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*Sarah Oates:*

## INTERCEPT THE NARRATIVE!

*RJ* At what point in time and why did so-called social media turn into a politically dangerous instrument, capable, as it turns out, of sweeping away entire regimes?

I don't think it is a question of the ICTs (information and communication technologies), but of the information itself. Information has always had the potential to be dangerous. **What is challenging about ICT, for regimes, for any government, whether it's Britain, America, Russia, or Tunisia, is the speed, because they compress time.** And that's what governments are really struggling to deal with, because they aren't good at reacting quickly. And that's the difference ICTs have made in Egypt and Tunisia: when there is unrest, it can now spread and intensify at speeds simply too fast for regimes to handle.

In Tunisia ICTs certainly made a difference I think, because they were able to speed up the resistance in a way that the regime could not handle; but there were also probably some fundamental questions in the support of the regime anyway. The ICTs acted like a catalyst. And governments need to be able to react to this catalyst – either by harnessing it for their own purposes or by defusing it. It has to be one or the other. **Governments have to find a proactive way of getting out there and communicating on Twitter or Facebook.** This, at least, has been



*Sarah Oates*

In the 21st century, no one has a monopoly on information. **But states can have a monopoly on the official narrative. And this is, for example, what the Putin administration was very good at.** They were very good at creating a narrative for Russia that resonated with the majority of Russian citizens. They were popular because they articulated certain national standards and ideals that people liked and appreciated. This is something that Obama has been popular with as well

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the American model, as Obama has a Facebook page and tweets constantly. China has adopted a different approach, where the government has been able to monitor the use of ICTs and control them. Whatever the strategy, recent events have shown **how important it is for governments to stay on top of things, and, above all, to have some sort of game plan.**

with his democratic citizens, but not with the republicans. In this sense, Putin was very good at finding the basic majority. Ultimately, even if the state no longer completely controls every means of information, Putin's government was very successful to a large degree in controlling the ideals and the values of the people.

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## INTERCEPT THE NARRATIVE!

Sarah Oates

DIXI

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**The Russian government should be using the internet in several important ways.** The first is to get a better gauge of public opinion, **how citizens are responding to state initiatives, ideas and narratives.** That's one thing, because I think Russians are incredibly active in online discourse, and the growth of the internet in Russia has been greater than the growth in any other European country, except maybe in the case of Albania, which essentially started from zero in 2000. So, for the last ten years Russia has had the greatest growth of online participation in Europe.

And that's really significant, because, as I said before, it is hard for states to keep pace with such changes, not to mention such a rapid change as has occurred in Russia. **The upside is that it makes the citizens visible to the state. It forces the state to be open to reading the major bloggers, and to understand what information sources are popular with the Russian people.** And that's great for a government, because it gives the government lots and lots of information on what the people want. The flip side is that the Russian government needs to increase its responsiveness to its citizens online. So far the Russian online system is pretty much 'pokazukha' when it comes to email and e-governance.

And in my research I found that some of the greatest anger is from the people who e-mail a leader and then don't get a response, or feel that the response is inadequate. So, if you create a portal, if you create e-governance to deal with citizens, you have to also take it seriously, or you will get quite a lot of dissatisfaction. **This process could really help with transparency in the Russian regime, which, as we know, is not so great right now for the average citizen.** Russia can step up to the challenge here and develop better e-governance and offer a service to citizens. And this is something that I think would bring about much more support for the regime.



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*RJ* **Do you think it is still possible to bring the internet under government control?**

Any attempt to go down the route of the great firewall, I think, would be rather difficult. While perhaps possible for the Russian government to achieve, it would ultimately be too expensive and arguably counterproductive. **The smart strategy would be one in which the Russian government uses the potential of ICTs to tell its own story and to transmit values and ideas to the Russian public to get values and ideas back,** and to understand that there are always going to be pockets and corners of the internet that they aren't going to agree with. There may be protests and demonstrations, but that's normal. By letting people express themselves and hold protests and demonstrations you ultimately diffuse these tensions. Russia is quite strange, because **the political parties and certain bright personalities have yet to really use the internet effectively.** I cannot think of a single Russian political figure who has really effectively used the internet. We don't follow

Yavlinsky on Twitter, we are not all on the Communist party Facebook page, or Vkontakte, nor do we follow the online journal blogs of Luzhkov. This is a very interesting situation.

*RJ* **Can you give some examples of effective use of social media in Russia?**

There was some interesting activity during the Khimki development protest, and at the time of the forest fires. There was a great deal of complaining about the inadequate state response. I have heard that a lot of people also turned to Twitter after the Domodedovo bombing. In fact, Channel One had to change the way they covered the event because their old model of reporting national disasters, whether Beslan, the Nord-Ost, or airplane crashes, was too slow to compete with the speed of Twitter. So given the speed of Twitter were they forced to be more quicker or more dramatic in order to sort of compete? I don't know, one can only speculate.

*RJ* **Do you think we will ever see a decline in the importance of social media? After all, you never know whether the information Twitter spreads is true or not.**

That's a good question. But I think Russians love the internet. And I think that it shows in the huge growth of sites like LiveJournal. I think it is an extension of the Russians' love of communication, the Russians' love of conversation and new ideas. It is interesting that Twitter is not as popular here. **I guess Russians have a hard time sticking to 140 characters. Russians are very communicative.** Russians take to the internet like bees to honey. I think it will always resonate with them, particularly for national and cultural reasons. And for that reason, I think the Russian government needs to sit down and think about where the web could be in five to ten years, and how it can be used effectively for the purposes of e-governance and for better connection with the citizens, so that we don't find ourselves, ten years down the road, in a situation like Tunisia. ■

*Sara Oates was speaking with Yulia Netesova*