

Chapter 75

Digital Democracy in Authoritarian Russia: Opportunity for Participation, or Site of Kremlin Control?

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ABSTRACT

Digital media is expected to promote political participation in government. Around the world, from the United States to Europe, governments have been implementing e-government (use of the Internet to make bureaucracy more efficient) and promising e-democracy (increased political participation by citizens). Does digital media enable citizens to participate more easily in government, or can authoritarian governments interfere with citizens' ability to speak freely and obtain information? This study of digital media in Russia will show that while digital media can be used by Russian citizens to gain information and express opinions, Kremlin ownership of print media, along with censorship laws and Internet surveillance, can stifle the growth of digital democracy. Though digital media appears to hold promise for increasing citizen participation, this study will show that greater consideration needs to be given to the power of authoritarian governments to suppress civic discourse on the Internet.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital media has been portrayed as a way to increase citizen participation in government. Dahl (1989) argues that digital technology can prompt a “third democratic transformation” which will restore the characteristics of the Athenian participatory democracy. E-democracy, or digital democracy, as it is also known, is based on the concept of participatory democracy, which has been defined as a democratic system which “involves extensive and active engagement of citizens in the self-governing process; it means government not just for but by and of the people” (Barber, 1995, p. 921).

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In the 1990s, with the advent of the Internet, some theorists began to argue that electronic technology could create participatory democracy through digital communications media (Budge, 1996; Dahl, 1989; Hague & Loader, 1999). The use of digital technology to revitalize democracy is called e-democracy, also known as digital democracy and cyberdemocracy (Hague & Loader, 1999).

Leaders of Western nations have begun to incorporate e-democracy into their campaign tactics and governing process. Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate whose victory has been attributed to his use of the Internet (Carpenter, 2010). In addition to creating a more participatory political campaign, researchers also argue that President Obama has helped develop a more participatory e-government in the United States (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012; Nam, 2012). Nam (2012) commends Obama for creating the Open Government Directive shortly after his 2008 election, which was designed to encourage transparency and citizen participation through social media (United States White House, 2010).

Besides the United States, many other Western nations are exploring how to implement e-democracy. In 2010, the EU set a goal for 50% of EU member states to use e-government by 2015, a goal that was nearly achieved (Davies, 2015).

At the same time, non-Western nations, such as the United Arab Emirates and Russia, are also declaring themselves to be proponents of digital democracy (E-democracy, 2012). The United Arab Emirates has a 100% rating from the UN on e-participation, and its government website gives citizens the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussion and share their opinions about civic issues (E-democracy, 2012). Yet the UAE is also an authoritarian country known for closing offices of foreign organizations and arresting alleged rebels against the government.

Russia is another authoritarian country which has presented itself as a champion of e-democracy in recent years. Russia, however, is also known for media censorship, state control of the media, and, in recent years, Internet censorship laws. An exploration of social media in Russia will help illuminate the extent to which social media can promote participatory democracy in an authoritarian state.

RUSSIA AND E-DEMOCRACY

Russia has made announcements that suggest it is prioritizing e-democracy. In 2012, then-President Medvedev said he planned to introduce e-democracy, including crowdsourcing and referenda, to the Russian regions. He told the people, “The country needs you—active and not indifferent people and I seriously count on you” (Internet Censorship, 2012).

The UN ranks Russia highly on its e-information and e-services. At the same time, it ranks Russia very low on e-decision-making (E-democracy, 2012). In 2013, Russia launched an online portal called the Russian Public Initiative (ROI), which allowed the Russian public to propose new legislation and vote on petitions launched by others. Every initiative which reached 100,000 votes within a year would be sent to a government council, which would evaluate whether the Russian Parliament would consider the legislation. After 15 months, however, only four petitions had received more than the 100,000 vote threshold, and the government council rejected all of them (Smolnikova, 2014).

Digital media is portrayed as a way to increase citizen participation in government; yet the Russian state is known for its authoritarian government and for exerting control over traditional media. Will digital media in Russia be the exception to Russian state control of the media, or will the Russian government use digital media for information gathering and surveillance, or to exert their own control over social media messages?

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