants, a purposeful sampling strategy was pursued that combined ‘criterion sampling’ with ‘maximum-variation sampling’ (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011: 111-113). The goal was to interview a group of young, urban, and educated Russians (criterion sampling) differing widely in terms of gender, age, studies pursued and political views held (maximum variation sampling). The group interviewed was thus clearly not representative of Russian society as a whole. Rather, participants were selected in order to explore characteristic patterns of knowledge and media use in a young and internet-savvy ‘avant-garde’ of Russian society. In order to recruit participants, I posted announcements to the mailing lists of two social science departments at leading research universities in St. Petersburg and Moscow and proceeded via the snowball method. I continued the process of interviewing until the data appeared theoretically saturated with regard to the four facets presented below (cf. Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

In the end, the interviewed group consisted of 12 male and eight female students who provided vastly different self-assessments of their political views (cf. Toepfl, 2013). Participants varied in age between 18 and 26 (median: 21). Fourteen students lived in St. Petersburg and six in Moscow. All participants had extensive technical skills in using computers and other devices to access the internet, i.e. skills widely referred to in the literature as information or digital literacy (Livingstone et al., 2008). All had practically 24/7 access to broadband networks. All owned at least one computer. Many also accessed the internet through a broad range of other devices, including smart phones, mobile phones and tablets.

Interview context and structure

All interviews were conducted by the researcher, in the Russian language, in St. Petersburg and Moscow in September and October 2011. Before being interviewed, participants signed a statement of informed consent and were guaranteed anonymity (their names were changed for the article). The researcher is a 36-year old white male who speaks Russian with accent. The data thus emerged in a social situation that most interviewees appeared to perceive as an informal, but 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 and Taylor, 2011: 194).

The interviews lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours and were divided into five sections. In section 1, I asked for personal characteristics. In section 2, I enquired about the devices that participants had access to, and when and where they typically used these devices to surf the internet. In section 3, I tried to reconstruct with participants which news formats they would access on a typical weekday. In section 4, I set out to explore stocks of knowledge that could be considered as dimensions of critical news literacy. Facing the methodological issue of exploring participants’ knowledge without imposing predefined concepts (Livingstone et al., 2008: 13), I opened section 4 with the simple question: ‘what do you think about the political mass media in Russia?’ As the conversations evolved, I tried to follow the specific lines of argument on which participants embarked, encouraging them to elaborate on their thoughts. In my questions, I avoided bringing up standard western concepts like *objective*, *censored*, *democratic*, *independ-*

ent, or *free* media. Instead, I used either the interviewees' own terms or everyday language. For instance, I asked what an interviewee considered *good*, *bad*, or *high-quality* news. Only when participants ran out of ideas of their own did I start probing western concepts. I then enquired what interviewees thought of *the media as a check on government*, as a *fourth estate*, or as a *free market of ideas*. In a fifth section of the interview, I discussed two specific news items with participants. The findings of this section are reported separately (Toepfl, 2013).

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed, with the first interview transcripts already available for analysis during the process of interviewing. Through a process of comparative reading and rereading that encompassed deductive and inductive elements (cf. Lindlof and Taylor, 2011: 246-48), I gradually arrived at four areas of knowledge that I considered to have particular impact on how participants navigated their internet-based news environments. After 20 interviews, the data appeared theoretically saturated with regard to these four dimensions (cf. Lindlof and Taylor, 2011), in the sense that the last five interviews added relatively little theoretical refinement to the concepts that I will suggest and illustrate in the next section.

Four Facets of Critical News Literacy in a Non-Democratic Regime

In presenting the four dimensions, I will proceed, with regard to each of the four dimensions, in two steps. In a first step, I will describe characteristic differences in knowledge of a particular dimension that I observed in the group interviewed. In a second step, I will illustrate how these differences in knowledge typically affected the ways in which participants navigated and made sense of their news.

Dimension I: Knowledge of the segmentation of the news environment

Differences in stocks of knowledge. In the group interviewed, I found highly consequential differences with regard to – what I came to call – ‘cognitive maps’ that participants used to navigate their news environments. These maps divided the Russian media landscape into different segments. They included not only attitudes and complex opinions towards each of the segments, but also expectations of what news formats could be found in each. I observed basically three types of map. A first group of students sketched out a bipolar map that arrayed different media on a one-dimensional continuum between the two extremes of controlled and not-controlled by the powers-that-be. A second group drew multi-polar maps that depicted the media landscape as a battlefield where different elite groups fought for power. A third group operated with a map that differentiated between serious and sensationalist segments of the news landscape. In each of the three groups, depth of knowledge varied widely. While some students could argue the differences between various segments of their map succinctly and drawing on a series of examples, others had no more than vague ideas. Some participants adopted different maps at different points in the interview; the third map especially could easily be combined with one of the first two.

Impact on navigation and sense-making. Students who navigated with a bipolar map of controlled vs. less controlled media tended to avoid state TV and other media in the official sphere, since they regarded these outlets as news sources of poorer quality. By contrast, those who navigated with a multi-polar map tended to regard state TV as one of many biased sources. Liza (22, 2nd year MA Sociology, multi-polar map), for instance, stated that she followed the news on state TV because she trusted a media outlet controlled by the government more than one controlled by a business oligarch. Students who operated with a serious vs. sensationalist map clearly preferred state-

controlled TV channels over other media. While these students were not strongly aware of the fact that these channels were state-controlled, they tended to prefer the state-controlled channels because these, in general, reported in a less sensational manner.

Dimension II: Knowledge of news production processes

Differences in stocks of knowledge. Even if a participant was able to sketch out a detailed map of the Russian media landscape, this did not necessarily coincide with any deeper knowledge of the conditions under which news was produced in different segments. In the group interviewed, I observed stark differences with regard to

- knowledge of ownership structures and consequences thereof (many Russian media are owned by wealthy business oligarchs with close ties to the Kremlin);
- knowledge of typical channels of political and economic pressure on media outlets and journalists (such as legal verdicts, paid articles or paid blog posts); and
- knowledge of the extent of pressure on and violence against journalists (Russia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists).

Many students lacked even basic knowledge in this domain. By contrast, one of the most knowledgeable participants was Daniil (22, 1st year MA Sociology). Daniil had earned a diploma in journalism from a university in a provincial town, where he had also worked as a journalist. In the interview, he distinguished between internal censorship (by the editor-in-chief) and external censorship (for instance, by legal verdicts). He was familiar with the fate of former Russian media moguls such as Boris Berezovsky, who lost his property and had to leave Russia in the early 2000s. Daniil also had detailed knowledge of present ownership structures in the Russian media market. He

knew, for instance, that the oppositional radio channel *Ekho Moskvyy* was owned by the state monopoly *Gazprom*. Daniil had also founded several Facebook discussion groups which he described as ‘moderately nationalistic’. According to him, these groups were closed down three times without comment. He strongly disapproved of this as limiting his freedom of opinion.

Impact on navigation and sense-making. While the maps participants used (facet I) appeared to affect which news organizations they tended to follow, knowledge of production processes seemed to be crucial to how students approached and made sense of specific news items. Evgenia (18, 1st year BA Sociology), for instance, operated with a bipolar map of controlled vs. less controlled media; she believed that the level of control increased from internet to newspapers to state TV. However, she lacked knowledge of the different practices by which the news in these segments was produced. Without this knowledge, she had difficulties in arguing the differences between the segments of her map. Asked, for instance, if she believed that the internet news sites that she trusted most were “objective or independent”, she answered:

I do not even know that. [...] It seems that very many facts are hidden. I think the internet sites that I visit have many visitors. That means they [the ruling elites] follow what information is published there. Probably, they are not a sufficiently objective source of information.

By contrast, Daniil, who had extensive knowledge in this field (cf. above), could argue very well which sources he visited and for what reasons and how he engaged with the information published there. To quote just one example, he said that it was difficult for him to fully trust the oppositional radio channel *Ekho Moskvyy*, since he knew that the state company *Gazprom* owned a majority of shares. But he said that for him the

chief editor, Alexei Venediktov, was a ‘person who has authority’. Venediktov had officially announced that he would leave the channel if the pressure became too strong. This was the reason why Daniil, to a certain degree, still ‘trusted’ the radio station as long as Venediktov led it. In a similar diligent and informed way, Daniil could also evaluate the reporting on state TV channels and the four political blogs that he regularly followed.

Dimension III: Knowledge of the ‘constructedness’ of political messages

Differences in stocks of knowledge. Participants also differed widely in the degree to which they were aware that social reality could be framed from different ideological perspectives. While some of the students were fully aware that ‘all media messages are constructed’ (Kellner and Share, 2005: 374; Potter, 2010), others were not.

Impact on navigation and sense-making. Students who were fully aware that all messages are constructed were able to challenge ‘the power of the media to present messages as non-problematic and transparent’ (Kellner and Share, 2005: 374). They were aware that political news did not simply reflect reality and thus could not be arrayed on a scale that ranged from *more true* (closer to reality) to *more false* (strongly distorting reality), but that all political messages were created, shaped and positioned through a construction process. Interviewees who were aware of the ‘constructedness’ of news were easily able to follow different sources and juxtapose ideological framings. Tagyr (21, 1st year MA Economics), for instance, followed – aside from a range of national media – twelve international newspapers and magazines through his Facebook account (amongst others the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic*) and an additional 50 blogs through RSS feeds on *googlereader*. He consciously compared the framing of political events as presented in this international collection of media outlets. He was

even able to formulate precise expectations of how certain events would typically be framed in the media of different countries.

By contrast, students who were not aware of the constructedness of social reality could only evaluate messages as – to a greater or lesser degree – true or false. Yulia (18, 2nd year BA Sociology), for instance, was well aware that state TV occasionally omitted or even ‘faked’ certain pieces of information. She had observed, for instance, how different media reported different numbers of deaths after a plane crash. Yet, if video footage of a meeting or other incident was broadcast on TV, this meant to her that this event had ‘most likely really happened’ – i.e. that it was ‘real’. This is why Yulia ‘trusted’ most in TV, since newspaper journalists, in her opinion, could more easily invent stories or events. For participants like Yulia, who lacked skills on this dimension, it appeared very difficult to cognitively process the ideologically sharply fragmented discourses produced by Russia’s media landscape. To these individuals, political news in Russia often appeared confusing, frustrating, and barely to make any sense, while ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ remained hidden by dark forces somewhere far beyond their reach.

Dimension IV: Knowledge of the role of the media in Russian society

Differences in stocks of knowledge. Participants also differed widely with regard to the ideas they held about the role of news media in Russian society. Some interviewees brought up societal functions of the media right at the beginning of the interview, without being prompted. Other participants, even when asked explicitly towards the end of the interview about ‘the tasks or functions media should perform for society’, could not think of anything beyond the basic idea that the media should ‘inform’. The tasks most commonly mentioned in the group were that news media should ‘guarantee transparency’, ‘provide independent information’, or ‘educate citizens’. By contrast, a

number of concepts that are typically discussed in western textbooks on media and politics appeared to be largely absent from the consciousness of the group interviewed. Only a few participants answered that the media should ‘check on government’ or act as a ‘fourth power’. No participant invoked the ideas of media as a ‘free market of ideas’ or a ‘self-righting process of ideas’. Towards the end of the interview, I explicitly brought up each of these concepts and asked students what they thought about it. Confirming the tendencies observed in the previous sections of the interview, in particular the concepts of the ‘media as a fourth power’, as a ‘free market of ideas’, and as a ‘self-righting process of ideas’ turned out to be completely new to many students. When I subsequently tried to set out the meaning of these concepts, some participants reacted with laughter. As it became clear in the conversations, these concepts were clearly dissonant with many participants’ prior patterns of thinking about political mass media.

What normative ideas would interviewees, then, suggest as alternatives? A number of students brought up the idea that mass media ‘in Russia just as everywhere else’ were ‘tools of those in power for guiding public opinion’ (Iosif, 21, MA Economics). Another common line of thought was one which I eventually termed the ‘stagnation vs. chaos narrative’. Students who produced this argument considered both too much and too little ‘media freedom’ to be a problem. While fully unleashing the mass media would destabilize the state and result in chaos, excessively harsh control would foster corruption, paralyze society and lead to stagnation, as happened in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. This narrative was often paired with a negative view of Russian citizens whom the interviewees deemed not (or not yet) capable of dealing with pluralistic media, making political decisions or acting in other respects as responsible citizens.

Impact on navigation and sense-making. The ideas participants had of the role

of mass media affected their patterns of navigation and sense-making in highly consequential, but very complex, ways. Iosif (21, MA Economics), for instance, was one of the students who operated with a variant of the stagnation vs. chaos narrative. Like other participants who did this, he conditionally approved of the news reporting on state-controlled TV, even though he was aware that political messages on these channels were heavily influenced by ruling elites. However, Iosif considered it the primary function of the media to ‘generate the right mood in society’. He thought that, when it came to politics, ‘not everybody has to know everything’, particularly not people living in the countryside. Thus, even though Iosif personally did not watch state TV regularly, he had a positive attitude towards it. He believed, for instance, that the recent financial crisis did not hit Russia too hard because state TV downplayed it. He considered this a positive, stabilizing effect of state-controlled media. However, Iosif himself watched state TV only very rarely and on specific occasions, such as after the resignation of a high official. In addition, on such occasions, he would search the internet for information and try to ‘guess what really happened’. Overall, Iosif thus approved of the information environment in Russia in its present form, even though he approached ‘each and every source with a specific skepticism’. By contrast, students who strongly endorsed the democratic control function of the mass media showed strong negative feelings towards the state-run segment. These participants commented cynically on the news discourse in that segment. Thus, most importantly, the stocks of knowledge in dimension IV can be regarded as a wider normative framework that encompassed and substantiated the knowledge structures in dimensions I to III.

Discussion

On Russian audiences, critical news literacy, and new information environments

This study advances the academic debate on media audiences in Russia primarily in two ways. Firstly, while previous studies have focused on TV audiences (cf. Oates, 2006; Mickiewicz, 2008), this project has investigated an audience that is deeply immersed in a new, largely internet-based information environment. As the findings illustrate, in this new environment individuals now also need specific stocks of new knowledge in order to critically navigate and evaluate political news. With the rise of the internet, a wide variety of novel news formats with specific production processes have emerged, such as political blogs, social network groups, and YouTube channels. In order to engage critically with these new formats, audiences require novel stocks of knowledge about the production processes of these new formats (facet II) and about the far more complex structure of the overall digital news environment (facet I). In other areas of knowledge, there appear to be strong continuities. Highly consequential patterns of thought raised earlier in TV audience focus groups have included, for instance, widespread disdain for sensationalist reporting and skepticism with regard to Western concepts of press freedom (cf. Oates, 2006: 44-65; Mickiewicz, 2008: 178-206). Overall, these continuities seem to be particularly evident in facets III and IV (constructiveness of messages / role of the media in society).

Secondly, this study has been the first to deploy the concept of media literacy in order to theorize what Russian audiences know about their news. Adopting this concept not only facilitated the development of four dimensions that structured the empirical findings in a novel and easily accessible way. It also allowed the empirical data to be presented within a theoretical framework that has a 'long and proud history of theorizing emancipatory knowledge' (Livingstone, 2008: 60). Most importantly, this account thus invites a discussion of the civic and democratizing potential that could spring from

developing knowledge about these four facets amongst citizens of contemporary non-democratic regimes (cf. Livingstone, 2008: 60).

Critical media literacy in Russia and in the West

An intriguing question now is how far these four dimensions parallel core elements of critical media literacy as discussed in western democracies. To summarize, many western approaches appear to include elements similar to dimensions II and III (Kellner and Share, 2005; Hobbs, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2008; Martens, 2010; Potter, 2010). By contrast, the concepts that were discussed as dimensions I and IV in this paper are less visible in debates on media literacy in western democracies.

Dimension I may have emerged in this study as particularly consequential because the media landscape of Russia's hybrid regime is much more ideologically fragmented than those of many western democracies. In consolidated western democracies, mass media discourse on politics is typically firmly rooted in a liberal-democratic consensus. By contrast, in contemporary Russia stark ideological differences divide media discourse into a number of spheres, with a strong presence of segments that present social reality within the framework of non-democratic ideologies (cf. Toepfl, 2013). Being aware that such divides exist can thus be seen as particularly crucial to critically navigating the extremely fragmented news environments of semi-democratic hybrid regimes. However, exploring the specific 'maps' that citizens adopt in order to navigate their news may also be a promising path for future research on media literacy in western contexts. As a cognitive tool, these maps could be of increased relevance in the more fragmented media environments of the internet age. It could be intriguing for media literacy scholars to ask, for instance, whether citizens in western democracies operate with maps that are divided into segments according to a perceived difference between

right-wing and left-wing media, between high- and low-brow media, or between traditional mass media and blogs.

Dimension IV could appear particularly salient in the Russian context because a number of widely held western beliefs concerning the mass media were not only absent in the group interviewed, but rejected as outright absurd. Ideas that were strongly dissonant with participants' prior knowledge included the notion that mass media could 'check on the government'; that they could be 'free'; that the media could act as a 'fourth estate'; or that they could function as a 'free market of ideas'. The social constructedness of these beliefs and their cultural specificity is obvious from the interview data of the present study. This is only rarely reflected, however, in western approaches to media literacy. A promising avenue for future media literacy initiatives might thus be to reflect more thoroughly and contrast how the mass media function in democratic societies with how the media operate in non-democratic regimes. Currently, the functioning of the news media in authoritarian, theocratic, dictatorial, or totalitarian societies is rarely broached in programs directed at enhancing media literacy in democratic societies (Kellner and Share, 2005; Hobbs, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2008; Martens, 2010).

Critical news literacy and the impact of the internet on non-democratic politics

One common causal story in current survey studies of audiences in non-democratic regimes (cf., for instance, Lei, 2011) is that internet use, operationalized mostly as access vs. non-access, results in citizens receiving a broader range of political perspectives. This, in turn, is alleged to contribute to a 'more critical and politicized citizenry', to a 'shift in the power relationship between the state and the society', and to a higher demand from citizens for democratic reforms (Lei, 2011: 311). However, depending on the selection of countries and the conceptualization of variables, other stud-

ies find negative correlations between internet use and democratic attitudes. Norris and Inglehart (2010: 212-4), for instance, in a comparative analysis based on survey data from more than forty countries, conclude that ‘use of all types of news media [including the internet] consistently showed a negative link with support for democratic principles in restricted media environments’. In interpreting these contradictory correlations, Norris and Inglehart (2010: 212) suggest the causal story that ‘propaganda achieve[d] its objectives’.

Against the backdrop of these two conflicting causal stories currently discussed in the literature, one promising way forward may be to devise models that factor in variables capturing the knowledge about political media of individuals. As the qualitative data presented in this study suggest, these knowledge structures can be expected to strongly mediate the impact of internet use on individuals’ beliefs. In this study, different stocks of media-related knowledge were not only found to be decisive with regard to what streams of news came into the view of participants. In addition, this knowledge was seen to affect how participants approached and made sense of the ideologically starkly dissonant streams of news which appear to be characteristic of the media landscapes of many of non-democratic regimes today (cf. Toepfl, 2013).

Conclusion

This study has suggested four important areas in which young Russians need knowledge in order to self-consciously and critically access, analyze, and evaluate political news – and thus to become ‘aware [of] why they see certain messages and not others’ (Lewis and Jhally, 1998: 109). These four areas of knowledge were labeled ‘facets of critical news literacy’ and seen as comprising knowledge of (1) the segmentation of

the news environment, (2) the news production processes, (3) the constructedness of political messages, and (4) the role of media in Russian society. The study has illustrated how different stocks of knowledge about these four facets crucially affect the ways in which participants navigate and make sense of political news.

Like any piece of scholarly work, this study has clear limitations. Most importantly, data collection in this explorative project was based on a small number of interviews and focused on a very specific group in Russian society. While the design of the study thus allows only for cautious generalization of its findings, the approach appears to open up a whole series of promising avenues for future research. An intriguing path for future qualitative studies could be to explore each of these four dimensions in more depth. Future research could also investigate the degree to which similar concepts apply in other non-democratic contexts, for instance in Asia and in the Arab world. Furthermore, quantitative researchers could use the findings presented here as a starting point for designing survey items that capture specific stocks of knowledge about political media. In these and many other ways, adopting the concept of literacy in order to study news audiences in non-democratic regimes appears to open up highly promising paths for future research. By embarking on these, scholars will hopefully be able to continue the 'long and proud history' (Livingstone, 2008: 60) of the concept of literacy being linked with processes of enlightenment, political empowerment and democratization.

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