

**A thesis submitted to the Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy of
Central European University in part fulfilment of the
Degree of Master of Science**

**Green awakening: social media for the environment in Russia – best practices from
activists.**

Maria STAMBLER

July, 2019

Budapest

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Author's declaration

Due to the similarities with a previous Master's thesis submitted to the London School of Economics and Political Sciences in August, 2012 several of the theoretical methodology concepts (in particular in the INTERVIEWING, TOPIC GUIDE, ETHICS and ANALYSIS sections) have also been applied here and some short sections of the descriptions of the methods used there are reproduced in the methods section of this thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Stambler', with a stylized, cursive script.

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CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT OF THESIS submitted by:

Maria STAMBLER for the degree of Master of Science and entitled: Green awakening: social media for the environment in Russia – best practices from activists.

Month and Year of submission: July, 2019.

Social media's growing presence in our everyday lives allows for information to travel across spatial and temporal boundaries, connecting people in all corners of the world. Environmental NGO's (ENGO's) are harnessing social media's potential to raise awareness about environmental issues and motivate the public to tackle them. However, no in-depth research has been conducted into the way ENGO's in Russia are utilizing social media to put the environment on the mainstream agenda and foster concrete action towards solving the ecological issues facing the country. This research seeks to address this gap because Russia is the world's largest country by territory and one of the largest in terms of population. It is therefore essential to understand whether ENGO's and environmental advocacy groups in Russia are utilizing social media like their western counterparts to tackle the country's most pressing environmental problems and if yes, *how* and *with what perceived success*. In-depth interviews with communications experts from several Moscow-based ENGO's suggest that social media channels are allowing Russian ENGO's to bypass traditional media and offering a cost-effective way to reach and engage the Russian public, though their choice of social networking sites is rather different to those used in the West. Experts concluded that without social media, a "green awakening" would not happen in Russia – or would happen at a much slower pace. Future research needs to examine whether this "green awakening" could have the potential to lead to institutional change by applying pressure on the government and law-making bodies in Russia.

Keywords: social media, environmental communications, environmental advocacy, environmental NGO's, environmental awareness, Russia

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my family and friends for the support during this entire master's program, which proved to be challenging but very rewarding. A special thank you to my husband András who was there every step of the way, always on standby with words of encouragement whenever the going got especially tough.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my interviewees who took the time to speak with me and offer their insights. In the world of an environmental activist time is a very rare and precious thing. Apart from speaking to me, I would like to thank you for your tireless – and oftentimes thankless – work to make Russia “greener”. It's a constant uphill battle but you never give up and keep fighting to ensure that future generations of Russians get to experience our country's mighty forests, beautiful rivers and lakes, the thirteen seas that wash our shores, the enchanting tundra, the boundless steppes, majestic mountains and so many other natural wonders that mother Russia blessed us with.

A huge thanks to my supervisor, Professor Tamara Steger, for the tremendous support from day one of the thesis and research process. It was such a great experience to have a supervisor who was so interested – sometimes even more than me! – in my topic and had so many invaluable pieces of advice to offer and always ready and available for a chat, even about the smallest questions. And, of course, thank you to the entire Environmental Sciences department at CEU for everything I learned throughout the course of this degree and the financial support to make this research project possible.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge one of the first environmental “influencers” and a real Russian hero – the first man in space, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. Upon returning from his first space flight in 1961, he said:

“While orbiting Earth in my spaceship, I saw how beautiful our planet is. People, let us preserve its beauty, not destroy it!”

So I would like to thank people like Gagarin who use their status and fame to draw the public's attention to the importance of preserving the planet that we call our home. As the saying goes – there's no planet B.

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INTRODUCTION

Much is written about the urgency of acting in the face of the looming environmental disaster, especially in light of the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report¹. Videos of whales washing up dead with stomachs full of plastic are making people wake up to the fact that something must be done to eradicate plastic. Humanity has wiped out 60% of animal populations since 1970 (WWF 2018). Luckily, online social activities are becoming increasingly important for the relationship between people's use of social media and how they perceive important social issues such as climate change and environmental degradation due to human activity (Anderson 2017).

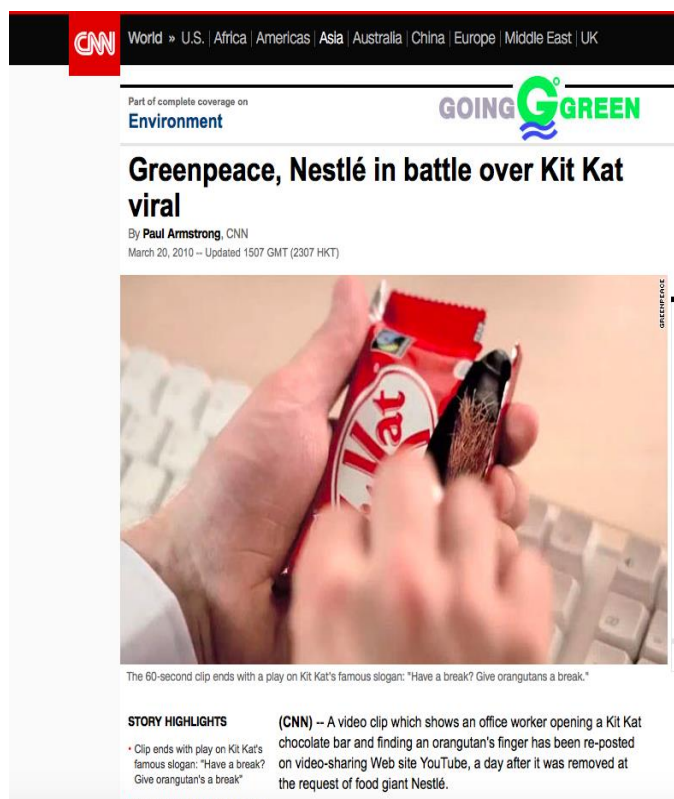
Environmental NGO's (ENGO's) – and advocacy groups in general – are turning to social media networks to get the messages of urgency across and to call on people to act. These new communication channels have had a positive impact on the work of advocacy groups thanks to increased speed, reach and effectiveness of communication and mobilization efforts (Van Laer 2010). Social media offers a low-cost way to foster a two-way dialogue with relevant stakeholders, mobilize supporters and draw attention to and raise awareness of problems that traditional media channels might not cover (Bortree and Seltzer 2009).

There are examples from all over the world of ENGO's utilizing social media to do just that. One of the first successful social media campaigns was Greenpeace's

¹ On October 8 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its latest report, which outlined that limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society and that beyond that even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods and extreme heat, spelling catastrophe for nature and humans (IPCC 2018)

Twitter campaign from 2010 drawing attention to Nestle's use of palm oil in their KitKat chocolate bars, which led to the destruction of rainforests across Indonesia. Greenpeace might have tried to challenge this and get Nestle to stop this destructive practice. Instead, the ENGO started spreading the hashtag #kitkat and it quickly began "trending" on Twitter and thousands of social media users used this hashtag to criticize the company's practices (Owyang 2010).

Fig. 1 Excerpt from a CNN article about the #kitkat campaign



STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Clip ends with play on Kit Kat's famous slogan: "Have a break? Give orangutans a break"

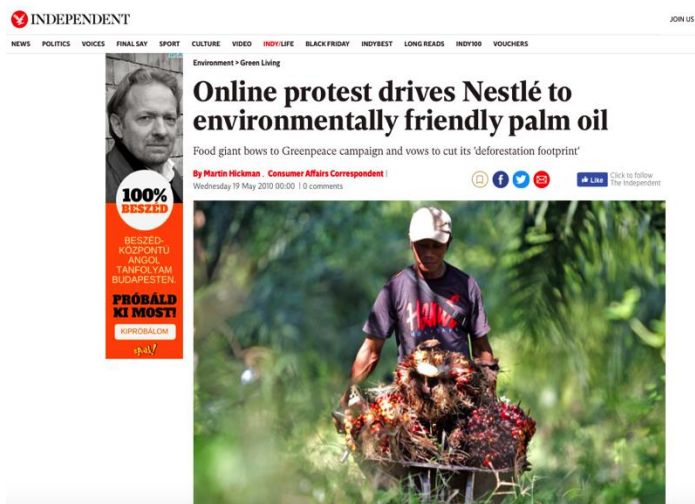
(CNN) – A video clip which shows an office worker opening a Kit Kat chocolate bar and finding an orangutan's finger has been re-posted on video-sharing Web site YouTube, a day after it was removed at the request of food giant Nestlé.

(Armstrong 2010)

The news spread to such a far-reaching audience that mainstream media picked it up and, subsequently, Nestle committed to using only "Certified Sustainable Palm Oil" by 2015 (Owyang 2010). The high visibility public pressure that social media afforded Greenpeace is becoming a common tactic within the environmental movement because there is growing evidence that it helps people

come together and make change happen, a phenomenon that will be documented in more detail in the literature review section with the help of several other case studies.

Fig. 2 Excerpt from an Independent article about online protests



(Hickman 2010)

Research into ENGO's using social media channels to achieve their communication objectives is coming in from many parts of the planet. However, there has been no significant or recent research carried out about the ways in which ENGO's in Russia are utilizing the new digital platforms. This presents a serious gap in knowledge because Russia is the world's biggest country, as well as a country with a long and serious list of environmental issues that need to be brought to the public's attention and dealt with effectively. Additionally, foreign ENGO's like Greenpeace have faced pressure from the government, law enforcement and business interests in the past (Litvinova 2016) so social media could be even more important in this context.

Furthermore, in July 2012, after taking office as president for a third term, President Vladimir Putin signed the law on "foreign agents," which came into

force in November of that year. The central, controversial aspect of the amendments was a requirement that organizations engaging in political activity and receiving foreign funding must register as foreign agents (Machelek/Freedom House 2012). This law affects international NGO's operating in Russia, such as Greenpeace. It is important to understand how social media operates in the world's biggest country and if it can help improve the environmental situation, we need to understand how given the potentially hostile context in which ENGO's operate.

Exploring **how** and **with what *perceived*** success ENGO's of different statuses and sizes in Russia are currently using social media platforms could provide a "best practices" collection of sorts in order to enable more effective communication of pressing environmental problems to the public and thus, eventually, effect much-needed change. To answer these questions, this study focuses on the key social media platforms used (and why) by international and national ENGO's based in Moscow, the strategies employed to reach their respective target audiences, their perceptions of success on social media and whether online action is translated into concrete outcomes according to the ENGO's. In order to get a better understanding of the current situation, members of several Moscow-based ENGO's (both Russian and international) were interviewed to get their views on and experiences with using social media to achieve a sort of "green awakening" – as understood by them – among the Russian public.

This thesis explores the connection between an ever more ubiquitous social media presence in our lives and the potential it has to make society more aware of the environmental issues we are facing – and causing – and elicit some sort of

action towards solving them. The study will begin by laying out the modern day context for the research. An overview of existing literature that deals with social media as a definition is followed by an examination of social media use in non-profit advocacy work before turning specifically to environmental advocacy. The literature review concludes with a brief analysis of the few research projects that have been carried out in the Russian context, thus evidencing a gap in knowledge.

The methodology section outlines the reasons for using semi-structured interviews (as well as some basic web-based content analysis) and details the selection process of interviewees, the development of the topic guide, issues pertaining to research ethics and the analysis method employed once the primary research had been carried out. The findings section details experts' views regarding social media's potential to raise environmental awareness and thus encourage the public to act to tackle ecological problems, incorporates the discussion of the results and draws relevant conclusions, as well as proposes ideas for further research within the field.

The findings suggest that social media are indeed greatly helping ENGO's in Moscow break through temporal, spatial and financial barriers to reach and engage new and existing audiences. This, in turn, is paving the way for the Russian public to become more environmentally conscious, change ecologically unsound behavior and encourage others to follow suit. According to the experts, without social media their organizations' communications objectives would be much harder to achieve.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the academic and literary background of ENGO's use of social media in their advocacy work and to then identify the gap that this work seeks to contribute to. The existing literature and theory reviewed for this thesis examines several key areas of theoretical debate that ultimately help in examining how ENGO's around the world have used and are using social media to advance their advocacy work and with what perceived success. The "Internet Age", on the whole, has been enabling information, ideas and debates to be circulated in an "unfettered manner" (Dahlgren 2005), a theme central to ENGO's work.

SOCIAL MEDIA – A DEFINITION

Boyd and Ellison (2008, 211) define social networks sites as "web-based services that allow individuals (1) to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections made by others within the system". To connect with others, users generate content such as comments, reviews and blog posts, thus user-generated content is the "lifeblood of social media" (Obar and Wildman 2015). Much of social media use is conducted in a visual form: half of social media users share or repost news stories, videos or images (Anderson and Caumont 2014).

Social media, according to Jenkins (2006), create a "convergence culture", one that entails media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence; users are no longer passively consuming information but rather are turning

consumption into a collective process by sharing knowledge to make sense of the amount of information. Algorithms are employed by social media sites to help users connect with content that is relevant for them by relying on active and passive forms of use (e.g. sharing a link on Facebook is the active form and liking the link is the passive form) to design a user's individual information feeds, thus creating a highly personalized news environment (Hermida *et al.* 2012). Information is generally filtered through friends (Metzger *et al.* 2010) and sites such as Facebook analyze an individual's previous information habits to provide content that is more likely to be relevant to that user (Pariser 2011).

For Qualman (2009), on social media authenticity is a currency of exchange and therefore mass communications no longer dominate the media landscape. In his book, he discusses how strategy, marketing and markets are influenced by social media's rising popularity. The author's conclusion is that brands and organizations can be strengthened or destroyed by social media and online networking sites are essentially large-scale, cost-free focus groups that allow them to gather user data much more easily than before.

There are, however, two distinct problems when it comes to conceptualizing social media according to Obar *et al.* (2012, 7):

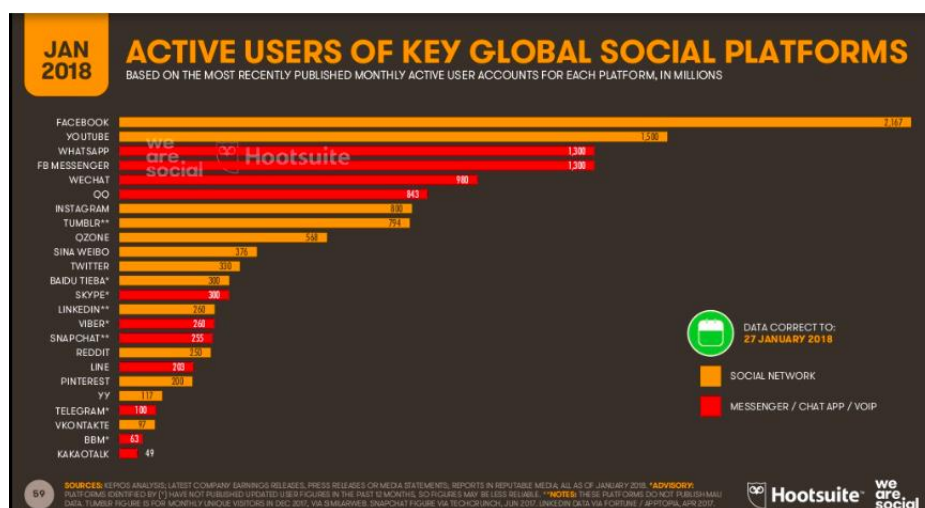
"1) the broad array of social media sites have been and continue to be developed, abandoned, ignored, and reconceptualized day-by-day in different countries and at different levels of public awareness;

2) social media have enabled forms and benefits of communication processes that when described generally can be regarded as similar to capabilities enabled by more traditional media technologies".

Indeed, would this then mean that a fax machine or an e-mail inbox can be considered a social medium? As the authors astutely point out, each medium can bring people together, help them share information and enable communication and information. A further analysis and conceptualization goes beyond the scope of this study and for this reason the social media channels to be studied shall remain limited to the ones that are most used by worldwide ENGO's and those in the country of study – Russia.

In 2018, global social media use looked like this:

Fig. 3 Active users of key global social platforms in 2018



(Source: We Are Social and Hootsuite 2018)

As shown above, globally Facebook alone boasted more than 2 billion active users in 2018. This means that in the context of the communications channels employed by ENGO's, social media has the potential to reach a very wide audience.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NON-PROFIT ADVOCACY

Often applied in the political context, the term “advocacy group” suggests a systematic effort by specific actors to further or achieve specific policy goals (Prakash and Gugerty 2010). However an advocacy group – often referred to as a non-governmental organization (NGO) – is distinguished from political parties in the sense that advocacy groups seek to influence policy but have no standing ambitions of exercising power as governments do (Obar *et al.* 2012). The range of issues various advocacy groups address is very wide indeed and includes areas like healthcare, education, civil rights, the environment and many more.

Already as far back as 1997 advocacy groups had been using the Internet to further their causes and one of the earlier examples is the Preamble Collective (one of more than 600 advocacy groups in almost 70 countries) that expressed opposition to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) thanks to its website “featuring fact sheets, congressional testimony, position papers, and issue briefs” which became “part of a tidal wave of electronically amplified public opposition to the MAI” (Kobrin 1998, 97).

Carty (2010) also points to the “Battle of Seattle” of 1999, in which advocacy groups used tools like e-mails, chat rooms and bulletin boards to halt the World Trade Organization’s Ministerial Conference, thus becoming the first example of a successful intersection between online and offline action. In the lead-up to the event, the Independent Media Center (now Indymedia) was created and “set the model for many-to-many use of the media whereby activists can subvert the traditional one-to-many approach of mainstream and corporate media” (Carty 2010, 2). Others followed suit and developed various techniques of utilizing the Internet to facilitate engagement and collective action (Obar *et al.* 2012).

With the advent of social media, advocacy groups and NGO's have begun using sites like Facebook and Twitter to supplement existing communication and information channels (Schwarz 2011), further subverting the traditional one-to-many media model. Studies carried out by Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) and Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) strongly suggest that social media channels are challenging mass media's gatekeeper functions.

Shirky (2008, 20-21) emphasizes new media technologies' contribution towards easing and accelerating the mobilization of a group and how "we are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations". For advocacy groups, this means that they no longer need to rely on traditional media channels to get their messages across and can organize their activities quickly, easily and cost-effectively across a number of geographic locations all at the same time.

Many advocacy groups are using the Internet to accomplish organizational goals (Obar *et al.* 2012). The rapid rise of social media use among people from all corners of the world has changed the ways in which non-profit organizations can reach existing and potential target audiences. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and other similarly interactive, decentralized channels have boosted nonprofits' capacity to strategically communicate with relevant stakeholders (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012) and to "expand advocacy efforts by reaching new networks of community actors and by mobilizing those networks to take action" (Guo and Saxton 2014). New media channels such as social media networks also enable collaboration between people across wide geographical distances (Benkler 2006), something that is important for advocacy groups' and

NGOs' organizational goals.

Simply reaching stakeholders, however, can only go so far in advancing a non-profit's work – the audience needs to be engaged and retained. Social media channels have facilitated relationship building and stakeholder engagement (Guo and Saxton 2014) and help non-profits *engage* existing and potential audiences by means of sharing, cooperating and mobilizing joint actions in real time (Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers 2010). Additionally, social media offer a low-cost way to foster dialogue, mobilize supporters and, more importantly, draw attention to and raise awareness of problems that traditional media channels might not cover (Bortree and Seltzer 2009).

A comprehensive study carried out by Obar *et al.* in 2012 surveyed 169 individuals from 53 US-based advocacy groups of diverse interests and sizes revealed that almost all groups surveyed at the time believed social media to be effective tools for facilitating civic engagement and collective action. The smaller organizations also repeatedly noted social media's cost-effectiveness as a way to overcome the barrier to entry in policy battles that before were mostly dominated by larger groups. Furthermore, social media provided the benefit of reach and organizational growth because they “enable groups to draw prospective (and current) members closer, which can create a sense of unity and help grow the organization” thanks to the “interactive nature of social media, which enables groups to engage in two-way ‘conversations’ with members and prospective members” (Ober *et al.* 2012, 20).

In 2012, Lovejoy and Saxton carried out a study that sought to identify the key communicative functions in tweets sent by the USA's 100 largest non-profit organizations and they discovered that *information*, *community* and *action* were

one of the key elements. Tweets with “information” contained, as the category suggests, information about the organization’s activities such as highlights from events, news, reports and other information that the stakeholders find relevant. The “community” function helped the organizations interact, share and converse with stakeholders, which enabled the creation of a community. The “action” function attempted to motivate the audience to take some sort of action, like donating money, attending events, engaging in advocacy campaigns, etc.

ENGO’S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a suitable and obvious space for environmental NGO’s to use local and relatable language and visuals that can be effective in mobilizing individuals to tackle environmental issues (Nerlich et al. 2010; O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009). It is also a useful platform to “break down complex scientific information visually and graphically and reach large audiences through sharing and discussion” (Anderson 2017, 13). The number of studies examining ENGO’s social media around the world is growing rapidly, especially as issues pertaining to climate change are starting to top the political and social agenda. Already in 2009 Bortree and Seltzer studied the Facebook profiles of 50 environmental advocacy groups; in the same year, Greenberg and MacAulay analyzed the online presence of 43 Canadian environmental organizations, which included websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and blogs.

The former study found that “dialogic strategies to create opportunities for dialogic engagement may produce positive outcomes such as increasing the number of stakeholders who interact with the organization by growing the organization’s

social network” (Bortree and Seltzer 2009, 318). The latter study found that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr created new opportunities for engaging the public and new constituents, to mobilize stakeholders more quickly and develop a dialogue (Greenberg and MacAulay 2009).

Internet-based environmental advocacy organizations such as 350.org utilize social media to communicate with or to members of the public to successfully mobilize offline publics, which can influence policy debate around certain issues such as the Keystone XL pipeline² (Hestres 2014). Segerberg and Bennett (2011) concluded that at the COP 15 conference in Denmark in 2009 Twitter features such as hashtags, retweets and replies provided information and organized logistics of offline activities. Greenpeace held an online activist campaign to protest Facebook’s use of coal as a primary energy source by communicating about it *on* Facebook, a tactic that the organization claimed was productive in mobilizing activists outside the professional activist realm without relying on mainstream media sources to share information (Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch 2015).

Hopke (2015) studied the Global Frackdown³ movement and its use of Twitter and found that this particular social media network, with its broadcast-like features, enables the diffused, loosely coordinated transnational activists to connect and feel like part of something bigger. The platform also helped to

² In January, 2017 US President Donald Trump signed executive orders that restarted the effort to complete the Keystone XL pipeline across the Great Plains and the Dakota Access pipeline in the northern plains. The project is highly controversial and has led to mass protests due to the affect it may have on animals, climate and people (Brady 2017).

³ Since 2012, Food & Water Watch’s “Global Frackdown” has rallied groups around the world as part of an international movement to ban fracking (Food & Water Watch 2019).

advance the movement, bolster its moral authority and bring together localized environmental concerns within a larger globalized organizing structure by forging “linkages between local groups on a transnational scale in-the-moment during coordinated events taking place in 27 countries” (Hopke 2015, 1). According to the researcher, the study sheds light on how environmental activists use Twitter for ephemeral movement communication throughout a transnational day of pre-planned action.

In 2016, more than 1 million people “checked in” on Facebook at the Standing Rock Indian reservation as a response to a viral post that claimed that this action would help protect activists protesting against the Dakota Access pipeline⁴ from police surveillance (Levin and Woolf 2016). Though the origin of the viral post remains unknown and the rumor that the local sheriff’s department was monitoring Facebook check-ins to gather intelligence on protestors at Standing Rock remains just that – a rumor – the sheer number of Facebook users who cared enough to check in suggested that a growing critical mass of public sympathy could get the attention of politicians and potentially stop the construction (Torchin 2016).

More recently, a group of academics from two Indian universities published a book titled “*Environmental awareness and the role of social media*”, in which case studies from around the world examine the role social media has in creating awareness “for the protection of the environment and the sustainable use of limited resources” and how it is a useful tool to create “an environment that

⁴ In 2016, members of more than 90 Native American nations gathered in Standing Rock in North Dakota since April to protest against the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline, claiming that it would jeopardize the tribe’s water supply and threaten sacred tribal sites (Levin and Woolf 2016).

encourages discussions of how the community can participate and change their behavior” (Narula *et al.* 2018, xiii). For example, Turkey is facing serious ecological problems but the country’s mainstream media do not cover them, therefore Greenpeace Mediterranean rely on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to organize events and create public awareness (Hasdemir and Cetin 2018).

RUSSIAN ENGO’S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Very few studies have been carried out to examine how Russia-based ENGO’s use new media channels – especially social media sites – and those that have are rather outdated. Gladarev and Lonkila (2012) examined the role of social networking in broader civic activism in Russia and Finland and found that in Russia, Vkontakte was an important channel for transmitting information, organizing and coordinating campaigns and creating and maintaining ties between formerly isolated campaigns, “thereby helping to build a ‘network of grassroots resistance’” in a campaign against urban building projects in St. Petersburg.

The author of this study (Stambler 2012) researched the role of social media, in particular Facebook, in the massive anti-government protests across Russia in December, 2011. The findings show that although the demonstrations would have likely happened either way, social media channels accelerated the process of reaching a “critical mass” and facilitated the organization of existing discontent into collective action.

A study by O’Lear in 1999 looked at the way an environmental activist group in Kaliningrad, Russia used electronic mail (e-mail) communication as a channel

with which to overcome the constraints of location and to create spaces of interaction and action. The findings showed that e-mail communication connected the activists' "activities, information sources and collaborative partners at different scales to create a viable space for environmental activism and information distribution within a shifting political context" (O'Lear 1999, 165).

The very modest body of knowledge about Russian ENGO's use of social media constitutes a serious research gap. Russia is the world's largest country and also one that faces an enormous amount of environmental problems that can, potentially, affect those beyond its borders. Also, a population of 145 million people makes it a large country in terms of population and finding out how to reach them means reaching a sizable part of the global population.

CHALLENGES POSED BY SOCIAL MEDIA

It is important to note that some research has shown that enthusiasm and optimism about social media's ability to strengthen social movements and create an engaged public must be met with caution. Morozov (2011) warns of a "net delusion", in the Western world in particular, in which an evolving Internet landscape may actually be limiting democratic possibilities and where the phenomena of "slacktivism" and "clicktivism" do little more than promote weak ties. It is possible to bring a million people to a Facebook page but this would still fail to mobilize a 1,000 people to take to the streets to actually effect change (Gladwell 2011). McCafferty (2011) also posits that information sharing as a form of online activism does not necessarily result in tangible change on the issue at hand. Studies carried out by Kirilenko and Stepchenkova (2014) and Williams *et al.* (2015) suggest that the potential for activism on social media may be

hampered by the fact that mobilizing is limited to those who are already committed and not to the wider public.

So-called “echo chambers” are another important obstacle to fully utilizing social media’s potential to enable environmental advocacy groups to reach and engage with relevant stakeholders and accomplish their goals. Echo chambers are situations where one is exposed only to opinions that agree with their own and as citizens become more polarized about a wide range of issues they are not exposed to the arguments of the opposite side but are further entrenched in their own views because they are surrounded by people and news sources that express similar opinions (Garimella *et al.* 2018). Social media networks’ use of algorithms (discussed earlier) is partly to blame for that. Algorithms rely on users’ preferences to guess which content to prioritize in their feeds and thus further reinforce content that already fits their interests and worldviews (Pariser 2011).

The issue of “digital divide” should also be discussed in the context of environmental advocacy on social media. Theorizing the relationship between any kind of media, including the Internet and social networking platforms, needs to take into account as a key condition citizens’ access to a wide range of information (Karppinen 2010). Initially, the term “digital divide” mostly dealt with questions of access to new communications channels (Gunkel 2003) but now this phenomenon is getting more complex. The issue of “digital divide”, according to Compaine (2001), is not limited only to different kinds of technological and social differences but also to the way the same medium can be used differently depending on the times and contexts. Difficulties associated with entering into a social space in cyberspace depend on the requirements of background knowledge, as well as certain required competencies of the medium in question

(Bohman 2004). As long as a “digital divide” – be it in terms of access, skills, social or economic opportunities – remains, it will be difficult for advocacy groups to reach and engage with all members of society (Stambler 2012).

As this section has shown, environmental advocacy groups are increasingly turning to social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to connect, mobilize, encourage discussions, circumvent traditional media channels, create a sense of purpose and foster a dialogue thanks to the interactive features. However, there is a lack of studies carried out on ENGO’s use of social media in the Russian context. This presents a serious gap in knowledge given the precarious nature of ENGO’s activities in Russia, especially the foreign ENGO’s that operate in a country with a potentially hostile “foreign agent law”.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This section justifies the selection of Russia for the case study and the interviewees that were chosen to share their expert knowledge and experience with regards to ENGO's use of social media in Russia and the broader implications of using these channels. This corresponds to the basic tenets of phenomenological research, as this study is primarily interested in the subjectivity of other people vis-à-vis a certain phenomenon (Englander 2012). For this reason, in-depth interviewing – a qualitative method – was selected to be the research method because this particular study needs to take a wide range of issues, factors, opinions and experiences into account and, therefore, demands a method that sees realities as “wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts, nor can they be fragmented for separate study of their parts” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 39).

The literature review section sought to identify what previous studies have found in this field to set this research within a broader context and to identify the gaps in knowledge. Additionally, some web-based content research was undertaken because studies concerned with attitudes and behaviors can benefit from the free Web content (Kim and Kuljis 2010).

RESEARCH QUESTION

Drawing on the literature outlined above, this research project seeks to understand **which** social media channels Moscow-based international and national ENGO's use, **why and with what *perceived*** success to raise awareness about the city's/country's environmental issues. Through the

perceptions and experiences of those who possess expert knowledge in environmental advocacy, especially in the communications sphere, the potential for creating a “green awakening” through digitally-mediated communication methods – social media channels in particular – among the Russian public is explored. This study aims to identify the best practices and the key conditions for reaping the benefits the current social media environment is providing for the work of Moscow-based ENGO’s because, as previously stated, social media has the potential to reach a wide target audience.

The following research question is addressed in this study:

How and with what perceived success do ENGO’s in Moscow utilize social media to raise environmental awareness and foster concrete actions?

The sub-questions that will help to answer the research question are:

- What are the key social media platforms used (and why) by international and national ENGO’s based in Moscow?
- What strategies and trends do these organizations employ to reach their target audience?
- Can online action be translated into concrete outcomes, according to the ENGO’s, and what are their perceptions of social media’s success?

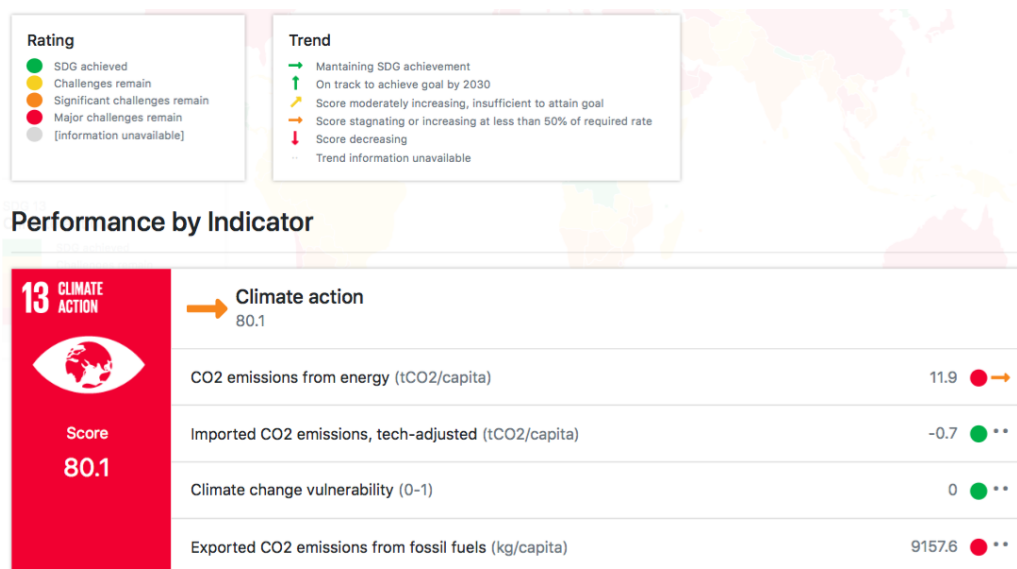
SAMPLING: WHY RUSSIA, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SELECTED EXPERTS

Firstly, Russia is of particular interest because it is the researcher’s home country. Consequently, the researcher has experience with Russian culture,

speaks the language and has a wide professional network in Russia. These factors facilitate the collection of primary data.

Secondly, Russia is the world's biggest country by territory and has a range of serious environmental problems. One-quarter of the world's fresh water reserves are in Russia but much of it is at risk of pollution due to the industrial legacy of the Soviet era (BBC 2018). If we look at Russia's performance by indicator for Sustainable Development Goal 13 (climate action), the statistics are more than troubling:

Fig. 4 Russian Federation: Performance by indicator for Climate Action



(Source: Index and Dashboards Report 2018)

CO2 emissions from energy were still a major challenge in 2018 and the progress towards solving it is stagnant, while exported CO2 emissions from fossil fuels are high and there is no data available to understand the country's efforts towards addressing this.

In Moscow Region alone (home to some 20 million people) climate-related economic damage is expected to reach \$4.3 billion a year by 2025, a figure comparable to the national toll, on average, in recent years (Davydova 2017). According to the Environmental Justice Atlas (2017), the northern city of Norilsk was one of the 10 most polluted cities in the world due to the operations of Norilsk Nickel, a large mining and metallurgic complex.

The list of environmental issues plaguing Russia is extensive and listing them all is well beyond the scope of this research project. Therefore it is essential to understand whether ENGO's and environmental advocacy groups in Russia are harnessing the power of social media like their western counterparts to tackle the various severe environmental problems and if yes, *how*. The findings of this research will serve as a "best practices" guide of sorts for ENGO's and advocacy groups across the country about ways to leverage social media channels to effectively communicate the problems – as well as solutions to them.

Why social media channels in Russia? In 2022, the number of monthly *active* social network users is projected to reach 75.9 million individuals in Russia – an increase of over 6.86 million new users from 69.04 million users in 2016 (Statista 2019). Currently, the overall population stands at around 144 million and prominent demographers do not expect Russia's population to grow in the coming decades but to decline (Yale Global Online 2014), therefore in the very near future more than half of the country's population will consist of *active* social network users. For this reason, exploring how ENGO's utilize these communication channels that are clearly growing in popularity is important in

assessing how to reach, engage with and raise environmental awareness among members of the public.

Why Moscow? At first, ENGO's from all across Russia were considered but that approach was deemed too broad for this research, as Russia is the biggest country in the world and dedicating enough time to environmental advocacy groups across the entire nation goes far beyond the physical scope and time limitations of the study. Instead, semi-structured interviews were arranged with members from two international ENGO's (Greenpeace and WWF) and three national environmental movements (Ekodvor, Razdelny Sbor and Plus One) that are based in Moscow. Both international and national ENGO's were selected to understand if there is any difference in their approaches towards communicating via social media and if yes, why and how.

The Russian capital was selected because it is the most populous city in Russia and is home to many ENGO's and the researcher has a well-established professional network through which the city's most prominent individuals on the ENGO arena could be contacted. Traditional wisdom for Russians dictates that new initiatives and technological innovations usually come from Moscow and spread to the rest of the country. For the purpose of this research, it would be most interesting to see how these organizations are utilizing the social media channels available to them, synthesize the findings and create a sort of best practices guide for other ENGO's in Moscow and further afield so that they too may be able to communicate more effectively and thus work towards solving the country's environmental problems.

Although Gaskell (2000, 42) stipulates that there is “no one method for selecting respondents”, the selection procedure was targeted at those either directly involved in the communications activities of Moscow-based ENGO’s or those who have in-depth and expert knowledge of sustainability and environmental issues particular to Russia. The initial respondents recruited for the interview included: Tatiana Chalaya (Communications and Engagement Director at Greenpeace Russia), Alexey Knizhnikov (Leader of Extractive Industry Programme at World Wildlife Fund Russia), Anastasia Popova (founder of Plus One, an important communications project in Russia that covers best practices in the sphere of social and environmental responsibility and sustainability) and Viktoria Strukova (social media manager of the Razdelny Sbor eco-movement in Moscow Region).

Once the initial list of interviewees was established and confirmed, the researcher turned to “snowball sampling”, a non-probability sampling used primarily in exploratory research, wherein the researcher asks already located individuals within the target population for research to provide information on other members of the population (Babbie 2008). This method is often used when the population listings are not available (Adler and Clark 2008), which is somewhat the case in this research project. The disadvantages of this kind of non-probability sampling are the possible introduction of bias due to the unrepresentative nature of the sample but, generally, this is less of an issue in exploratory research, whose purpose is not to generalize the findings on the whole population (Wegner 2007). As a non-professional in the ENGO sphere in Moscow, the researcher concluded that the disadvantage of possible bias was far outweighed by the benefits of learning of other experts that would be able to provide invaluable insights for this research project.

Through referrals, the researcher managed to gain access to Tatiana Chestina of EKA (a Moscow-based ecological organization that is active in various regions of Russia), who then provided the contacts of Alisa Khokhulya and Irina Cherkasova (social media managers for various projects of EKA), Chingis Balbarov (social media manager at WWF Russia), Vladimir Kalaev (Internet Marketing Director at Greenpeace Russia) and Mikhail Butorin (former social media manager at WWF Russia and owner of a social media marketing agency specializing in NGO's in Russia).

INTERVIEWING⁵

To attempt to answer the research question, members of ENGO's and environmental advocacy groups that are based in Moscow, Russia were selected to be interviewed. In-depth interviews provide a "fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations" (Gaskell 2000, 39) and obtain the interviewees' interpretation of the described phenomenon (Kvale 2007). The aim of these interviews was to reveal the experiences and attitudes of the experts in the field in relation to social media's potential to improve environmental awareness and lead to concrete action, as defined by the experts themselves.

Interviews are useful when vague and not yet established issues are explored and privileged information from key players in the field is needed (Denscombe 2007). Grinnell and Unrau (2010) suggest that this method is also preferred by respondents due to its naturalness and can thus produce more spontaneous

⁵ As this research project has many similarities to the study carried out by the author for her previous study of the role of social media in the protests that swept across Russia in December, 2011 (Stambler 2012), several of the theoretical methodology concepts (in particular in the INTERVIEWING, TOPIC GUIDE, ETHICS and ANALYSIS sections) have also been applied here and some short sections of the descriptions of the methods used there are reproduced in the methods section of this thesis.

responses. Interviewing is more flexible than other methods and allows for flexibility for the interviewer in terms of probing, omitting, including, rephrasing and clarifying questions based on what is important to the interviewee.

Semi-structured open-ended interviews will be used because it is necessary to cover certain themes whilst also leaving room for flexibility. This type of interview can be conceptualized as a “third space where interviewer and interviewee work together to develop understandings” (Cousin 2008, 73), a process essential to understanding new phenomena like the role of social media in raising environmental awareness. Because the interviews can be considered a kind of “third space”, Holstein and Gubrium’s (1997) “active interviewing” approach will be adopted, whereby the interviewer offers interpretations and connections to support explicit and dialogic meaning-making for the interview (Cousin 2008). This allows the researcher to acquire details and a richer set of data.

Where appropriate, “possible horizons of meaning” (Holstein and Gubrium 1997, 125) will be suggested and together the interviewer and interviewee can conceptualize issues and make connections in regards to the ways in which social media channels are being utilized by ENGO’s within the Russian setting. Each interview will be transcribed and then, where needed within the research project, also translated by the researcher who is more familiar with the topic and can therefore convey the original meaning as accurately as possible.

The ability to conduct the interview in person was one of the top priorities in order to increase the naturalness of the setting, tailor the order of the questions to the flow of the interview and address the potential problem of questions being misunderstood. Initial e-mails/calls were written and made to ask potential respondents if they agreed to meet in person; most agreed. Due to time

constraints and a tremendous workload, one expert (Viktoria) agreed to a phone interview.

TOPIC GUIDE

Gaskell (2000) stipulates that the building blocks of effective interviewing are recruitment of respondents and the interview topic guide. A topic guide is needed for semi-structured interviews to serve as an agenda for the topics and themes to explore and to ensure consistency in data collection, while also ensuring flexibility (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). One main topic guide was devised, covering the major themes and questions. This topic guide was then extended into two slightly different versions, tailored to whether the organization was a Russian or foreign NGO. This distinction was made in light of the controversial “Foreign Agent” law because it would be interesting to see if that somehow leads to differences in the ways Russian ENGO’s and foreign ENGO’s utilize social media. The topic guide only differs at the very end, with one extra question for the experts at Greenpeace and WWF in order to keep the rest of the research as uniform as possible.

The “active interviewing” approach starts with the more simple *hows* and *whats* (Holstein and Gubrium 1997) of the respective ENGO’s communications strategies and social media’s place within them to start the interview comfortably. Once the interviewee becomes comfortable, questions will then shift and relate more to *why* the respondents felt social media was (or was not) useful in their communications campaigns, *what* makes a social media campaign successful or not, *how* the impact is calculated and *if* this could be a sign of a “green awakening”. If Greenpeace and WWF do not mention it in the course of the interview, the final question will ask if the “Foreign Agent” law has changed the way they conduct their communications in traditional media and on social media.

The topic guide can be found in Appendix 1.

ETHICS

Ethical issues in interviewing arise due to the complexities of “researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (Mauthner *et al.* 2002, 1). The somewhat political nature of this study meant that respondents could be putting their careers, and even lives, in danger. Having consulted the CEU ethics checklist, the interviewer will explain the aim of the research to the respondents in order for them to know exactly what they would be agreeing to (types of questions, amount of time required, etc.) and will be offered the option of anonymity in whichever form they choose. Verbal consent from the interviewee will be required prior to beginning the interview and recording it. Before beginning the interview, respondents will be asked for permission to record on tape. In the event that they decline, notes will be taken by hand, provided the necessary permission is granted by the interviewee.

ANALYSIS

Analytical categories and instruments will be developed in response to the collected material (Schmidt 2004). The section on **INTERVIEWING** outlined the transcription process, which is the first step of analysis. Because there is no hypothesis to test, the researcher wanted to be “surprised” by the data and therefore a thematic analysis approach will be adopted, which is more inductive than content analysis and allows categories to emerge rather than deciding on the themes prior to coding (Ezzy 2002). This was done through re-reading and coding the transcripts. Care was taken not to try to tailor the material to one’s own assumptions and to remain open in order to notice responses and themes that may not correspond to prior beliefs or had not been anticipated (Schmidt 2004).

Analytical categories were developed on the basis of the different themes that emerged in the interviews. Open coding analysis was deemed most relevant in order to break down the data analytically and to retrieve a “succession of concepts” (Boehm 2004, 272) from the text. The researcher sorted and weighed up the results of the work to retain concepts and themes most relevant to answering the research question.

WEB-BASED CONTENT ANALYSIS

As this study deals with Moscow-based ENGO’s social media use, looking at their profiles on various networks and websites also constitutes part of the research process, though to a lesser extent than in-depth interviewing. Content analysis can be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies (Krippendorff 1980). Qualitative content analysis is similar to textual analysis because it is primarily interpretive and does not use statistics for analysis and in the context of the Web, it “is a relatively easy process that allows researchers to perform and prepare data at their convenience” (Kim and Kuljis 2010).

Social media accounts and websites of the selected ENGO’s were studied in order to gain an initial understanding of the platforms that are utilized, the amount of followers they have, the type of content and wording that is used and how the material resonates with users. This helped gain initial knowledge of ENGO’s campaigns and styles, which in turn would facilitate the interview process as the researcher would already have some understanding of campaigns, posts, etc. that interviewees might talk about and make the researcher look more credible and prepared.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

This section will begin by summarizing the key findings, i.e. the central themes, trends, practices and results that experts outlined throughout the interviews. After providing a detailed overview of the findings, a more in-depth analysis will be undertaken to select the main insights, details and nuances, followed by a conclusion and suggestions for further research. By and large, experts agreed on the importance of using social media to bypass traditional media and the cost-effectiveness and speed it provides for getting environmental messages across without spatial barriers, although there were mixed attitudes towards the social networking sites available in Russia. Engaging the audience with the help of influencers, educational and motivational content, two-way horizontal communication and community building are the top online trends at the moment that Moscow-based ENGO's are employing. Though there are some barriers towards utilizing social media's full potential (such as lack of human/financial resources, a "digital divide" and somewhat of an information overload), experts have indicated that their perception is that social media is central to people's lives nowadays and is thus central to their communications activities to bring about this "green awakening".

FINDINGS

The **LITERATURE REVIEW** section suggested that social media is an important tool for ENGO's around the world to achieve a number of communications and organizational goals. Experts from Russian ENGO's in general seem to agree with the global academic community and amongst themselves that the growing interest in environmental protection interest among the Russian public is in large

part thanks to ease with which information can spread on social media. The organizations are finding it easier to enlighten the public about ecological problems and collaborations with opinion leaders and influencers allow them to reach and engage new and existing publics more effectively. Their choice of social media networks differs to ENGO's studied in the West due to certain specificities within the Russian context. Presently, Moscow-based are seeking to shift their content from being purely educational towards instructional and motivational in order to foster more concrete actions from the public. Though there are several obstacles that lessen social media's effectiveness as a communication, on the whole it is indeed making Russian public more environmentally conscious.

HOW AND WITH THAT AIM SOCIAL MEDIA ARE USED

Environmental education, audience engagement and behavior change

One of the main purposes of social media use among Moscow-based ENGO's is education and awareness raising among the public about various environmental issues with the aim of effecting some sort of behavioral change.

"So how do we use them [social media channels] in our work? Firstly, to educate. This is one of the most important parts of Razdelny Sbor because without education what we strive to achieve, i.e. recycling and correct waste management, would not work...the main function of our social media channels is education," Viktoria, the social media manager of Razdelny Sbor, explained.

Razdelny Sbor actively uses social media to interact with its audience by, for

example, answering questions they ask on the various platforms. Thus, Viktoria believes ENGO's can further engage their audience in the topic of environmental protection.

Vladimir (Director of Internet Marketing at Greenpeace Russia) shared a similar view when asked how and with what aim social media are used by Greenpeace Russia:

"We use them to engage people and by communicating with them to change their behavior. Social media give us the biggest reach for this and, first of all, allow us to tell people about what is happening, to break through all the other noise of – God forgive me – Ukraine, Syria and all the other good and not so good things happening in our country. And to tell them that 'yes, it is possible to do this – it is possible to recycle your trash, it is possible to bring your own shopping, it is possible to drink from a reusable cup, it is possible to drive less and to plant trees'".

Tatiana (Communications and Outreach Director at Greenpeace Russia) agreed with Vladimir:

"It's very important for us to tell people about the right attitude towards nature, a lot depends on people's behavior and everything starts with the behavior of just one person. Mountains of waste actually begin at the supermarket when a person takes a plastic bag or buys something wrapped in three layers of packaging. So it's very important for us to get important information to people. Explain to them why a certain behavior is bad and one of our objectives is to effect a behavioral change."

Educating and engaging is what will ultimately lead to a "mind shift", to a change

in behavior and attitude towards everyday consumption habits and other “more global questions, including how to effect change” (Vladimir).

Alisa (social media manager at EKA) also stated that EKA’s principal communications objective on social media is education and “getting as many people as possible engaged with the problems that we’re facing”. The expert is confident that through social media, her organization can reach more people, educate them about serious environmental problems and this, in turn, will lead to “a moment where they will start to solve them”.

Irina (Alisa’s colleague at EKA) added that people are generally interested in obtaining useful information, therefore her organization uses social media to share knowledge and know-how pertaining to topics like planting trees and forest legislation.

As Anastasia (director of Plus One) explained, Plus One aims to create and provide various services and instruments for the popularization of the term “sustainable development” in Russia and external communications, which social media are a significant part of, help to educate people about sustainable lifestyle options. For Plus One, platforms like Instagram are a very useful tool to educate followers “by offering simple DIY solutions” and to “communicate the easiest approaches to tackling the biggest problem, to get more people to find out what conscious can look and feel like and then provide more complex explanations for those who want to go further”.

Mikhail, the former social media manager for WWF Russia and now the owner of his own social media marketing agency for NGO’s, believes that although social media channels are not effective tools for fundraising, they provide ENGO’s the possibility “to get into a user’s newsfeed and for their message to become a part

of a user's general picture of the world". Alisa simply stated that "it would be so much harder for ENGO's to get through to people without social media, many of our websites get a large part of traffic from social media".

Spreading information further

Many experts hope that once a social media user learns about a certain problem and the solutions to it, they will then pass on this new knowledge to their contacts – both offline and online.

"If we talk about social media as a tool to 'virally infect', then this is a colossal instrument," Anastasia said.

"We also use social media to call on our followers to spread the word to their neighbors, families and friend...we engage people so that they then engage other people," Vladimir explained.

Tatiana also added that the more people that support Greenpeace Russia, the further their ideas will spread and ideally followers do not only change their own behavior but spread information further in order for real change to happen. Social media is one of they instruments for this because it allows for instantaneous information sharing.

Community building

"The world is a network of communities" (Anastasia) and therefore social media users are increasingly turning towards groups and smaller community pages. As Tatiana explained: "it's also obvious that everything is moving now towards the

creation of communities; people are no longer interested only in reading information but also want to communicate/socialize with each other and not just the organization so it's important for us to create opportunities for them to communicate with each other".

The expert believes that people want more intimate and more personal communication these days. For this reason, social media users are starting to communicate more in private chats and closed interest groups. Even Facebook, Tatiana said, is giving priority in the newsfeed to displaying content from the groups that people are members of. Anastasia agreed that this is indeed happening.

Creating a special channel on Telegram for the Greenpeace Russia volunteers, as well as providing a separate volunteer platform called "Greenwire", are some of the ways the ENGO is building a community, according to Vladimir and Tatiana. Mikhail has also placed a significant emphasis on the community that WWF Russia created on Vkontakte during his time there. At first, the ENGO was unsure what a group on Vkontakte should mean for WWF Russia but soon Mikhail discovered that this is the perfect platform for building a community of online volunteers.

"We'd have people write to us about volunteering opportunities so we decided to give them tasks like checking the new website for any errors, broken links, pixelated images...and that's how we found the answer to our question. WWF's slogan is 'saving nature together' and with this online volunteering community we really are doing this".

Tatiana further elaborated: "a lot happens through communities and, furthermore, people want to communicate with each other not just online and on the Internet,

social media really help with this, they really help us create these communities”.

Alexey (director of the Extractive Industry program at WWF Russia) is an especially active user of closed groups on Facebook and created two groups with fellow experts. In his view, by creating this community on social media, they managed to “unite Russia’s professional community”, “acquire a platform for expert discussion” and “try to exert influence on our opponents primarily through an open discussion”. The expert is also a member of other Facebook groups and communities that keep him up to date with conservation efforts in areas where WWF Russia is not present.

Working with bloggers, influencers and opinion leaders

Many experts spoke of the rising importance of bloggers and influencers, the trust that ordinary people still have in them and how social media facilitates collaborations with these opinion leaders. Mikhail explained that bloggers are the main social media marketing trend of the past couple of years.

“On Instagram, in particular, we actively engage bloggers because their audience is important for us. If we see that a blogger is, in one way or another, interested in topics related to ecology...we try to get into their live videos or do posts together, maybe answer some questions in order to get an audience that is not ours to find out that things like recycling do exist,” Viktoria explained.

The expert also added that people tend to get more engaged when their favorite singer or blogger tells them about various ecological issues and how to go about solving them.

Chingis (social media manager at WWF Russia) also praised Instagram for

facilitating engaging collaborations with bloggers and influencers. The experts at Greenpeace Russia also spoke at length about this.

“We have been working with bloggers a lot lately. Since we don’t have a budget for this kind of promotion, we try to find likeminded bloggers who share our vision. Oftentimes they’re not big names but rather people who work within our sphere and their audience is not necessarily big but it is ‘warmed up’ for us. They can have from 1,000 to 100,000 subscribers...this type of audience is usually more tightknit...so if we need to get signatures, etc. their subscribers are usually very responsive because they really understand what is going on,” Tatiana said.

Vladimir explained that Greenpeace Russia even hired an employee to work specifically towards attracting bloggers and influencers for collaborations on Instagram. The ENGO believes that by mentioning Greenpeace Russia and shedding light on important ecological issues in their posts, bloggers are one of the reasons more and more Russians are starting to avoid things like plastic bags. Additionally, these collaborations lead to a growth in follower numbers for Greenpeace Russia: “thanks to one blogger mentioning us of her own free will, we got 4,000 new subscribers over night” (Vladimir).

EKA’s Alisa and Irina also mentioned working with influencers, local celebrities, opinion leaders and bloggers, as well as partnering up with larger organizations in order to get wider publicity for the ENGO and thus grow their audience and spread their message further. Irina added that having a budget to attract more influencers would make these types of initiatives even more fruitful.

Anastasia, however, exercised some caution and claimed that bloggers are actually not as trusted as they once were. Nevertheless, she has plans for Plus One to start working together with influencers, “but the trick is to find someone

who is really in line with our principles, someone who really practices what they preach...we want to connect with influencers who already have a solid grounding in sustainability issues and a dedicated audience”.

Event organization, attracting volunteers, collecting donations and other organizational objectives

In addition to education and enlightenment, experts from Moscow-based ENGO's also cited social media channels as a tool to achieve other organizational objectives.

Apart from education and eco-enlightenment, WWF Russia, for example, uses social media to “call to action and a wide range of other things...to fulfill all of our organization's aims because in 2019 social media are the most important instrument for interacting with the audience” (Chingis). Social media are used to achieve all of WWF Russia's organizational tasks, i.e. environmental enlightenment/education, donations, information about the organization's achievements (scientific and corporate), hiring new team members, organizing events, informing the public about new legislation, etc.

“Whenever we do a campaign about protecting nature, like Earth Hour for example, we always have some sort of call to action and try to get our audience to undertake the concrete action, like leave their contact details and then we start to interact with them, which will then lead to a growth in our supporter numbers. And social media are becoming an extremely powerful tool for this” (Alexey).

Razdelny Sbor utilizes Telegram and WhatsApp to enable team members and volunteers to coordinate upcoming events and communicate amongst each other. Vladimir mentioned that Greenpeace Russia makes important announcements

about events on social media. Irina detailed how EKA uses social media platforms for offline events:

“We announce our projects, try to attract volunteers, provide details as they appear about the what’s and when’s of upcoming events...and ask our friends at other organizations to spread the word”.

Viktoria said that these channels also facilitate internal communication for the ENGO.

Getting signatures for petitions is another important organizational task for Greenpeace Russia and here too social media facilitate the accomplishment of this goal.

“If we’re talking about next level commitment, then we ask our followers to sign a petition, to let their voice be heard and show that they are not ambivalent to what’s going”, Vladimir said.

The expert especially praised V Kontakte newsletters as an effective instrument to gather signatures and bring petitions all the way to the attention of the Russian President.

Attracting new volunteers and holding offline events are other organizational tasks for which ENGO’s use social media.

“We have a project called ‘lets resurrect our forests’ aimed at restoring our forests through the efforts of school children and volunteers and social media is a great tool to invite people to these reforestation events that we organize,” Tatiana stated.

Vladimir recalled another volunteering project launched by Greenpeace called “Heroes of Nature”, whereby ordinary people can volunteer their skills and time

and send all proceeds to Greenpeace Russia. Though this is a separate website, people who opt for making this “time donation” and giving the proceeds to Greenpeace Russia share their initiatives to boost visibility “and one guy even managed to raise 730,000 rubles [approximately \$11,200] for holding a marketing conference” (Vladimir).

For EKA, attracting new volunteers is a very significant task because of the specifics of its work.

“What’s important for us is to reach an activist that will not only go and organize an event but will also get other people to come to this event,” Alisa said. However, finding activists and teachers to organize offline events requires extreme precision in social media targeting approaches.

Although it was previously stated that Mikhail does not consider social media channels to be the best platform for raising funds, Vladimir was not so quick to discard their potential to achieve this organizational objective.

“As controversial as this statement may be, no one works for free – not even NGO’s. Greenpeace has fundraising platforms and fundraising projects and we talk about them and attract financial supports through our social media channels,” (Vladimir).

Tatiana also mentioned that the search for new donors “happens largely through online mechanisms” at Greenpeace Russia, though she did not specify whether these online mechanisms are e-mail newsletters or social media platforms.

Transparency, application of pressure and sharing results

Because Alexey is not a communications expert at WWF Russia but rather deals with oil and gas extraction, his main target audience are fellow experts and executives from Russian oil and gas companies. Therefore, his communications objectives differ from the other experts but it is still illustrative of how social media channels can be harnessed in Russia try to solve environmental problems:

“I use it [Facebook] as an individual to reflect my position vis-à-vis certain ecological issues, especially those that are within my expertise (ecological responsibility of large businesses)...We [experts and company representatives] have a real platform to discuss and exchange opinions and ideas. This is an open group and I see groups like this as popularizing mechanisms for ideas like liquefied natural gas – ideas that only a few years ago would have been dismissed as unviable”.

Though these Facebook groups have relatively few members (one has 400, while the second one has only 40), Alexey sees it as an opportunity to “create a community consisting, first and foremost, of ecologists who know something about at least one of the problems that exists there and want to do something about them, i.e. provide information, give their opinion”.

Alexey and other experts in this field are using social media as one of the methods to influence companies remotely, especially those that are extracting resources in some of the most remote parts of Russia with extremely fragile eco-systems.

“Social media and space monitoring give us the possibility to not leave the industrial companies one on one with these fragile eco-systems”.

Transparency is a key issue for Alexey and these expert Facebook groups allow

him and his colleagues to influence companies' actions because "lately they've been less responsive on direct communications channels". He believes that society too demands information from companies regarding their operations in ecologically vulnerable areas and this is why their expert groups on Facebook are "pushing for information transparency".

Tatiana holds a similar view on how social media helps to exert more and more pressure on companies and government figures that are threatening nature.

"In recent times there have been various attempts on specially protected nature territories – nature reserves, national parks – because very often someone important wants to build a dacha [a traditional Russian country house] there or construct a pipeline but, luckily, nowadays the laws are quite tough. So they try to change the laws somehow, oftentimes in a way so that no one would notice. Our experts then bring all this to the surface and we address people on various communications channels, especially social media, 'guys lets do something about this' and collecting 50,000 signatures, for example, is already a good size to be able to influence policymakers. So far we've been able to defeat all these attempts."

Mikhail echoed this view by saying that those who want to threaten nature now understand that with the speed that information travels on social media, their actions will indeed be visible to many people and these people now have more power than before to block these attempts.

What is important to note, according to Tatiana, is that through social media people are beginning to understand how their online actions are influencing the outcomes of

certain situations, which can potentially make society more active when it comes to environmental issues.

“This is my feeling and I think some research has also suggested this – people are no longer interested in simply liking or sharing something on social media. They want to know that the action they undertook actually changed something. Even if it’s a small action. And so it’s important for us to show people that it’s not just a signature, not just a like or a share but that it’s an action that can greatly impact the situation” (Tatiana).

Irina believes that by using social media platforms, her organization can show donors by posting spending reports that their money was used as it was intended. This, the expert believes, helps to create trust.

WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ARE USED AND WHY

The social media landscape in Russia is different in several ways to that in the West in part due to the strong presence of social networking sites created in Russia by Russians for Russians. Despite the difference in choice of platforms, the ways in which and the reasons why they use them are fairly similar.

“The idea is to use social media because, in my opinion, the costs are minimal but there is definitely some kind of effect,” said Alexey.

Mikhail added that ENGO’s can make use of a number of free resources and courses to aid in their management of their social media channels, making it a “good way for development”.

Secondly, it has come to replace the more traditional company website and other communication channels as an effective form of communicating an ENGO's messages.

"The website has slumped to third or fourth place, news are read only by socially active people – an average person doesn't normally visit a news website of their own free will, only if someone sends them a link on social media. That's why we use social media to achieve all of our organization's tasks" (Chingis). Mikhail echoed this view.

Anastasia suggested that, in fact, these days social media networks are the main source of traffic to her organization's website and that the "nucleus" of their audience comes from social media.

Alexey added: "having worked in this industry for a long time, I sense that social media are mainstream now and there's no getting around without them". Tatiana, who has been with Greenpeace Russia since 2005, agrees that "things are moving more and more online if we compare our work methods to 2005".

Thirdly, it is used by a vast majority of Russian society and the younger generation in particular, which makes it a vital communications tool.

"Eco enlightenment is not possible at the moment without social media sites because it's 2019 and it's hard to find a person who doesn't use at least one social media site," said Viktoria and Chingis echoed this view. Anastasia added that the younger audience reads Plus One's material more on social media.

"A vast majority of people are on social media, be it through mobile or laptops and this gives me hope that social media will not die. Not everyone reads

newspapers, not everyone reads online media outlets but almost everyone is on social media. Even little children manage to register somehow without their parents' knowing! And we can reach them there" (Alisa).

Another reason experts cited for using social media was the ability to engage with influencers, bloggers and other opinion leaders that encourage their followers to care about environmental issues.

"If an opinion leader declares that something is good or bad, people tend to follow. And opinion leaders spend a lot of time on social media in this day and age so yeah, social media's influence is huge" (Viktoria).

Finally, as Chingis explained, social media greatly reduces the distance – "almost to zero" – between the organization and the user, allowing for genuine two-way communication.

The literature review section dealt with case studies from around the world of ENGO's harnessing social media's power to engage with existing audiences and reach new ones. In many of those case studies, Twitter and Facebook were cited as the social media tools of choice to organize events, create public awareness, change behavior and achieve other communications aims. In the Russian context, the situation is different; almost all interviewees cited Vkontakte.ru (a Russian social networking website similar to Facebook) as their primary social media channel.

Mikhail stated simply: "in Russia, platform #1 for everything is Vkontakte".

"Historically, Vkontakte has always had the majority of our supporters because it was the first social media platform that WWF Russia began using," Chingis explained.

Anastasia stated that although initially Plus One's main platform on social media was Facebook and it dedicated most resources to that, the organization then started "copying and pasting the content to Vkontakte and the page started growing rapidly and even overtook the Facebook page".

Viktoria, Vladimir, Tatiana, Alisa and Irina also cited Vkontakte as a platform that is widely used. Several of the respondents mentioned Vkontakte's new newsletter feature as a subsection of this platform that they have begun to use. Alisa also praised Vkontakte's "convenient interface, a fairly simple algorithm" and the ability to work with re-targeting on the platform. The only respondent that did not mention Vkontakte was Alexey but that might be because he uses social media for different reasons than the other respondents, as previously discussed.

Other social networking websites that are widely used by the ENGO's studied are Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and – in certain cases – Odnoklassniki (another Russian social networking website).

For Anastasia, Facebook's audience in Russia is the "thinking kind, middle age Generation X who are not ambivalent, who discuss important topics that are not on the general media agenda".

"In the past five years I started using Facebook very actively," Alexey said. "WWF Russia started using Facebook approximately five years ago because in those days it was the mightiest of them all...our organization decided that social media is an important trend and an innovation that we must use".

"Of course we have a Facebook page but we use it less actively because the audience there is a bit apathetic...recently we started paying more attention to our YouTube channel...we have an account on Instagram as well but we don't

use it as actively as we'd like to due to a lack of resources...we also have an account on Odnoklassniki and we have an active friendship with the administration there, but the audience there is very specific," Chingis said.

Odnoklassniki, according to Chingis, is seeing a growth in users and many of them are in the countryside. Although the expert described the audience there as "very specific", he conceded that "if you need to find a user deep in the countryside, then Odnoklassniki is the instrument to do that".

Chingis also mentioned that Twitter is not very popular in Russia, unlike in the West, so it is mainly used as a news portal for WWF Russia. This is was the only mention of Twitter throughout all the interviews, suggesting that this is not a worthwhile social media platform for Moscow-based ENGO's.

Viktoria mentioned that her organization's main focus on social media is on Instagram "because the audience there is more open to new ideas" and their community on Instagram "grows and develops faster than on other social media sites". In the future Razdelny Sbor might start an account on Odnoklassniki but when asked about this, Viktoria used the words "God forgive me", signaling that this platform is not very desirable but might be necessary.

Vladimir shared this distaste for Odnoklassniki. When asked about which platforms Greenpeace Russia uses, Vladimir responded:

"Our Odnoklassniki page is doing great...this is a joke, of course."

When probed a little more about whether there are any considerations at all of starting to use Odnoklassniki, Vladimir responded with a blunt no.

In addition to the V Kontakte page, Vladimir also mentioned Instagram, Facebook

and YouTube as platforms that Greenpeace uses actively in its communications activities on social media. Tatiana confirmed that YouTube and Instagram are particularly strong platforms for Greenpeace Russia at the moment, with their YouTube channel growing very quickly in terms of subscribers. Both Vladimir and Tatiana believe that Instagram is a very useful tool when it comes to working with bloggers and influencers in Russia.

Mikhail's view is that there is nothing better in Russia at the moment than V Kontakte "because it has everything and is more effective" and though it is important to have a presence on Facebook and Instagram, in his opinion the platform that works best for community building is V Kontakte. The expert also praised the platform's initiative to combat fraudulent fundraising activities on the social network and its dedicated section to charity and fundraising. Regarding Odnoklassniki, Mikhail stated that this platform is "limited" and the audience is "limited to students from the regions and pensioners...and it's too late to try and teach pensioners about wildlife".

In contrast, the two social media managers at EKA, mentioned using Odnoklassniki, however it is not the most important platform and is used only in three of EKA's projects because, as Alisa explained, "the people on there are very...particular. There are lot of people on Odnoklassniki that left to live abroad and for them it's just a place to be nostalgic, it's a bit of a difficult audience to be honest." Otherwise, EKA's projects also use Facebook, Instagram and there are plans to launch a YouTube channel for EkaWiki.

Mikhail summarized the approach that all ENGO's should have when considering which platforms to use: "it's important to understand that there's a general 'eco-system' of social media and each platform performs its function, so ENGO's must

understand all the platforms' unique points”.

OTHER COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Although experts agreed that social media is a must for ENGO's in Russia in 2019, several of them have pointed out that they are not the only communications channels and that it is important to use “all that's available – and what might not yet be available” (Anastasia). Greenpeace Russia has a fairly large communications department, according to Tatiana, and uses different communications platforms with a different reach at both a federal and regional level.

Tatiana specifically pointed to the television as still being an important platform for communications, especially when trying to raise awareness about problems like forest fires among the older generations and those who live in rural areas because “for them federal TV channels are still the most important source of information – we can't do without TV in these cases”. Greenpeace Russia had a campaign about forest fire prevention and Tatiana believes that without partnerships with federal and regional TV channels this campaign would not have achieved the reach and the results that it did.

Chingis stated that although WWF Russia is trying to focus more on social media marketing, the ENGO tries to utilize all the communication channels out there. Greenpeace Russia also utilizes, when possible, radio, print press and outdoor advertising, though the latter is problematic because the organization relies only on free spots, which are rarely available. Tatiana mentioned collaborations with the Moscow Metro, which features Greenpeace ads on its pop up windows that passengers have to view to log into the free Wi-Fi network it provides. Publishing

material in newspapers like Kommersant⁶ is also important to Greenpeace's work in Russia because it is read by policy makers "and that helps our cause" (Tatiana). Vladimir added that Greenpeace Russia utilizes whatever communication channels "we can get our hands on and which don't go against our principles".

Messengers like WhatsApp and Telegram are also used by some of the organizations, especially the smaller ones that do not have the resources or connections to take advantage of TV, print media and outdoor advertising. Razdelny Sbor has a channel on Telegram and also chats on WhatsApp, though Viktoria admitted to using the latter less. Both Vladimir and Tatiana of Greenpeace Russia also cited Telegram and WhatsApp as communications channels that the organization uses.

Experts also pointed out that in 2019, direct communication channels like the e-mail newsletter are still a very relevant and important way to communicate with their target audience. Alexey stated that WWF Russia started using newsletters in the 1990's and still does so. Experts from Greenpeace Russian also mentioned newsletters, as did Alisa from EKA. Mikhail stressed the importance for Russian ENGO's to use newsletters because this, in his opinion, is the most effective way of securing donations – something that is much harder via social media.

Anastasia explained that it is important to think "outside the box" in terms of communications: "because we are makers of content, agenda setters and navigate between offline and online we need to use a wide range of communications instruments". Her organization is actively seeking offline

⁶ A nationally distributed daily newspaper published in Russia mostly devoted to politics and business.

methods to communicate with its potential and current audience. For example, Plus One organizes its own award ceremony along with other offline events and has a number of projects that utilize art installations as a form of communication.

CONTENT, STRATEGY AND CAMPAIGNS

Content

The phrase “content is king” originates from an essay Bill Gates published in 1996 (Evans 2017) and the Moscow-based experts believe this phrase rings even more true today. All content starts with an idea.

“First of all it’s the idea. If the idea is simple and understandable and explains that their [users’] actions will really help, then the campaign can be successful” (Chingis).

According to Mikhail, there are three types of content that ENGO’s tend to produce on social media these days: alarmist content, constructive content and “more simple content on the level of ‘help save this kitty’”. The expert believes that the third type of content evokes more reactions “because it doesn’t require you to immerse your audience into the complex nature of wildlife problems”, while “constructive content is not as attractive because you need to be able to tell it well”. Mikhail hopes that constructive content will soon catch up and sees WWF Russia moving in the right direction with this, especially through creating communities on social media.

Anastasia confirmed that Plus One is starting “to focus on how to talk about complex problems and solutions in a simple way (how-to, DIY, simple value shifts and showing monetary value from changing behavioral habits)”.

Razdelny Sbor usually focuses on producing content that is not boring or “super serious”, but content that is interesting and gets the viewer “on the hook”. The foundation of Razdelny Sbor’s success on social media, according to Viktoria, is that the content and the campaigns are “reasonable, kind and personal” and the information is unique and educational.

“Since I started doing this job I began to focus more on educational material and it is popular like ‘wow’” (Viktoria).

Sincere content is in demand and ENGO’s need to be able to tell a story well, Mikhail explained. Organizations also need to focus on quality journalism. As an example, Mikhail mentioned Takie Dela, a Russian online journal and charity foundation that became popular thanks to producing high quality journalism.

“Before, charity work online consisted of ‘it’s bad - help, it’s bad - help!!!’ and a horrible image. This is very simple because it plays on human emotions. So when more complex and deeper explanations to these problems start to appear, this can be considered good content and this is the content that is winning right now...more and more NGO’s are producing high quality and sincere content,” Mikhail elaborated.

Irina agreed that this type of content is the way forward:

“We want to show that doing something good for nature is easy and everyone can do their part. We offer ‘instructions’ and issue calls to action. And, of course, we want to go deeper into people’s stories and let them talk about themselves, about their needs and ideas”.

Video content is something that several ENGO’s cited as a major part of their social media strategy. Greenpeace Russia in particular is experiencing a

substantial growth in subscribers on its YouTube channel. Vladimir explained Greenpeace Russia's approach to video content:

"We try to create video content that answers eternal – well, I hope they won't always be eternal – questions like how to properly separate waste".

This resonates with the overall trend towards creating constructive content – content that offers solutions rather than simply stating what the problem is. Although experts seemed to be divided on the use of Odnoklassniki, Chingis stated that it is, in fact, an important platform for the organization to reach those in more rural areas and video content is especially in demand on the site. WWF Russia plans to become more active in the production of its own video content because this has been a major social media trend in Russia and the world for the last few years.

Strategy: partnerships

Thanks to its size and reputation, WWF Russia manages to secure important partnerships that help make the organization's social media efforts more effective. Chingis named Sberbank – Russia's largest bank – as a key partner in the ENGO's online work. The bank has a separate charity/fundraising platform called "Sberbank Vmeste", through which it contacts clients (on social media as well) and informs them about the different charities and causes they can help financially. Together with Sberbank Vmeste, WWF Russia managed to collect an impressive amount of money to strengthen tiger fences in the Russian Far East in a record amount of time.

Both Mikhail and Chingis also mentioned the administration of the V Kontakte social networking site as being a friend of the organization and through this

friendship WWF Russia receives support for special projects. Other organizations that Chingis works with on social media promotions and campaigns are Zhivaya Planeta⁷, National Geographic and Greenpeace Russia.

These sorts of partnerships are also at the core of Plus One's work. Anastasia described Plus One as a "cloud media", one that is present on large federal media platforms. As such, already at the outset it had partnerships with larger outlets such as RBK⁸, TASS⁹, Vedomosti¹⁰ and Forbes Russia.

"We use global media – platforms that help us capitalize on Plus One...On the one hand we talk with their audience using their language, on the other hand we put the content out on social media channels to grow our 'nuclear' audience, the 'nuclear' audience of Plus One," Anastasia explained.

Irina also briefly mentioned partnerships, though on a more low-scale level. Viktoria briefly spoke about how support from various media figures attributed to the success of one of Razdelny Sbor's campaigns.

Strategy: paid advertising

Attaining organic follower growth on some social media channels is proving to become an ever more difficult task. Several experts pointed to Facebook as being the most problematic site in terms of this. In general, ENGO's do not have a big budget (or any budget at all) for paid advertising on social media. However, they do try to use what funds they have to invest in advertising on social media. In the

⁷ The first Russian TV channel with its own production team dedicated to nature

⁸ The first 24-hour business news television channel in Russia.

⁹ A major news agency in Russia

¹⁰ A Russian-language business daily

previous section, Alisa from EKA praised Vkontakte for its convenient and user-friendly advertising options.

“Our videos on Vkontakte got more than 100,000 views and it was successful because of a combination of paid advertising and because people downloaded and put up all sorts of posters around their neighborhoods...Also, thanks to our latest ads on social media, we managed to recruit quite a few new volunteers and activists” (Alisa).

Chingis also briefly spoke about advertising on Vkontakte and mentioned that the social network sometimes gives special promotional codes to the ENGO to advertise itself for free. Vladimir mentioned a paid campaign Greenpeace Russia conducted on Instagram and said that it was a good experience for his organization.

Strategy: making use of available instruments

In 2019, the worldwide web has many useful instruments on offer for digital and social media marketing.

“There’s no formula for success, you just have to keep trying, experimenting and tweaking. Especially because now we have more media and social media instruments than ever,” said Chingis.

Mikhail spoke at length and put enormous emphasis on ENGO’s – especially the small local ones – utilizing various free resources on the Internet to improve and maintain the quality of their social media marketing:

“If you’re an NGO, you will always find a way to get access to a good online

course for free. V Kontakte and Mail.Ru¹¹ hold events and webinars and if you write to them and say you're from an NGO, they'll send you the course for free. When I worked at WWF Russia we got whatever we needed for free...and this allows for expertise to be accumulated within the ENGO...and with time, an employee can become skilled enough to ensure that the organization's accounts are well-maintained".

Tatiana also mentioned various conferences and organizations that allow ENGO's to stay up to date with the latest trends in the world of social media marketing and always encourages colleagues from other organizations to attend them.

Campaigns

When speaking of the type of content that works well in Russia in 2019, several experts mentioned originality as being the key factor in determining success. For the global "Earth Hour" campaign, WWF Russia and V Kontakte launched two special projects in Russia. One year, V Kontakte allowed users to "switch off" their accounts for "Earth Hour": their accounts went dark and a little virtual flashlight appeared, allowing other users to navigate the page with it by moving their mouse.

Mikhail spoke about the other "Earth Hour" campaign WWF Russia carried out together with V Kontakte:

"We created a special set of stickers with rare and endangered species and till this day these are the most frequently sent stickers on V Kontakte. They're sent in the millions...and in the space of just a few days after releasing this set of stickers, WWF became a much more recognizable brand in Russia, organizations

¹¹ A Russian Internet company. It was started in 1998 as an e-mail service.

that didn't know our name before began to want to partner up".

What was less successful for WWF Russia were contests because, according to the expert, people are tired of contests. Mikhail believes that only trial and error can illustrate what works well and what does not.

This year, Razdelny Sbor carried out a campaign with the help of social media that Viktoria deemed to be extremely successful. On International Women's Day (a very important holiday in Russia), one of the Moscow neighborhoods planned to release flying lamps and other balloon-like items into the air and "this is a very dangerous item of trash flying out into the air because sooner or later, it's going to fall back down and considering that these are light lamps there are batteries inside – the end result is that it's going to decompose somewhere and release very toxic material. Not only will a turtle and bird eat it, it will also seriously pollute the environment" (Viktoria).

Razdelny Sbor quickly prepared a template for a letter for people to send to Rosprirodnadzor¹² urging for this event to be called off, posted it across their various social media accounts "and the results were phenomenal because people got engaged very quickly; already on that very same evening the organizers of the event changed the format of the event completely" (Viktoria). The campaign was repeated the next day because a similar balloon releasing event was planned for Maslennitsa (an important Russian Orthodox holiday marking the beginning of the Great Lent); the organizers reacted very quickly and issued a video on the same day explaining that "that they had no idea of the consequences" and also changed the format.

¹² The Federal Nature Management Supervision Service

The experts from Greenpeace Russia spoke at length about social media campaigns that they carried out jointly with Russian celebrities such as Sergey Zverev and the singer Glukoza. In both cases the celebrities drew the public's attention to important issues through their social media accounts. In the case of Zverev it was about stopping the construction of a drinking water plant near Lake Baikal and with Glukoza it was about releasing sea mammals from the "whale jail"¹³. However, Tatiana exercised caution when evaluating the latter campaign because:

"This madness has been going on for too long, these poor animals have been in this 'prison' for ages already. On the one hand it's great to see that people are worried about this and have been showing their support for our work and these animals but on the other hand, this has been dragging on for so long that people have kind of grown tired of it and lost faith that we can change the situation".

This echoes back to what the expert said earlier about the importance of people seeing that their actions are leading to results. With the horrific "whale jail" situation in the Russian Far East there still has been no progress made at the time of writing (June 2019).

Mikhail also detailed a campaign his agency did together with local bloggers and influencers from a small but wealthy town in the Republic of Karelia:

"We organized a tea session with local bloggers and influencers where we told locals about plastic cups and the damage they do. So now these bloggers are going to cafes with their own cups and documenting it and we hope that people

¹³ In February 2019, activists raised the alarm about the mistreatment of 11 orcas and 90 belugas that were kept in freezing and cramped pens in Srednyaya Bay (Primorye region) and due to be sold to China (The Moscow Times 2019)

will follow suit and thus learn to avoid plastic where possible. Thanks to social media we can develop this locally in Russia”.

The experts from EKA spoke about the ENGO’s annual International Women’s Day campaign called “Plant a Forest” that they carry out on social media. Throughout this campaign, EKA calls on its followers to “buy a tree as a gift instead of giving bouquets”. Followers can purchase a certificate for a specific amount of trees and then EKA’s volunteers go out and plant them. Alisa, who has been at the organization much longer, explained that for years this campaign was not as successful as they hoped it would be.

“For the longest time we couldn’t get the desired response for March 8th because of bad messaging. We used to say ‘instead of giving a bouquet plant a forest’ and I’m sure you can imagine the reaction here in Russia when someone gives a girl this certificate instead of flowers. But this year we had more success, we used different messaging and targeted more the women themselves and said ‘give this as a gift to your mother or to someone who lives far away from you’. And this campaign was quite successful, we had tons of purchases especially around March 8th” (Alisa).

A recent campaign of EKA’s that did not go as well as the ENGO had hoped was also likely due to the wrong selection of words. EKA held a webinar dedicated to urban gardening and called it “partisan gardening”.

“Perhaps it was a communication error on our part because people don’t like the word ‘partisan’, we did not succeed with our advertising efforts and even those who are our subscribers already didn’t really react to this webinar. Really it was

about urban gardening and re-greening – something totally harmless – but we called it ‘partisan gardening’ and set our ad targeting to those who are interested in gardening and there was no reaction” (Alisa).

This, once again, demonstrates that it is important for ENGO’s to pay attention to the content of their social media posts, as well as to consider who they are targeting and the language that the audience responds to well.

RESULTS

Social media, for the most part, brought positive results in terms of the communications activities of the Moscow-based ENGO’s that were interviewed.

Reporting

As part of their overall strategy, Moscow-based ENGO’s pay a great deal of attention to recording, analyzing and reporting the results of their activities on social media. Mikhail stated that ENGO’s like WWF Russia operate as a full-fledged business so they need to work in accordance with KPI’s (key performance indicators) just like any business. This is done to then go back and make necessary amendments to the strategy, content plan, etc. in order for their social media activities to be more effective in the future.

“We do a monthly report and compare it with the previous month...We use the instruments that the social media platform provides and third party analytics instruments” (Chingis).

“We analyze data and statistics and based on that we edit our content plan and understand what’s interesting for people and what isn’t, what to tell them about” (Viktoria).

Greenpeace Russia has a plan that outlines how many new donors need to be attracted, how the engagement rate should grow, etc. The communications department uses third party analytical instruments like Popsters and Live Dune to compare a given month’s results to the previous month’s results, analyzes the data and the numbers and, based on all this, the ENGO makes amendments to its social media strategy.

EKA utilizes Yandex¹⁴ and Google Analytics to do weekly and monthly statistics gathering on the website and social media channels:

“We get it all into a table, analyze the data and then if we see that the CTR [click through rate] is falling it means we need to do something about it, that means there’s a problem with the content so we need to do something about it. And if everything’s ok then we carry on doing what we were doing” (Alisa).

Audience growth is one of the main things the ENGO’s measure to assess how effective their social media presence is. Engagement rate and reach are also closely monitored by the experts, as is the performance of certain posts.

¹⁴ A Russian multinational corporation specializing in Internet-related products and services, including search and information services, e-Commerce, transportation, navigation, mobile applications and online advertising.

“The first thing we look at is the reach, the amount of new subscribers, the amount of new financial supporters and how many people came to the website from social media networks” (Vladimir).

“Analytics allow us to understand what sort of content evokes a better response and a concrete action from people. So if we publish a link to a petition that needs to be signed or to an article, data analysis allows us to understand where these people come from, how often, what they do on our website and what the conversion rate is...this gives us a better understanding of what sort of material is interesting and what is more difficult to absorb” (Tatiana).

Alisa also mentioned the amount of new publications in other media as an important indicator that EKA looks at:

“In the last two years we’ve had a lot more people addressing us, recognition became higher. The amount of our publications appearing in mass media and other social networks grew. Cross PR in various groups around Russia is also happening. We have other organizations saying things like ‘yes of course we’ll work with you, we saw your other posts, we’ll make a free publication’. This allows us to get our posts across various other groups – and all for free” (Alisa).

Greenpeace Russia, a larger ENGO, also has access to and partnerships with official government pollsters like VTSIOM¹⁵ and, according to Tatiana, this type of reporting and campaign evaluation is also important “because it gives us a better

¹⁵ Russian Public Opinion Research Center - the oldest polling institution in post-Soviet Russia and one of Russia's leading sociological and market research companies.

understanding of how effective our work was. To really understand the extent of reach over the course of a year you need to ask a large amount of people”.

Raised awareness and exposure to new information

When asked what exactly the growth in followers, likes, reposts, reach, engagement, etc. could be interpreted as, experts cited better awareness of environmental issues as one of the results.

“Because the reach is growing, I personally feel that the topic of ecology and ecological problems is becoming more and more relevant for Russians. We don’t even have to look at statistics – it’s enough to look at the news and we’ll see that the amount of news related to these topics has grown visibly over the past few years and even months...our inbox is overflowing with direct messages about which ecological injustice is taking place and where. And this, first of all, shows that people are interested in and aware of environmental issues and want to do something about it by asking us” (Chingis).

The speed with which information travels across social media means that people are constantly exposed to new facts, figures and opinions. Mechanisms such as likes, shares and comments might not mean that a certain person will immediately become an eco-warrior, but it does signify that they have been exposed to a potentially new piece of information.

“The growth in likes, shares, etc. is important here. I’ll use a recent example of a campaign we had about the ecological footprint of clothes under the slogan ‘are you sure you have nothing to wear?’. And it was a post which was shared by

many. This means that more people found about this issue and have at least started to think about telling themselves off for buying the 15th pair of jeans” (Viktoria).

Razdelny Sbor’s “Eco-Spring” campaign is another social media success story for the ENGO because people who simply did not know that there are special places to dispose of old electronics suddenly found out about them and that, otherwise, “mountains of this hardware trash ends up in landfills” (Viktoria).

Alisa at EKA sees a like on social media as, first of all, evidence that a person saw and was exposed to new information. If the follower then reposts or shares the post, this means that:

“The person found the information useful and wants to keep it for later or that they want to share it with friends: they understand that this is how it should be and that other people should also see this and it is great that people share”.

In this manner, more and more Russians are exposed to important information regarding environmental issues and there is the potential for more awareness about ways to tackle them. Alisa’s colleague Irina agreed that having instantaneous access to information regarding environmental issues is something that only became possible thanks to social media:

“Social media give every person access to any information they need. It greatly reduces the path towards obtaining it”.

Mikhail also feels that social media are shedding light on environmental problems in Russia more quickly and effectively: “through social media ENGO’s can raise awareness about a certain issue, talk about solutions and get a mechanism going towards solving the problem”.

For example, Tatiana feels that through active work on social media, Greenpeace Russia helped create the trend for Russians to start avoiding plastic and other single use objects:

“People are really starting to think about consuming consciously, that we create all the trash we see lying around – it doesn’t just appear out of nowhere. On social media we see that people are really responding to this, that they are ready for this information and ready to make necessary changes. People are writing to us with questions, we see lots of comments on our posts, we’ve got a high engagement rate”.

By employing publications on social media, Greenpeace Russia has also popularized the “eco-bag” (small reusable textile bags used for purchasing vegetables, fruits and other produce instead of taking single use plastic bags provided by the store) because now an increasing number of people are using them and even making their own.

“In the last year and a half or so it’s become a very popular and trendy word. If you type in ‘eco-bag’ [in Russian] into wordstat.yandex.ru, you’ll see that in autumn of 2017 there were zero online searches for this word and now, in just one and a half years it’s in the thousands. It’s a rapidly growing line [Appendix

2]...of course several thousand is still not a huge number, but the dynamic is clearly an upwards one” (Tatiana).

Concrete action

Although assessing whether social media helps lead to concrete action towards solving environmental issues in Russia can at times be a tricky task, several of the interviewed experts explained how they evaluate this.

Remembering their social media campaign with Sergey Zverev, Tatiana said that with the celebrity’s help (he made a post on his Instagram account urging his followers to vote against a piece of legislation that would relax Lake Baikal’s special protected territory status), many social media users participated. The expert noted that this was especially surprising given the complex participation mechanisms:

“It’s a government website – it’s not enough just to like the Instagram post – you have to go on this website, authorize yourself, make your way through all kinds of errors and bugs until you finally arrive at the page where you can cast your vote against”.

In this way, by collecting several thousand signatures, Greenpeace Russia has managed to put a stop to many pieces of legislation that would have endangered the environment in one way or another.

Mikhail is also optimistic that through social media, initiatives such as avoiding single use plastic are already leading to concrete action in a sort of domino effect, where it starts with just a few people and then others following suit:

“So it just starts off as a few sparks here and there and then grows into one big fire. And we can see this with plastic already. It’s a fairly simple concept and it’s starting to be visible. People are starting to avoid plastic, starting with their own families and then their cities and then it turns into a huge ‘fire’.”

In the case of EKA, enlisting teachers and volunteers to conduct lessons in schools across all of Russia or lead other types of ecological events is one of the main organizational tasks.

“We see them [EKA’s followers] being active on social media and being engaged with our projects. And then when we see the statistics and see that we have 8,000-10,000 teachers join a lesson it’s really a very cool thing!” (Alisa).

Irina added that thanks to social media, the task of coordinating these volunteers has become much less cumbersome. However, at the same time, Vladimir advised to be more critical towards making definitive statements about social media’s role in leading to concrete action:

“The best example is a personal example. I know that if my friends come to me and say they’ve stopped using single use plastic bags after talking to me, I can say with certainty that I led them to this. But when a person likes or comments on social media ‘ban plastic bags, I will stop using single use bags, etc.’, I can’t say for sure that this person will undertake this action after seeing the post”.

Nevertheless, the expert said that there has been an observed reduction in plastic bag production and consumption. He hopes that this is indeed thanks to the communications work that Greenpeace Russia and other similar ENGO's are doing. Vladimir also said that the number of forest fires is going down.

"I would like to believe that yes, our videos and our other series – and this is not just social media – are really changing something. And social media as a communication channel are evoking a reaction. People are writing comments about banning plastic bags...And that the climate is changing and that we are responsible for this planet. Where else can we live but on this planet?" (Vladimir).

Alisa's view echoed that of Vladimir. When asked whether a person liking something means that they will go and undertake a concrete action, the expert expressed some doubt:

"No, it doesn't mean that they will go and do something. Even if they followed a link and registered. It depends on a range of factors for each person. Someone is prepared to share information but not prepared to go and organize an event. But if they find out that someone in their neighborhood is organizing something they might come and attend".

Uniting

There is evidence that with the help of social media, Russians are beginning to unite around causes that matter to them.

“Social media show people that they’re not alone. They unite people into one big network. Before social media this was not possible. So if a person is sitting somewhere in Vologda, looking at piles of garbage and saying ‘man, I’m scared but I’m probably the only one’, these social media sites are allowing people to unite and that’s why movements like zero-waste and saying no to plastic are really starting to gain traction here in Russia” (Mikhail).

At the time of the interviews, there were protests taking place in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg¹⁶. Locals were protesting against a church being built on a park square – one of the few green spaces in the city. Anastasia made an interesting remark about this:

“Look at what’s happening in Yekaterinburg now. People in Russia have gotten used to the fact that someone listens to them on social media and that they can speak out. Now, they’re speaking out and no one is listening and so they’ve taken to the streets”.

Over the years social media has given Russians a platform to air their views, hopes and frustrations and when things happen that they do not necessarily agree with, social media also gives them a chance to unite and show their discontent.

¹⁶ In May 2019, thousands of residents of Yekaterinburg took to the streets to protest plans to replace a popular riverside park with a replica of an Orthodox cathedral demolished in the Soviet era (The Moscow Times 2019)

Behavior, mindset and attitude change – a “green awakening”?

Anastasia believes that in Russia, the younger generation is becoming more environmentally aware and this is in large part thanks to their active use of social media:

“Of course it’s the influence of social media. Social media allow for horizontal communication and to understand the world as a whole, as an interconnected network. There are no barriers”.

Irina agrees that social media is having a positive effect on the younger generation in Russia in terms of exhibiting more environmental behavior:

“Thanks to social media networks the younger generation has less fear of changing and of doing something about the environment. My generation, unfortunately, has this fear”.

Alisa is confident that if ENGO’s continue disseminating truly interesting and valuable information through their social media channels, a “green awakening” can really happen for the Russian public:

“I think that it is a super useful instrument...social media have become a central part of our lives and there people get constant reminders. Sooner or later a person will see a post – advertising and the new smart feeds let us remind people that ecology is important. And maybe not on the first or 50th time, but on the 100th time they see this information something will click and lead to a change in attitude and behavior”.

Mikhail added that through social media ENGO's can raise awareness about a certain issue, talk about solutions and get a mechanism going towards changing attitudes and behaviors and solving the problem. Tatiana also sees them as a vital instrument for "creating a demand for a certain trend and to then respond to this demand".

OBSTACLES

Although experts concluded that social media is indeed a powerful tool for creating a green awakening among the Russian public and leading to concrete results, there are some obstacles standing in the way of utilizing these channels to the fullest.

Resources

In general, the nature of ENGO's means that resources (both monetary and human) are often limited and this can have implication for how effective their communications work is, including on social media. For example, Chingis lamented that WWF Russia could be more active in terms of collaborations with influencers if more resources existed for this.

Analyzing data would also be a more precise and accurate task if communications experts working for ENGO's had the financial resources for more advanced analytics tools.

"It's 'surface level' digital marketing, I'd like to have deeper analytics so I could analyze data down to what type of content works better in terms of percentages,

what type of content different audiences prefer – for now these are all a bit blurry for us, again because of a lack of resources” (Chingis).

Viktoria and Irina also mentioned this as an obstacle to analyzing data to then adjust their strategies for more effective work online, as well as for experimenting with paid online targeting to attract new followers.

“We don’t get as many likes as we’d like to but this is the reality – either you cough up some money to boost each post or come to terms with the fact that a narrower circle of people sees them” (Irina).

Network-specific obstacles

Experts identified an issue with Facebook that makes it a less effective tool in Russia – and globally – than it once was: the social network is constantly changing its algorithms and without a budget for advertising on the platform, attaining organic growth and reach is becoming increasingly difficult. This corresponds with the previously identified obstacle of a lack of resources: in most cases, ENGO’s either have a very limited budget for this or no budget at all.

“Growing on Facebook without paid advertising is pretty hard and also due to the algorithm, new smart feed and other features that were introduced recently. To get into a user’s feed you need to do a lot of ‘rain dances’ and as a charity/NGO we have zero budget for online advertising” (Chingis).

Vladimir and Tatiana also mentioned these issues with Facebook for Greenpeace Russia, as did Alisa and Irina for EKA. Furthermore, Tatiana suspects that this is done intentionally by Facebook to force organizations to spend money on

advertising.

Odnoklassniki, though not favored by some of the experts, was still identified as an important channel for reaching the more rural population of Russia. However, Chingis explained that the content that works best is video content but due to a lack of resources – both human and monetary – the ENGO cannot produce as much of this content as needed to make the most of this social media network. Additionally, the expert believes that Odnoklassniki users tend to discuss politics and interpersonal matters there, while wildlife protection and ecology are much less popular topics.

Anastasia believes that across most platforms, speculative and alarmist content tends to be more viral, which is counterproductive to thinking about and attempting to solve pressing environmental issues.

Collecting donations and online fraud

Mikhail spoke at length about the limitations of social media networks when it comes to collecting donations to carry out ENGO's important work.

"Using social media is not always beneficial from a commercial point of view because contracting a social media management agency is expensive, hiring an in-house social media manager is also relatively expensive...I already mentioned that raising funds is more effective through e-mail newsletters. But it is important as an 'image' channel".

The expert added that there are a lot of fraudulent "charities" on social networks in Russia and this presents a serious obstacle for honest charities and NGO's to collect funds because people have no trust left. The frauds "have already

‘cleaned up’ social media’s trusting users, the ones that are left are more suspicious so honest NGO’s have to do a lot more work to get their donations”.

Information overload?

In our day and age, there is a lot of information online and sometimes even too much; people tend to experience what is called “information overload”. Tatiana believes that this is indeed happening on social media.

However, Chingis is not certain that this is necessarily a bad thing because the topic of ecology and environmental protection is discussed more and more frequently online, which in turn “warms up” the audience for WWF Russia and other Moscow-based ENGO’s and makes it “more capable of consuming more complex content”. This so-called “information overload” is also what is forcing people into communities, according to Tatiana. Therefore, the expert sees this as an opportunity to develop her ENGO’s social media strategy towards enabling the creation of these communities.

“Foreign agent” law

Only WWF Russia made it into the list of “foreign agents” but the experts from this organization did not view this as any sort of obstacle to their communications work on social media.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

As was demonstrated in the **FINDINGS** section, during the interview process the interviewees produced a wealth of data, which leaves ample room for analysis. The key analytical findings that emerge are that social media present cost-effective growth and engagement opportunities without spatial/temporal barriers. They allow for linking and two-way horizontal communication, which foster a sense of community – a very important online trend identified by experts. Different social media are used in different ways and with different aims by Moscow-based ENGO's in somewhat of a sharp contrast to the Western realities explored in the literature review. Content comes in various different forms, though the interviewed experts are striving to shift the focus from simply describing the problem to offering constructive solutions and, more importantly, the motivations for attempting to solve it. Influencers and opinion leaders are helping the ENGO's achieve these objectives quicker and more effectively because they possess a certain degree of credibility due to their status. All in all, experts found that social media are helping bring the environment into the mainstream agenda and a "green awakening" is indeed taking place amongst the Russian public in large part thanks to the seamless way information can now diffuse online.

COST-EFFECTIVE GROWTH AND LINKING

For Moscow-based ENGO's, the range of organizational and communications objectives is quite wide. From a communications standpoint, one of the key tasks for every ENGO is education and enlightenment, which means that they need to be able to get information across to a large audience over the biggest territory of land on the planet. The reason this is such a vital task for all Moscow-based

ENGO's is that education is the first step towards effecting some sort of behavior/attitude change and a mind shift to start leading a more environmentally conscious lifestyle. To achieve this, they need to constantly grow their audience and grow as an organization.

Social media channels have provided these ENGO's with a cost-effective way to reach and educate people, which resonates with research carried out by Shirky (2008) and Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch (2015) in the West about how new media technologies lessen advocacy groups' reliance on traditional communications tools and help them reach a number of geographic locations at the same time. Indeed, several experts alluded to the fact that nowadays it is difficult to find a person in Russia who does not use at least one social media platform and so in order to reach Russians in cities, towns, villages and even remote settlements, these channels should be an essential part of every ENGO's communications toolkit.

Because the vast majority of Russians – according to the experts – are using these new media technologies, an ENGO cannot grow, and thus spread its message, without having a social media presence. But simply being online is not enough: ENGO's in Russia must be able to manage their social media presence well and one way to do that is to make use of the free resources and social media management courses, which provide further evidence of their cost-effectiveness.

The idea of linking was also brought up several times during the discussions. Social media is the linking agent to ENGO's websites, articles and various other educational pieces of information that appear online, as well as a direct link to their target audience and vice versa. The latter link is especially important in light of the clearly identified trend both in the literature review (Lovejoy and Saxton

2012) and amongst Moscow-based experts that is witnessing users move towards more intimate and tightknit communities, both online and offline. Without providing such a function through their social media channels, ENGO's in Russia would find it difficult to grow as an organization and to grow their audience. These channels also reduce the distance between the ENGO and its audience, thus enhancing and growing the community. Organizing and coordinating events through social media also facilitates community management and helps bring people (volunteers, activists and members of the general public) together online as well as offline - and in real time, which echoes Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers' findings from 2010.

Furthermore, the consensus amongst experts, especially "veterans" like Tatiana and Alexey who have been working in this industry for almost two decades, is that social media platforms have come to replace the traditional website and a large part of an ENGO's audience now comes from social media, which means that in 2019 these new media channels simply can not be ignored or avoided. In 2012 Obar *et al.* found that advocacy groups were using new media technologies to achieve a wide range of organizational goals and in 2019, ENGO's in Moscow are also utilizing these channels to achieve virtually all of their aims. If an ENGO wants to grow, develop and continue educating people with the aim of leading to attitude and behavior change, it needs to embrace social media and direct even more resources towards them, which is the advice Chingis stated he always gives to his fellow communications experts working for advocacy groups in Russia.

Cost-effective growth can also be partly achieved via social media through collecting donations to help fund ENGO's work, though this is not the most important tool for this.

In 2014 Guo and Saxton found that in the West, social media facilitated relationship building and stakeholder engagement for advocacy groups and Benkler (2006) suggested that it is an effective way to enable collaboration across wide geographical distances. In 2019, this is very much the case in Russia according to experts. One of the most effective ways for ENGO's in Moscow to do this is to collaborate with bloggers, influencers and opinion leaders because people still have a great degree of trust towards them. The experience of the interviewed experts suggests that audiences tend to get more engaged when a trusted blogger or celebrity tells them about an issue and how to solve it. Additionally, several ENGO's reported securing new followers on social media after a prominent blogger/influencer mentioned or tagged them in a post on social media.

Such collaborations are also an effective tool for engagement since the bloggers/influencers tend to "specialize" in eco-friendliness so their audience is much more likely to be interested in and support the work that the ENGO's carry out. These collaborations with bloggers, influencers and opinion leaders are usually free of charge, adding to social media's cost effectiveness of getting information and messages across, as well as contributing to an organization's growth. This, however, could also pose a challenge because as suggested by Kirilenko and Stepchenkova (2014) and Williams *et al.* (2015) the potential for activism on social media may be hampered by the fact that mobilizing is limited to those who are already committed and not to the wider public. By collaborating with eco-bloggers, Moscow-based ENGO's risk reaching only those who are already "environmentally enlightened" while failing to address the majority of the

population, which still has little ecological awareness.

That said, less “specialized” bloggers help ENGO’s reach an audience that is perhaps not yet familiar with environmental issues and thus engage a new audience with these problems in Russia. For example, Greenpeace Russia acquired the support of non-specialists like pop stars Sergey Zverev and Glukoza, whose audiences are not necessarily attuned to environmental problems. Their followers on Instagram (1.2 and 2.1 million respectively as of July, 2019) have been exposed to this information and this has the potential for these issues to now become a part of their agenda. Sergey Zverev has even become somewhat of an activist in that his Instagram feed is now almost solely dedicated to saving the pristine nature around Lake Baikal and, therefore, it is possible that for his 1.2 million followers this is now an important issue as well because he has been posting about the problems facing the lake – and tagging Greenpeace Russia – continuously since February 2019. Mikhail also outlined a successful, albeit much smaller, campaign he carried out with local influencers in a small Karelian town. Though these influencers were not specialized eco-bloggers, by seeing that they are now taking reusable coffee cups with them around the town, their followers have found out about the existence of such caps – and the general problem of single use items – and might now also consider shifting their consumption patterns to include reusable items.

This corresponds with the concept of resonance and claimsmaker credibility, whereby speakers that are regarded as more credible are usually able to be more persuasive and win people’s trust (Hovland and Weiss 1951). Both specialized eco-bloggers and more celebrity-like figures possess this claimsmaker credibility thanks to their status and/or perceived expertise on environmental issues.

In addition to claimsmaker credibility, the thoughts and opinions offered by experts throughout the interviews point to an important factor of frame resonance¹⁷ – empirical credibility. This, according to Snow and Benford (2000), refers to the fit between the framings and what is actually happening in the world and the more evidence there is of the framing, the more credible it is and the broader the appeal to believe it. Indeed, one of the reasons ENGO's are perceiving such a success towards bringing about a "green awakening" amongst the Russian public via social media is because the Russians themselves are beginning to see and feel the ecological degradation taking place around them. As Chingis explained it:

"I think in terms of an 'ecological awakening' the most important factor is that people are finally starting to see the situation around them. Sooner or later we're all going to see the mountains of trash not on the news but outside our windows".

In this context, the Russian public is more likely to resonate with the content the ENGO's are publishing on their social media pages. They will not only believe what the ENGO's are saying but are more likely to listen to and follow the advice they give to tackling these problems.

As mentioned earlier, a large part of Russians are using at least one social media channel and this gives ENGO's the potential to reach a wide audience – adults and children, city dwellers and people living deep in the countryside. Finding the right platform to reach and engage with them is one of the key tasks for Moscow-based ENGO's. The social media landscape in Russia is fairly large and differs quite significantly from that in the West.

¹⁷ The concept of frame resonance – one of the variables of collective action frames – explores why some framings, i.e. the way organizations construct meanings, are effective and "resonate" with the audience while others do not (Snow and Benford 1988).

The most widely used social media network in Russia is V Kontakte and in the year 2019, every ENGO should be utilizing its features. Aside from being the country's largest network in terms of users, it was also praised by experts for things like the new newsletter feature, ease of building a community, convenient interface, simple algorithm and the ease with which organizations can advertise on the platform. Experts from WWF Russia are able to reach a lot of Russians and increase brand visibility through partnerships with V Kontakte because the network is open to collaborations with advocacy groups (for example the "Earth Hour" campaign and stickers of endangered species), offers occasional free advertising opportunities and is active in terms of tackling fraudulent "charities" who scheme users out of their money.

Though attitudes to Odnoklassniki, Russia's second biggest social networking site, were quite controversial amongst experts, it is an important tool to use to reach and engage with an audience that is perhaps less open to or interested in environmental issues. Experts called its audience "very specific" and "peculiar", "limited to the regions and pensioners" and "a bit difficult" and some even expressed their reluctance towards utilizing this platform. Despite the obstacles presented by the nature of the audience, it is important for ENGO's to not dismiss this site and to make an effort to engage with these people because, ultimately, it is those people who are completely unaware of or ambivalent towards environmental issues that need to be reached and informed. Reaching the more educated city dwellers in Moscow and other big cities is undoubtedly important as they comprise the bulk of the country's population, but reaching the regions (where Odnoklassniki's audience tends to reside) is also crucial because some of Russia's most pristine and therefore vulnerable ecosystems are located there.

Moscow-based ENGO's recognize Instagram's potential thanks to its power of visual story telling because Russians tend to engage with powerful imagery and also because images are easier to absorb than large chunks of text. Instagram's audience in Russia is growing very quickly and it was deemed by experts to be more progressive and thus more open to new ideas such as environmental awareness. Therefore this is a tool that ENGO's are using more and more actively to engage with an audience prone to being increasingly environmentally conscious. Facilitating collaborations with influencers on Instagram was another reason several of the experts placed a lot of importance on the platform going forward because, as mentioned before, this was identified as a major way to engage and reach audiences in 2019.

Similarly to Instagram, the audience on Facebook is also considered to be more of the educated "thinking kind" and thus an easier "target" for environmental enlightenment in Russia. However, the ever-changing algorithms on this social networking site make it increasingly harder for ENGO's to reach this desired audience without spending financial resources on paid advertising – a luxury that such organizations normally cannot afford. Therefore, most ENGO's are currently using it less actively but using it nonetheless because it is still an important resource that can occasionally engage this coveted audience given the right circumstances.

Unlike in the case studies from the literature review that examined ENGO use of social media in the West, Twitter is currently not an important tool for engaging or informing because it is not very widely used by the Russian public.

Employing these social media networks allows Moscow's ENGO's to move from one-way communications towards civic engagement. Because individuals are

provided with full information regarding a particular issue and through mechanisms like signing petitions, organizing events and sharing this information are included in developing responses to them, this in turn makes them more likely to engage in taking further action (Jasanoff and Wynne 1998) and feeling like they are part of the solution. Transparency that is afforded by using social media and the ways in which they help to hold environmental culprits accountable is another reason they are an effective tool for engaging the public and earning its trust.

Apart from simply engaging, experts noted the speed with which users can get engaged. During the interviews, several experts mentioned campaigns that succeeded in record time thanks to the speed with which users discovered, absorbed and then spread the information further – once again without relying on traditional media channels, which corresponds with Shirky's findings from 2008.

CONTENT: DIAGNOSTIC, PROGNOSTIC AND MOTIVATIONAL

A decade ago, Nerlich et al. (2010) and O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) suggested that social media provides a suitable arena for ENGO's to use relatable and local imagery and language to enlighten the public about and motivate it to take action against ecological problems. Experts from Moscow-based ENGO's stated that "content is king". They also spoke of the kind of content that they feel works best to achieve environmental enlightenment, encourage action and further other organizational aims they might have.

The three basic types of content identified were alarmist, constructive and simple motivational that does not delve into too much detail. In essence, this loosely

corresponds to the three core framing tasks proposed by Snow and Bedford (1988): diagnostic (identifying the problem), prognostic (articulating a proposed solution) and motivational (a “call to arms” or rationale for undertaking a concrete action to solve the problem).

Anderson (2017) proposed social media as the place to break down complex scientific information and reach large audiences through sharing and discussion. ENGO's in Moscow are also offering this type of “diagnosis” because they understand that many Russians are still quite new to being concerned about environmental problems and bombarding them with complicated facts and figures could potentially alienate a large percentage of them. Experts like Viktoria focus their social media content on the “reasonable, kind and personable” and “not super serious” kind, which is also educational. At the same time, however, there is a growing trend to produce more complex content but in the sense of story telling. Here, quality journalism plays a role as the audience looks for sincere content that tells the story of a problem. Therefore, when it comes to “diagnosis”, ENGO's need to experiment with both easy to understand and more complex content, depending on the type of audience they are targeting. If their audience is only starting to become environmentally conscious, simple explanations of complex problems are needed. If the audience is already more “progressive”, it is likely looking for something deeper and at the same time sincere and personable.

While providing a “diagnosis” of the problem is important in the Russian context, experts generally agreed that offering an understandable solution (prognostic framing) is what they tend to focus on when coming up with social media content. Many Moscow-based ENGO's want to demonstrate “that doing something good for nature is easy and everyone can do their part” (Irina) and through educational

material and “simple DIY solutions” (Anastasia) offer easy to follow “instructions” of how to go about this. This is because, as several experts pointed out, an increasing number of Russians want to actually undertake an action and, more importantly, see that their action is leading to some sort of result. When a person starts with him/herself, it is much easier to see the results of their action, for example by visibly producing less plastic waste and getting their family and friends to follow suit.

Motivational content comes in different forms in the Russian context. It can be a post outlining an issue in order to collect funds to solve it. Other types of actions that ENGO's try to motivate their audience to undertake is signing petitions, sharing the information with friends and families and coming to events. Overall, there seems to be an overlap between prognostic and motivational because ENGO's tend to offer solutions to environmental problems and, at the same time, motivate people to start following them. It is important to note that ENGO's in Russia need to be mindful of the wording they choose to use when offering prognoses and motivation because several experts attributed campaign failures to an unfortunate use of words and terms, which actually de-motivated followers from undertaking the desired action. Unfortunate wording is what Alisa from EKA attributed to the ENGO's failure to convince followers to attend a webinar dedicated to urban gardening and to purchase a “plant a tree” certificate as an International Women's Day gift. Once the ENGO adjusted the wording of the latter campaign, it actually became successful in motivating followers to carry out this action. Furthermore, social media is helping people to begin to understand that their prior actions have led to the desired result, thus motivating them to keep undertaking the actions outlined by the ENGO's.

The interview data has also revealed some framing processes that ENGO's directly and indirectly employ when creating their social media strategies. Dominant field frames, as explained by Brulle (2010), define appropriate relationships, practices and understandings in a given area. Until recently, practices like recycling, consuming consciously by utilizing reusable items and generally being aware of how people's actions/behaviors impact the environment were mostly outside of the dominant field frame, according to experts. Now, alternative field frames¹⁸ are emerging that offer diagnoses, prognoses and motivations, and social media are helping ENGO's push them further into the mainstream.

Vladimir stated that through social media, Greenpeace Russia aims to explain that "it turns out that you *can* bring your own shopping with you, you *can* recycle, you *can* drink from a reusable coffee mug, you *can* drive less, you *can* plant trees" – that Russians *can* actually do something about issues that have been and, to some degree, still are outside the dominant field frame. Social media is helping create these alternative field frames with the ambition of soon making them the dominant field frames. As Vladimir explained, he hopes that online video tutorials about recycling will not be necessary in the near future because this practice will simply become the norm, the dominant field frame.

It must be noted that Moscow-based ENGO's are trying to direct their resources towards producing more video content because, in their view, this is the kind of content that is proving to be more engaging and more effective at putting environmental issues within the dominant field frame.

¹⁸ As per Rochon (1998, 22), alternative field frames display "a unique sensitivity to some problem, an analysis of the sources of the problem, and a prescription for what should be done" and it is small groups "whose experiences, reading, and interaction with each other help them to develop a set of cultural values that is out of step with the larger society".

In 2012, Lovejoy and Saxton identified the key communicative functions in tweets sent by the USA's 100 largest non-profit organizations: the three categories that emerged were *information*, *community* and *action*. When describing the kind of content they post on social media, experts from Moscow-based ENGO's largely follow this pattern.

The previous sections demonstrated how the organizations use social media to inform about events, reports, news and provide useful educational material that can enable a behavior change and attitude shift when it comes to environmental issues. For example, Razdelny Sbor's two consecutive campaigns against the releasing of potentially toxic air balloons into the air sought to inform the public and the events' organizers about these dangers and thanks to the speed with which information travels on social media, the ENGO achieved this objective very quickly. Because the public and the event organizers – who had no prior knowledge of the dangers – found out about the environmental hazards associated with these types of balloons, the events were cancelled immediately. Greenpeace Russia used their social media accounts to create a “trend” for eco shopping bags because before, the organization's followers were not aware that they could do their grocery shopping in such a plastic-free fashion; now, online searches for “eco-bags” are growing fast.

On social media, these organizations are also increasingly shifting towards creating a community where two-way, horizontal communication takes place thanks to interaction, sharing and conversation between the organizations and the audience (and audience members amongst each other). Hopke (2015) found social media (Twitter, to be precise) as enabling the diffused, loosely coordinated

activists to connect and feel like part of something bigger and this resonates with what the interviewed ENGO's are doing when fulfilling the community function of their social media activities, though on different platforms such as V Kontakte and Instagram. Finally, Moscow-based ENGO's are leveraging relevant communications channels to motivate their followers to take some sort of action, like donate money, attend events, spread the message further, engage others in advocacy campaigns, etc.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the aforementioned benefits of using social media to further communications and organizational objectives, experts mentioned several obstacles in the way of utilizing these platforms to their maximum potential. Though the literature review covered issues like the "slackitivism"/"clicktivism" and echo chambers, Moscow-based ENGO's are facing different problems. On the whole, experts assessed the public's enthusiasm towards and engagement with environmental issues online in a positive way but this is a resource-intensive task. Most ENGO's have very limited financial resources and this, in turn leads, to limited to human resources.

The latter is necessary if ENGO's want to produce quality and in demand content (such as video content) on social media and manage their presence there well in order to, as previously discussed, grow, engage and enlighten. Though there are free online resources to help ENGO's manage their social media presence well, it is still not a guarantee for success and ENGO's can sometimes struggle to find an experienced professional to manage their social media accounts in return for an

ENGO-level salary.

Limited financial resources stand in the way of ENGO's acquiring access to more sophisticated analytics instruments and paying for advertising, things that would, in the experts' opinions, improve their visibility and thus lead to a growth in followers who would be aware of environmental problems and spread the message further to their friends and family. Social media networks themselves are exacerbating these obstacles for advocacy groups, namely Facebook's ever-changing and somewhat mystical algorithm, which gives organizations little choice but to advertise if they want their content to appear in a user's newsfeed. Deeper analytics are necessary to reach the "tougher" audience, those that are less likely to be concerned about the environment and thus those, who need to be reached and engaged perhaps even more than people who are already expressing an interest in and concern for ecological issues.

Even though social media is a cost-effective way to grow externally and internally, it is not the best tool for securing donations – instruments like e-mail newsletters work better to achieve this objective. In general, though an indispensable tool for Moscow-based ENGO's, experts cautioned against relying too heavily on social media and suggested that advocacy groups should use everything that is available and "what might not yet be available" (Anastasia). Though more and more Russians are using some form of social media, there are members of the population who are still dependent on more traditional communications channels like the television as their source of trusted information. Because there is still this "digital divide", Russian ENGO's must study their target audience well and make use of opportunities and partnerships that would give them exposure to those segments of the population (typically older people in the countryside) that are not

on social media.

Information overload was another barrier cited by experts: in 2019, there is simply too much information and users cannot absorb and make sense of it all. This goes back to the question of content and being able to produce quality material to get the user's attention through all the other noise online. But this is difficult for ENGO's because, once again, both financial and human resources are usually limited in such organizations. Fraudulent "charities" make the situation even more problematic because people's trust in online donations has dwindled as a result of these schemes, so ENGO's financial resources have become more strained due to this.

CONCLUSION: GREEN AWAKENING?

Obstacles notwithstanding, experts from Moscow-based ENGO's attributed an increased awareness of environmental issues (and interest in solving them) to their activities on social media and Russians' growing use of these platforms. The growth in likes, shares, reposts, etc. signifies an increased awareness of the ecological problems that are happening in Moscow and elsewhere in the country, in real time. Perhaps this is the most important point: social media is eradicating the term "distance", while at the same time enhancing instantaneity, and now Russians need not actually be present where the environmental degradation is happening (oftentimes it's in the most remote areas of the world's biggest country) to start undertaking an action or applying pressure for something to be done about it. This is because social media are offering ENGO's – regardless of their size and financial capabilities – a cost-effective way to grow their online following and achieve a wide range of organizational goals, one of the most

important ones being environmental education and enlightenment. Social media are thus democratizing knowledge: anyone with Internet access can find virtually any information on social media.

Although a person might not become an eco-warrior after seeing just one post about a certain problem, this at the very least means that they will now know about it. Repeated exposure to this information has the potential to lead to attitude and behavior change and that particular user then spreading this knowledge further and motivating people in their circle to also make these changes. Oftentimes, exposure to information via social media even leads to instantaneous attitude and behavior change because a person simply did not know that a certain type of environmental behavior was possible.

By utilizing these channels, Moscow-based ENGO's have managed to circumvent traditional media, which can be a costly communications platform and, in the Russian context, might not always have the environment high on its agenda, to reach members of the public and wake them up to the ecological degradation taking place. Reaching relevant stakeholders is just the start: social media are enabling Moscow-based ENGO's to also engage them effectively by collaborating with trusted and influential bloggers and highlighting not only the environmental issues (diagnosis), but also the solutions to them (prognosis) and successfully motivating to undertake action (motivational) like signing a petition, attending an event or reducing plastic waste.

Furthermore, social media are enabling a two-way communication between ENGO's and their audience, which creates more of a community feel and this is one of the most important online trends at the time of writing. Not only do social

media show people that they are not alone with their environmental concerns and fears, they also enable them to link up and start doing something about these problems. Movements like “zero waste” are starting to gain traction in Russia because more people are starting to find out about the horrors of plastic waste *and* are then able to unite to tackle the issue more effectively together. Over the years, average Russians have come to view social media as a place to air their views, hopes and frustrations – and also a place where they are actually *heard*. Now that there is more information about threats to the environment than ever before in part as a result of the work ENGO’s are carrying out on social media, Russians have more opportunities to come together as an environmentally-minded community thanks to the horizontal forms of communication afforded by social media and do something about these threats.

Finally, the experts all stated that they personally perceive that social media has allowed their organizations to “popularize” environmental issues by making them more visible, “trendy” and an increasing priority for people. Russians are beginning to visibly consume more consciously, take things like recycling and plastic waste more seriously and make their voices and concerns about environmental degradation heard. Experts, of course, concede that these are simply their perceptions and there is no absolute guarantee that these positive trends can be attributed to their organizations’ social media use or that there is a way to be certain about how likes, shares, etc. translate into offline behavior. This echoes concerns expressed by McCafferty (2011) that information sharing as a form of online activism does not necessarily result in tangible change on the issue at hand. However, aside from simply relying on their perceptions, experts claimed that the statistics, i.e. growth in followers, engagement rates and reach, are further evidence that this “green awakening” is happening and without social

media such success would not have been possible – or would have been possible at a much slower pace.

In conclusion, the in-depth interviews with experts from Moscow-based ENGO's suggest that social media is helping them in their work to raise environmental awareness among the Russian public in a cost-effective way and foster concrete action, all while avoiding reliance on traditional media. Because a large part of the population – especially the younger generations and those living in cities – are using at least one form of social media, these ENGO's are able to reach an ever larger amount of people and, more importantly, engage them in a meaningful way. Thanks to social media Russians have unprecedented access to information without barriers and the content produced by ENGO's has the ability to draw users' attention to threats to the environment, ways to minimize this threat and reasons for doing so.

There is, however, no way of ascertaining with absolute confidence that putting environmental issues on the agenda and exposing the public to this information is guaranteed to lead to behavior change or concrete action. Despite this, experts do believe that although a person might not change their behavior to become more environmentally conscious upon their first encounter with a piece of information, continued exposure that social media affords ENGO's has the potential to lead to the desired result. Several experts suggested that social media are "central" to people's lives in Russia nowadays and therefore it is a must as a communications channel even if the impact cannot be measured with utmost certainty.

Vkontakte is Russia's most important and largest social network site that is easy to use, does not appear to have complex algorithms, is open to collaborating with

ENGO's and has a wide range of useful features. Odnoklassniki is only slightly smaller in terms of scale and thus important for ENGO's, but the network's audience is not attuned to environmental sentiments and therefore some ENGO's choose to forego it completely. As tempting as it might be to focus precious resources on those social media platforms whose audience is more likely to harbor environmentally conscious sentiments, it is also vital to try to reach those that are not in order to bring about this "green awakening" faster and, therefore, Odnoklassniki should not be ignored. Instagram is a sort of rising star for Moscow-based ENGO's thanks to the ease with which they can collaborate with influencers on the platform and the opportunities for visual storytelling. Facebook is not as strong a tool as it once was for Moscow-based ENGO's due to the complex and changing algorithm, which forces organizations to pay for advertising to appear in users' newsfeeds. However, ENGO's still utilize this platform because when managed well, it has the potential for occasional success in reaching a more progressive-minded audience. Twitter is hardly used because not many average Russians are on this social media site.

Despite obstacles like lack of financial and human resources, the existence of a digital divide, complex and constantly changing algorithms, the inability to collect the desired amount of funds and somewhat of an "information overload", the task of environmental enlightenment and motivating the public to tackle ecological issues would be much more difficult for ENGO's in Moscow without social media.

Due to time constraints the scope of this research was limited to exploring how Moscow-based ENGO's are utilizing social media to raise environmental awareness amongst and foster concrete action from the Russian public. Further research is needed to investigate whether this can then translate onto institutions

and the government. They are, after all, the bodies that can enact the legislation needed to ensure the necessary responses to environmental issues. Tatiana mentioned that the petitions her organization's followers signed have in the past managed to stop potentially harmful legislation from being enacted and to hold environmental culprits accountable. Thus, the link between increased exposure on social media, better environmental enlightenment and more effective environmental governance is worthy of being studied.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Topic guide for interviews:

- What do you use for communications? What is your communications approach/strategy? If you have a communications strategy, it would be interesting to see it.
- How do you use social media? Which channels do you use and why?
- Could you please tell me about your most successful campaign – what did you do exactly, how did it start and how did you evaluate the results?
 - What was the biggest impact of the campaign, how did you measure it? What makes a campaign good or bad?
 - Could you also tell me about a campaign that did not work so well and why?
- Do you record/report data? And if yes, what do you do with it afterwards?
 - How do you measure impact?
 - If the impact is calculated on likes/views – what are these metrics representative of? How do you interpret them?
- How would you evaluate the influence of social media on the “environmental awakening” of the Russian public?
 - Is there a relationship between, for example, an increase in likes/shares/reposts/etc. and people’s understanding of ecological problems and solutions to them and more responsible behavior (towards the environment)?
- Are there any obstacles for leveraging social media’s power even more effectively?

Extra question for WWF Russia:

- Did the “Foreign Agent” law in any way affect WWF’s communications activities in Russia (both traditional and new media channels)?

Appendix 2: Online searches on yandex.ru for the word “eco-bag” [in Russian], starting from December, 2017 until June, 2019.

