Identities and Their Discontents: YouTube as a Platform for Political Opposition in Contemporary Russia

By Theo Tindall

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Political Science

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Political Science

Supervisor: Professor András Bozóki

Advisor: Professor Alexandra Kowalski

Vienna, Austria

(2021)

Abstract

This thesis will examine the role played by online media in the development of political opposition in contemporary Russia, focusing in particular on the role of YouTube as an alternative to traditional forms of mass media, and the way in which online political opposition interacts with authoritative constructions of Russian national and popular identities. By examining a range of theoretical approaches to nationalism and twentieth- and twenty first-century mass media, this thesis will argue that identities should be understood as objects of discursive contestation which may be disputed or instrumentalised by opposition in order to undermine political authority, before exploring the implications of this argument in the context of contemporary Russian politics. In Russia, YouTube offers opposition a platform for the publication of independent content and a way of circumventing state controls on television and other traditional media. However, YouTube, which has been owned by Google since 2006, ensures that this national opposition must be articulated within the wider discursive structures of global capitalism. As such, even as YouTube provides an opportunity for the development and dissemination of politically oppositional material, this opposition is shaped by the conditions of its articulation within the globalised, profit-oriented space of YouTube. Russian YouTube is therefore characterised by the tension stemming from its location within these two competing authoritative discourses, which, even as they allow the development of political opposition, condition the forms it may take.

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Note on Translation and Transliteration

Transliteration from Cyrillic generally follows the Library of Congress system. Some common names have been anglicised (e.g. ‘Alexei Navalny’ instead of ‘Aleksei Naval’nyi’ and ‘Yury Dud’ instead of ‘Yurii Dud’’). All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

The impasse of any transformative politics is that it can unravel […] the nightmare of history only with the poor, contaminated instruments which that history has handed it.

Terry Eagleton, Nationalism: Irony and Commitment (1990, p. 27)

Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language […] but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.'

Mikhail Bakhtin, Discourse in the Novel (2011, p. 293-294)

Half the Internet's pornography! Can we really be expected to rely on it?

Vladimir Putin, Speech to State Duma (2010)

Introduction

On 23 January 2012 over 100,000 people gathered across Russia to protest opposition leader Alexei Navalny's arrest following his return to Russia on 17 January and the publication on YouTube two days later of *Putin's Palace*, a two-hour exposé of a grandiose Black Sea palace allegedly built for President Vladimir Putin at a cost of over 100 billion roubles (1.12 billion euros) (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Remarkably, the 2021 protests repeated in many ways the events of spring 2017, when Navalny's publication on YouTube of another investigation, *Don't Call Him Dimon,* into then-Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev's corruption led to a similar wave of protests calling for the resignation of both Medvedev and Putin.

These two cases, in which the publication of a film on YouTube led directly to the mass mobilisation of protestors across Russia, point to a significant development in the contemporary Russian media landscape – the emergence of YouTube as an 'alternative

television' (Litvinenko, 2021) on which political opposition may develop or proliferate and, consequently, on which the ideological foundations of the modern Russian state may be questioned and contested.

Recognising that mass protest movements do not simply emerge from a vacuum, but instead are the product of a wider process of political engagement and ideological dispute, we may begin to examine the role of online media, and in particular of YouTube, in the development of an active community of political opposition in contemporary Russia. This analysis will focus on how YouTube as a media platform influences the forms which such opposition may take, and the ways in which online political opposition disputes the values and ideologies promoted by the Russian state, while itself seeking to acquire legitimacy from the instrumentalisation of constructions of national and popular identities.

Before proceeding to an analysis of this process of ideological contestation and its political implications, it is first necessary to specify the way in which both identities and ideologies – two famously slippery concepts – will be understood in this thesis. Terry Eagleton offers no fewer than sixteen possible definitions of ideology, of which the third – 'ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power', may serve as a useful point of departure (1998, p. 1). Ideology's function as a nexus between ideas and power is well-established (Althusser, 2004; Burr, 2015; Shklar, 1995) and this thesis, by examining the nature of this relationship, will begin to develop a better understanding both of the way in which ideologies – including, crucially, constructions of national identity – serve to legitimise state authority, and of how the contestation of these authoritatively constructed identities may serve as the beginning of a process of destabilisation from which open political opposition may emerge.

Identity, no less elusive a term than ideology, is defined usefully by Stuart Hall, for whom identities are unstable – not a singular, coherent entity so much as a field of discourse,

constituted of many distinct, competing strands in a constant state of fluctuation, dispute and change (1996). It is in this process of dispute that the possibility of opposition emerges – authoritative constructions of identity are exposed as limited and inflexible, and, through their contestation, it is possible to expose their artificiality and, consequently, to reveal the vulnerability of the power which seeks legitimacy from those same constructed identities.

Understanding ideology as a key force by which states legitimise and perpetuate their authority, we may begin to consider more precisely how national identities are constructed and contested in contemporary Russia, and the role of online media in this process. While much of nationalism theory has tended to treat identity as monolithic, and mass media as a mere instrument for its dissemination, identities should instead be seen as plural rather than singular, and media not merely as a neutral vehicle for their dissemination but as the necessary condition of their expression. In the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's insight that ideology exists not as an abstract force but is always and inevitably bound up in the conditions of its linguistic utterance (2011) – in Boris Groys's words, that it 'appears not as a pure idea, but always materialised, embodied, having a real bearer' (1992, p. 195) – identities, like ideologies, can be said to exist only by virtue of their articulation, and the mode of expression of those identities to be fundamentally constitutive of them. Mass media, including online social media, are one of the primary means in modern societies for the expression – and therefore, the contestation – of ideologies. As such, social media, as participatory and, in Bakhtinian terms, 'dialogic' platforms, present radical new possibilities for the voicing and development of political opposition.

Media, even as they offer a platform for the potential contestation of dominant ideologies through the expression of subversive, independent ideas, are at the same time conditioned by the values and limits of the wider ideological and socio-political context in which they are embedded and, as such, accept and reproduce many of that field's hegemonic values. However,

while mass media are nationally or regionally bounded, online media, by virtue of their simultaneous location within the globalist, supranational space of the Internet and the various national cultural and socio-political contexts in which they are produced, are positioned at the inflection point of two distinct ideological regimes. Caught between the often contradictory ideological imperatives of these two systems, online media present the possibility for the inhabitation of both national and global-capitalist discourses by oppositional figures – and, as such, we find that the most successful forms of online opposition are often those which are able to exploit effectively both the ideological content of national identity and the discursive structures of late capitalism.

The Internet is therefore governed by the competing ideological imperatives of these two regimes. It does not, however, simply reproduce those systems' hierarchies, but instead presents a meeting point of two distinct ideological orders, a space of potentially productive ambiguity which oppositional figures may exploit. The exploration of the nature of the interaction in the online space between these two competing ideological regimes – and the subversive possibilities engendered in its articulation and utilisation by oppositional figures – serves as the primary motivation for this thesis, which will seek to provide a partial answer to this question through investigation of the role of YouTube in the ideological and institutional setting of contemporary Russia.

***

YouTube, which has emerged in Russia as the principal alternative platform to state-dominated cable television (Ovcharova, 2017), has consequently become the primary medium for the expression of oppositional views, serving in many ways as an 'alternative public sphere', or 'counterpublic' (Fraser, 1990), in which content producers and consumers may independently respond to and renegotiate authoritative constructions of national identity. In order to analyse

better the role played by YouTube in the development of political opposition, this thesis will seek to answer the following research questions: what role does Russian YouTube play in the development of political opposition in contemporary Russia?; and, how do such forms of opposition interact with the wider ideological fields in which they are located?

Through examination of the films of journalist and interviewer Yury Dud and opposition leader Alexei Navalny, this thesis will argue that Russian YouTube, while offering the possibility of authentic political opposition to both content producers and to the millions of viewers who watch their videos, is nevertheless still defined by the same hierarchies and values which define Russian society as a whole. Dud and Navalny's work, even as it relies on the expressive possibilities provided by YouTube – an American-owned, 'global' media platform – is able to become successful (i.e., popular) only through its acceptance and reproduction of certain 'mainstream' elements of national and popular identity. For Dud, political critique and contestation of state-promoted understandings of 'Russianness' acquire legitimacy from his claims to patriotism, while Navalny's success relies on his ability to instrumentalise both national and popular identities in order to form a mass oppositional movement.

Dud's and Navalny's work will be explored through the technique of discourse analysis, used within the wider post-structuralist and social constructionist approach adopted in this thesis. Envisioning discourse not simply as a way of constructing meanings, but as an essential way of contesting them (Burr, 2015; Jorgensen & Philips, 2002), discourse analysis offers a powerful tool for understanding the way in which political opposition is discursively constructed on YouTube. As Natalia Moen-Larsen notes in her work on Navalny's blog posts, 'Words themselves are important – but so are the ways in which words are disseminated' (2014, p. 552). This thesis, understanding identity as a diverse, unstable and contested discursive field, will thus use analysis of oppositional content on Russian YouTube to provide an initial insight

into the way in which political opposition may emerge from the interplay of different, competing ideological regimes.

YouTube, although unable to deliver on its utopian promise of producing a democratised, egalitarian space of independent content production, nevertheless presents a significant threat to the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes – whose authority rests to a large extent on their ability to mobilise support (or at least nullify opposition) through their monopolisation of major media platforms (Gehlbach, 2010; Siebert, 1984) – as it offers a relatively free space on which state censorship may be circumvented and political opposition may develop. However, the success of that opposition remains dependent on its ability to find mass appeal, a requirement which – regardless of the mode of that opposition's expression – demands that it resort to the reproduction of certain widely-accepted conceptions of identity, even as it seeks to dispute other elements of those identities and, in doing so, to undermine the state authority which derives legitimacy from them.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which consists of two sections. Given the thesis's interdisciplinary approach and the diversity of material covered, in place of a single literature review an overview of the relevant literature will be provided in each section. Chapter One will first explore theoretical approaches to national and popular identities, formulating a concept of national identity founded on its indeterminacy, and underlining the subversive possibilities engendered therein. In its second section, this chapter will examine the development of the imperfect 'participatory culture' (Burgess and Green, 2018) of the online space through both twentieth-century and online media theory.

Chapter Two will explore in its first section constructions of Russian national identity, emphasising both its contingent nature and the role which debates over national identity have played in the development of modern Russia. It will also identify central tropes – focussing on

those of the past and of Russia's relationship with Europe – which constitute key sites of contention in contemporary debates on Russian identity. The second section will explore the relationship between politics and media in post-Soviet Russia, charting the development from the oligarch-dominated privatisation of the 'wild nineties' to the state domination of media under Putin, and the subsequent development of the Internet as an alternative platform for cultural and political content production, as well as recent state attempts to take control of the online space.

Finally, Chapter Three will analyse the work of two major figures of Russian YouTube – Yury Dud and Alexei Navalny. Through analysis of the different forms of opposition they present, this chapter will offer two case studies of the way in which processes of contestation of identity take place in the Russian online space, thus demonstrating the way in which authoritative constructions of identity, through their reformulation, may be instrumentalised and transformed into the basis for an oppositional politics with potentially radical and destabilising implications for the Russian political order.

Chapter One – Theoretical Approaches

1.1 Constructing a Collective – National and Popular Identities

In his analysis of the reasons for the emergence of the nation state as the pre-eminent political structure of modernity, Ernest Gellner identifies the proliferation of a common 'high' culture as the key foundation of the institution of the modern nation. For Gellner, culture serves as a shared code from which a common identity may emerge, broadly defined as 'a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating' which, in its role as the foundation of a common national identity, serves as 'the necessary shared medium, the life-blood or perhaps rather the minimal shared atmosphere, within which alone the members of the society can breathe and survive and produce' (1983, pp. 7, 37-8).

However, in Gellner's description of culture there remains a largely unexplored tension – namely, that which exists between 'the objective need for homogeneity which is reflected in nationalism' (1983, p. 46) and the way in which cultures are in fact invented and transformed by their folding into the nation-building project. Thus, when Gellner argues that '[t]he cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred and patch would have served as well' (1983, p. 56), he overlooks the subversive possibilities engendered in such a 'patchwork nationalism' – that is to say, if a nation is constituted by the weaving together of many distinct and even contradictory 'patches' of identity into a dominant 'high' culture, then this high culture – in other words, the very fiction of the nation – is built on far shakier foundations than it would have us believe. The nation, then, even as it may claim for itself a status of permanence, is in fact inherently vulnerable to change, as the constitution and combination of the patches of identity from which its whole is woven remain susceptible to dispute and transformation.

Such a view of culture is echoed by Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett who, far from seeing culture as a unified body of ideas imposed hegemonically from above, describe it instead as 'practice', 'an achievement of large-scale collective participation as well as of elite memory and exemplary performance […] an always incomplete, never entirely systematic weaving of achievements together' (2007, p. 7). Benedict Anderson, similarly, distancing himself from the 'ferocity' of Gellner's formulation, emphasises the creative and imaginary aspects of the nation (in contrast to Gellner's emphasis on 'fabrication' and 'falsity') (2006, p. 6), and echoes Ernest Renan in his emphasis on the 'dynamic of memory and forgetting' which characterises citizens' participation in the nation (Moore, 2001, p. 118).

Eric Hobsbawm, too, identifies a process of 'collective forgetting', but diverges from Renan and Anderson in seeing the destabilising potential of such a process, arguing that 'we cannot assume that national identification – when it exists – excludes or is always or ever superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being', going on to note that 'national identification and what it is believed to imply can change and shift in time, even in the course of quite short periods' (1992, p. 11).

A further perspective on the roots of the modern nation is found in the ethno-symbolist school. Ethno-symbolism critiques the modernist school, which it regards as 'over-confident in locating national manipulators with surgical precision' (Conversi, 2007, p. 17), and instead sees 'culture, myth and memory' as pre-dating the nation and, therefore, influencing its form and content, even as these 'pre-national' cultures were themselves reshaped and transformed through their involvement in the national project. Ethno-symbolism thus 'affirms symbols as cultural resources capable of shaping collective responses to changing socio-economic and political circumstances; but it does not collapse the meanings borne by those symbols into those circumstances' (Leoussi & Grosby, 2007, p. 6).

National identities, then, are not simply imposed arbitrarily from above, but are dynamic creations produced at the intersection of elite manipulation and popular reception, continuously constructed and reconstructed through their practice and (re)production. As such, the shifting of national identifications identified by Hobsbawm and the 'continuous process of reinterpretation of national identities' described by Smith (2009, p. 17) carry within them the potential roots of a subversive politics of opposition. Identities, far from constituting the stable basis of elite authority, are instead a field of contestation, as authoritative constructions of identity may be questioned and reformulated, and the political authority which is founded on them undermined.

The significance of such an understanding of identities is further elaborated in Stuart Hall's essay 'Who Needs "Identity"?. Arguing against the 'common sense language' definition of identification – as 'constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation', Hall suggests instead that it should be seen as a 'construction, a process never completed – always "in process"' (1996, p. 2). He goes on to argue that cultural identities, far from constituting fixed, temporally consistent conceptions of the self, are in fact founded on their inconsistency and constantly changing nature, that they are 'increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (1996, pp. 3-4).

In this light, then, the nation should be seen not so much as the political manifestation of a common national cultural identity as the unstable and heterogeneous product of a collective process – and practice – of imagination. However, while Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' of the nation was founded on the unity of a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (1996, p. 7), Hall's conception of identity offers no such stable construction of the collective. Indeed,

in addition to their internal heterogeneity, Hall argues that identities themselves 'can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside", abjected', that '[e]very identity has at its "margin", an excess, something more' (1996, p. 5). Any unitary sense of identity, being necessarily founded on a process of exclusion, is fundamentally vulnerable to this excluded 'excess', and, as such, any authoritative construction of the nation will always remain vulnerable to contestation, questioning and undermining by the multitude of imaginations from which it is constructed, as the inevitable heterogeneity of identities will always bring back the 'excess' which any single construction of identity – national or otherwise – must artificially expunge beyond its limits.

***

Eric Hobsbawm identifies the formulation of 'the equation nation = state = people' as a key conceptual leap in the ideological development of the modern nation state (1992, p. 19). However, this equation represents less a political reality than an abstract ideal – the nation, far from being identical with the state and the people, is instead in tension with the two, while the internal significance of the terms themselves are the subject of vigorous contestation. Further examination of this unstable relationship between nation and people can provide a useful insight into the ways in which popular identities can be constituted in order to dispute authoritative constructions of national identity and political authority.

Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism offers one way of understanding the subversive possibilities stemming from the non-identity of the nation and the people. Laclau, defining populism as 'quite simply, a way of constructing the political', presents 'the people' as a potentially radical political construction, in which heterogeneous demands are merged into a homogeneous and 'equivalential' whole (2005, p. xi). The 'people', like the nation, is not a stable or unitary construction; instead, 'popular identities are always historical *singularities*'

(2006, p. 670) – in other words, being formed from a heterogeneity of demands, the 'people', even once it is discursively constructed, is subject to a constant process of transformation under the pressure of its own heterogeneity.

However, although the concept of 'the people' is itself unstable, Laclau argues that 'popular traditions are far from being arbitrary and they cannot be modified at will. They are the residue of a unique and irreducible historical experience' (1997, p. 167). Remembering Hobsbawm's observation that the 'ideological engineering' of modern nation-building was 'most successful when [it] could build on already present unofficial national sentiments (1997, p. 92), we can begin to advance a theory of how both the 'nation' and the 'people' are constituted. Identities – both national and popular – are unstable and heterogeneous, but, once constructed, they are, in some sense, 'real'. As such, attempts to reform identities must, to some extent, engage with what came before – novel identities cannot simply be magicked out of thin air but must instead flow from the body of thought, practice and tradition which preceded them.

Therefore, even as new, oppositional conceptions of identity must interact with the authoritative values of the ideological field in which they emerge, so too it is true that any authoritative construction of national identity, being inevitably constituted from the wider field of the cultural, historical and political identities within the national space, may be disputed through the reassertion of the 'excess' which lies outside that authoritatively constructed identity. Popular identities, themselves unfixed and internally inconsistent, may be the agents which serve to disrupt this authoritative order, as diverse identities and demands find expression in a unitary, albeit unstable, construction of the 'people'. Identities, necessarily founded on the contingent construction of the homogeneous from the heterogeneous, are therefore always subject to change, and it is from this instability that a radical political opposition may emerge.

1.2 Mass Media and the Online Space

Modernist theories of the nation have consistently pinpointed the proliferation of mass media (initially print, later radio and television) as instrumental to the development of the modern nation state. Thus, in addition to Gellner's identification of education and communications as the twin instruments through which the state propagates the high culture with which it inculcates in its citizens a sense of the 'nation', Anderson and Hobsbawm see modern communications technology and the emergence of the nation as fundamentally linked. Anderson underlines the importance of the proliferation of symbols – facilitated by the technological possibilities of the modern age – to the production of the 'imagined community' of the nation, while Hobsbawm emphasises the way in which print media, radio and television made the creation of national vernaculars both possible and essential (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992).

However, while modernist theories of nationalism have drawn attention to the historical role of mass media in the creation of both national identities and the nation itself, they have tended not to analyse in detail the precise nature of the operations through which this process takes place. One account of these operations of mass media in contemporary society may be found the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who argue that twentieth-century mass media is a 'totalitarian' form of control, constitutive of the seamless ideological monolith of late-capitalist modernity, in which citizens are bound into a singular mass of unindividuated consumers. In their telling, a totalitarian 'unity of politics' stems from the 'relentless unity of the culture industry', which has brought about a 'withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today' (2002, pp. 96-100). From a more rigidly Marxist perspective, Louis Althusser presents a similar argument, identifying communications as a key 'ideological state apparatus' through which individuals are 'interpellated' as ideological subjects (2004).

While he does not plumb quite the same nihilistic depths as his teacher Adorno, Jürgen Habermas offers a similarly bleak perspective on modern mass media. Identifying initially the liberal, bourgeois public sphere which developed in the coffee houses, *salons* and *Tischgesellschaften* of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Europe, Habermas argues that this authentic public sphere – a place of egalitarian, democratic dialogue – was in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries 'replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption' (1999, p. 160). Ultimately, Habermas sees modern mass media as producing 'a public sphere in appearance only', as, instead of fostering the authentic spirit of debate of the eighteenth-century coffee shop, they 'draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under "tutelage", which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree' (1999, p. 171).

Less pessimistic responses to these arguments may be found in the work of Terry Eagleton and Stuart Hall, who suggest respectively that the Frankfurt School gives at once too much credit to authoritative ideological structures and too little to the critical capacities of audiences. For Eagleton, the weakness of Adorno's argument lies in the fact that it takes the claims of late capitalism 'at face value, judging it as it would *wish* to appear' (1998, p. 47). Eagleton rejects Adorno's argument that '*all* ideology [works] by the identity principle, ruthlessly expunging whatever is heterogeneous to it' (1998, p. 128), seeing instead in late capitalism a greater diversity of thought and practice than is allowed for in Adorno's philosophy, and with that diversity, the possibility of disputing and resisting hegemonic ideology.

Hall, meanwhile, underlines the difference between the production and reception of mass media – that is to say, the difference between its intention and effect. Underlining that 'reality' as such 'is constantly mediated by and through language' and that 'what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse', Hall is able to pinpoint a gap between the messages 'encoded' into mass media and the way in which these are 'decoded' by consumers

(2006, p. 121). Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer's passive, dead-eyed consumers are imbued with a critical capacity for active engagement, and in Hall's description of '[p]roduction and reception [as] differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole' (2006, p. 119), it is possible to detect, if not a resurrection of Habermas's ideal public sphere, then certainly at least a process of diverse, critical engagement with the ideological claims carried by mass media.

Twentieth-century mass media may therefore be seen as defined largely by the difference between the claims it would make about itself and the way in which these claims are in fact received. However, we may now ask whether in the twenty-first century the rise of the Internet – and the mass-participatory possibilities of its communicative structure – has fundamentally changed the way in which we understand the relationship between media and ideology.

Theorists of online media have repeatedly drawn attention to the tension between the 'utopian' possibilities presented by the Internet and its 'dystopian' roots in the hierarchical and unequal structures of the 'real world' (Jenkins, 2009; Kim, 2012; Papacharissi, 2009). Alongside this, the question of the extent to which the Internet represents a reconstitution of Habermas's 'public sphere' has also received a significant degree of attention (Buckley, 2020; Papacharissi, 2009; Salikov, 2018). This second debate, focussing on the possibilities and limitations of the Internet's 'participatory' frameworks, will serve as the starting point for our discussion of online media's – and in particular YouTube's – relation to authoritative ideology.

YouTube, which is, after the main website of its parent company Google,[1] the second most popular site on the Internet (Alexa, 2021), is distinct from other social media in that its primary mode of content production is video (of up to twelve hours in length (Google, n.d.)), unlike

[1] Founded in June 2005 by former PayPal employees Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim, YouTube was bought by Google in October 2006 for $1.65 billion (Burgess & Green, 2009). In 2020, YouTube.com reported annual revenue of $19.8 billion (Securities and Exchange Commission, n.d.).

other social media – such as Instagram, which is dominated primarily by images and short videos, and Facebook and Twitter, which are principally textual platforms. This makes YouTube a potential rival to the top-down modes of production which have defined traditional modes of visual media. However, just as subversive attempts to reform national identities must ultimately emerge from the pre-existing historical and ideological context of the 'nation', so too, as Zizi Papacharissi notes, are technological innovations such as YouTube 'actualised by and within the historical context that delivered it' (2009, p. 231). A similar observation is made by Henry Jenkins, who observes that 'YouTube's utopian possibilities must be read against the dystopian realities of a world where people have uneven access to the means of participation and where many are discouraged from even trying' (2009, p. 124).

There is, therefore, a tension between the democratising, politically subversive potential of YouTube as a platform and the limitations placed on this radical potential by the website's embeddedness within fields of authoritative ideology. The precise nature of these limitations may be illuminated by Stuart Hall's argument that 'a native language is not equally distributed amongst all native speakers regardless of class, socio-economic position, gender, education, and culture: nor is competence to perform in language randomly distributed' (2005, p. 75). This 'unequal distribution of voice' illustrates clearly the way in which YouTube, by virtue of its embeddedness in pre-existing socio-ideological orders, fails to deliver on the utopian promise of its universally participatory structure. Instead, YouTube, like traditional mass media (which, as Hall reminds us, are not 'institutions which merely reflected and sustained the consensus, but [are] the institutions which helped to produce consensus and manufactured consent' (2005, p. 82)), privileges views which accord with those of the majority. YouTube is run according to a system in which popularity leads to profit and, with the goal of maximising profit-generating views, is incentivised to promote those voices which are situated within Hall's 'consensus' at the expense of the culturally, ideologically and politically marginal or radical.

Similarly, Jenkins observes that 'a participatory culture is not necessarily a diverse culture' (2007), while Tarleton Gillespie writes, 'Platforms don't just mediate public discourse, they constitute it' (2017, p. 257). Thus, YouTube, governed by the 'uneasy convergence between the dual logics of community and commerce; and broadcast and social media' (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 14), is caught between the utopian ideals of its foundation and the ideological strictures of the global capitalist system of which it is part. As such, even as it promises a universally accessible platform for content production and broadcasting, through the privileging of its most popular voices it nevertheless simultaneously reproduces the hierarchies and inequalities of both the national settings and international system in which it is embedded.

However, while YouTube – and online media in general – may not constitute a perfect twenty-first century reiteration of the public sphere, we should nevertheless note that, particularly within institutionally authoritarian settings, it does provide *some* degree of democratisation of the media space, and presents some (admittedly privileged, hegemonically-acceptable) individuals with the possibility of circumventing state controls of mass media, and, in doing so, of contesting state-promoted ideologies and values. Thus, while YouTube's former slogan 'Broadcast Yourself' (which was quietly – and significantly – abandoned in 2010 (Burgess & Green, 2018)) – may offer an undeliverable promise of egalitarian participatory diversity, it also provides a way of understanding the way in which YouTube combines an open, participatory structure with a top-down broadcasting model. By offering a new medium for the production and dissemination of visual content independent of the constraints of traditional media, YouTube provides a platform for the production of original, independent content and, consequently, the criticism and delegitimisation of authoritative politico-ideological claims and structures.

Chapter Two – Russian Identity and Its Expression in the Media

2.1 Who Needs 'Russian Identity?'

Following the theory of identity formulated above, in which collective identities are conceptualised as temporally unstable, internally incoherent, and susceptible to change, it would seem that any attempt to pinpoint a 'Russian' national identity as such would be a Sisyphean task. However, Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis, who echo Hall in their argument that identities 'are constructs […] parts of a process of identity formation that is ongoing, fragile, and always incomplete', provide a useful response to this problem, suggesting an approach to identity founded on its very contingency. Thus, where modernist approaches to nationalism would see national identities as a hegemonically imposed, coherent body of ideas and practices, Franklin and Widdis see identities as founded on their very indeterminacy – 'not in the resolution but in the nature of the discussion and argument' (2004, pp. 3-4).

However, although 'identity' may not be fixed, this does not mean it is not there, and that we cannot begin to identify some of the 'shreds and patches' from which it is made. Advancing from Rogers Brubaker's understanding of nationalism as 'a heterogeneous set of "nation"-oriented idioms, practices and possibilities that are continuously available or "endemic" in modern cultural or political life' (1996, p. 10), we may begin to isolate some of these idioms and practices, focussing in particular on the nature of their articulation in contemporary Russian mass media.

Stephen M. Norris, in his study of national identity in post-Soviet Russian cinema, highlights the way in which cinema offered 'visual and aural menus of Russianness that audiences could consume' (2012, p. 17). Norris provides a list of some of the items on this 'rich menu of Russian traditions new and old', including but not limited to 'Siberian forests', 'prerevolutionary Moscow', 'the heroic defence of the motherland', 'Orthodoxy', 'New Year's nostalgia', 'the

Brezhnev era' and 'the manliness and sober-minded patriotism embodied in the security forces' (2012, p. 316). Even in this short list, it is clear that 'Russian identity' is by no means a unitary, internally coherent construction, nor is each of its potential elements necessarily included in what it means for an individual to be 'Russian'.

However, Russian identity is not merely constituted from the sum total of such a collection of tropes, but instead is 'a field of cultural discourse' (Franklin & Widdis, 2004, xii), one in which identity emerges from a continuous process of dispute around the valorisation attached to the various heterogeneous elements which together constitute the field of Russian 'identity'. Such a perspective allows us to isolate a number of elements around which this contestation of national identity has coalesced; for the purposes of this thesis, we will focus on Russia's relationship to – and place within – Europe, and popular conceptualisations of its history.

The issue of post-Soviet Russia's 'post-Imperial' identity and its implications for conceptions of the modern Russian nation has been discussed extensively (Brubaker, 1996; Gadzhiev, 2018; Groys, 1992; Moore, 2001; Tolz, 1998). The 'weakness' of post-Soviet Russian identity has often been ascribed to Soviet nation-building policy, which ensured that, while the minority Soviet republics were given definite identities, Soviet Russian identity was not strongly differentiated from Soviet identity in general, and Russian linguistic and cultural dominance ensured that Russian identity became something common to all Soviet citizens, rather than to ethnic Russians alone (Brubaker, 1996; Franklin, 2004; Slezkine 1994).

However, the historical anxieties arising from the tension between the national and the imperial may be traced back further, to the Russian Empire and the states of Medieval Rus' which preceded it (Franklin, 2004; Suny, 2001). This tension, to which Russian Imperial rulers attempted to respond through the development of an 'official nationalism' – a means of 'stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of empire' (Anderson, 2006,

p. 86) – is also recognised by Suny, who sees the collapse of the Russian Empire as being in large part due to its failure to develop a notion of 'civic' Russianness, noting that it 'at times engaged in nation-making, but that state practice was always in tension with the structures and discourses of empire' (2001, p. 56).

Amidst the historic indeterminacy of Russian identity, the theme of Russia's relationship to Europe emerges repeatedly as a key point of dispute (an observation consistent with Hall's argument that identification is ultimately founded on difference (1996)). Russia's location on the boundary of Europe and Asia has produced a sense of uneasy identification with Europe in the national cultural imaginary, neatly captured in the observation that, in the Russian language, 'Jerusalem is part of the "Near East" despite being slightly to the west of Moscow […] as if the very language looks from Western Europe' (Franklin & Widdis, 2004, p. 5). This tension is seen by Groys as a central theme of Russian philosophy, which was in his telling constantly engaged with the tension arising from Russia's 'Otherness' from Western Europe and its simultaneous inability 'to propose anything really exotic and heterogeneous in comparison to the Western culture of the time' (1992, p. 197). Present-day imaginations of Europe therefore constitute a key site for the contestation of Russian identity, as officially hostile messages (perhaps best typified by the idea of '*Gayropa'* promoted on state channels (Riabov, 2020, p. 757)) compete with oppositional voices – such as those of Dud and Navalny – which emphasise the depth and closeness of Russia's cultural and historical relationship with Europe (Grishin & Pronina, 2016).

The new wave of discussion around national identity in Post-Soviet Russia has not been limited to the country's imagined geography, but has also focussed on narratives of the past. As James Pearce notes, 'Russian history' has been instrumentalised by Putin as a source of legitimacy, as 'Putin and his government seek to present [themselves] as the natural historical heirs to Kievan Rus', pre-revolutionary Russia and the USSR' and weave from the raw material of the

past a coherent narrative comprised of 'a collection of carefully selected, events, periods and figures depicting the idea of a strong nation united behind a patriotic message on a march to greatness' (2018, pp. 10-11). One example of this can be found in the documentary film *Putin's Witnesses.* Director Vitalii Manskii includes clandestinely filmed footage of the newly-elected President Putin explaining his decision in 2000 to restore the Soviet anthem (albeit with new lyrics) as the national anthem of the young Russian state in the following way:

> 'Why can we not listen to the music of [composer of the Soviet national anthem Alexandr] Alexandrov and think not about the camps, but about the great victory in the Second World War? Why should we be obliged to associate this music with the worst aspects of life in the Soviet period?' (Manskii, 2018, 1:15:45)

However, while 'history' as such may be instrumentalised by the Russian state in order to build a new national identity, such authoritative constructions are always open to dispute. In his study of the significance of the 'Motherland' in contemporary Russia, Oleg Riabov notes that 'symbols do not so much express meaning as the capacity to make meaning […] symbols are effective precisely because they are ambiguous and imprecise' (2020, p. 754), echoing both Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the world as defined by linguistic struggle (2011), as well as more recent theoretical approaches which have highlighted the potential role of symbols and objects in processes of ideological struggle (Zubrzycki, 2017). As such, Riabov notes that both the state and opposition compete for 'the right to interpret' the Motherland and the 'right to speak' on its behalf, as each claim its symbolic value as a source of legitimacy (2020, pp. 762-3).

Russian national identity, therefore, should not be understood simply as a stable, authoritatively constituted 'menu' of tropes, but instead as a discursive field, made up of shared values, memories and cultural works and practices which serve as points of possible contention. Notions of identity, on which the concept of the 'nation' is founded, therefore contain within themselves the roots of a transgressive politics of opposition, as, through the contestation of

the iconographies and ideologies of the nation, identities may themselves be reconstructed, and the ideological bases of authority undermined.

2.2 Political Authority and Mass Media in 21st Century Russia

2.2.1 Television

The close relationship between mass media and political authority has been well-documented (Althusser, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 1988), as, particularly in authoritarian regimes, control of mass media, of which television has been most important in the post-War era, allows governments to control the 'framing' of issues and to limit the flow of political information to their citizens (Pomerantsev, 2015; Tolz and Teper, 2018). In the twenty-first century Russian media has consequently witnessed a change from the oligarch-dominated 'pluralism' of the nineties to an increasingly authoritarian state-domination of the media landscape, as the much-discussed Putin-era 'power vertical' has infiltrated media structures.[2] However, as television and other traditional media have been increasingly monopolised by the state, the Internet has emerged as a contested space in which opposition voices have been able to find large audiences, and which the Russian state has correspondingly tried increasingly to co-opt and repress.

The role of television in post-Soviet Russia can perhaps be most clearly seen in its influence on the outcome of elections. It is something of a truism that Yeltsin's electoral successes were in a large part due to his ability to marshal oligarch-owned TV channels in his favour and against a resurgent Communist Party (Freeze, 2009; Service, 2015), an observation supported by the work of Enikolopov et al. (2011) and White et al. (2002), who found respectively that in the 1999 elections viewing state television increased support for the pro-Kremlin party

[2] Gregory Asmolov defines the 'power vertical' [*vertikal' vlasti*] as 'a centralised management system that enables full control of the entire country by the person at the top of the pyramid' (2014, 31).

Unity, and exposure to NTV, the sole opposition channel, decreased support for the government.

In the new millennium, Putin, following his election as president in March 2000 (a victory no less reliant than Yeltsin's on the support of television networks), quickly began taking control of television channels, seeing their oligarch owners as a potential source of opposition. Thus, in addition to Mikhail Khodorkovskii, then Russia's richest man, whose support for opposition parties led to the confiscation of his Yukos oil company and his imprisonment, both Vladimir Gusinskii, owner of NTV, and Boris Berezovskii, owner of Channel One, were pressured into selling their stakes in the channels and imprisoned or exiled (Freeze, 2009). In June 2000, NTV, which had aired corruption allegations against Yeltsin and his family, was taken over by state media-holding company Gazprom-Media, while, following critical coverage on Channel One of Putin's lack of response to the *Kursk* submarine disaster in August 2000, Berezovskii was forced to sell his stake in the channel and flee to London (Soldatov & Borogan 2015; Yaffa, 2020). Just a few months after being sworn in as president, Putin had secured control of all major national television channels, ensuring, in his eyes, an effective monopoly over the flow of political information.

However, the Russian media landscape has continued to develop in response to political and technological developments. One instructive example is that of TV Rain [*Telekanal dozhd'*], a liberal channel established during the so-called 'Medvedev Thaw' (the period of 2008-12 during which Dmitrii Medvedev served as president, and Vladimir Putin as prime minister) and later effectively banned from cable television and forced online.

Founded in April 2010, TV Rain found an audience amongst Russia's urban middle classes – as Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan colourfully put it, 'Intelligent speech and faces were missed so badly on television that all of a sudden Moscow's middle classes tuned in to the new

channel' (2015, p. 119). However, by 2014, amidst a rising tide of patriotic fervour in the public space, TV Rain's liberal bent was increasingly unwelcome. Following the publication of a poll on the channel's website asking whether Leningrad should have been surrendered to the Nazis in 1941 in order to avoid the suffering of the siege, and subsequent uproar on the part of 'patriotic', pro-regime media, cable television companies across the country abruptly stopped transmitting TV Rain. Ultimately, the channel moved online, where it continues to be available via a subscription service (albeit to a significantly smaller audience than its 2014 monthly audience of 12 million viewers) (Soldatov and Borogan, 2015).

Before analysing the online media space of which TV Rain is a part, it is worth briefly considering how Russian state television has developed during the last decade. As a key 'ideological state apparatus' (Althusser, 2004), it is unsurprising that television content has largely reflected the shift from 'soft' to 'hard' authoritarianism and the increasingly 'conservative' turn which has characterised Russian state policy following Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 (Riabov, 2020; Rogov, 2018). Studies of talk shows have pointed to the increasing prevalence of nationalist and conspiratorial framing and the Kremlin's desire to stimulate support through ideological messaging (Knobel, 2020; Tolz & Teper, 2018). Ultimately, alongside the Kremlin's growing tendency to substitute 'carrots' for 'sticks' in its attempts to maintain political control (Gelman, 2020), its media coverage has taken on an increasingly conspiratorial, nationalist tone – captured by Tolz and Teper's coining of the term 'agitainment' to describe the 'intensive and prolonged, centrally sanctioned communication of ideologised political messages, delivered in accordance with an entertainment logic' which has come to define content on state television (2018, p. 216).

2.2.2 YouTube

TV Rain's move from cable to online broadcasting is far from atypical – in fact it is merely one example of a wider phenomenon in which independent cultural production has moved online in order to evade the restrictions placed either implicitly or explicitly on Russian television. Within this movement, YouTube – as an international website which allows the uploading of programme- or film-length video – has emerged as a form of 'alternative television' on which political issues are increasingly openly discussed, and is preferred by a majority of young Russians to state television (Litvinenko, 2021; Meduza, 2016; Ovcharova, 2017). Russian YouTube therefore constitutes a new and potentially subversive media space, conceived of as independent of, yet also in dialogue with, state television and the narratives of identity which are disseminated through it, and one in which the Russian state must compete with independent content producers for authority to frame political and national narratives.

While the Internet is often categorised as an international project, a product and vector of globalisation which serves to undermine national boundaries, a growing number of dissenting voices have pointed to the way in which national characteristics are preserved within the online space. Sarah Oates argues that we should see the Internet as embedded in national cultures, noting that 'even cursory evidence […] would suggest that there is as much indication for the [I]nternet to be transformed by society as vice versa' (2013, p. 7). In the case of Russia this is made particularly clear through the wealth of discussions on the nature of the 'Runet', or Russian-language Internet (Gritsenko et al., 2021; Klepikova, 2018; Lonkila et al., 2021). Asmolov and Kolozaridi, for example, draw a useful distinction between the Runet as 'an alternative socio-political and cultural space' and the 'Internet in Russia' – the global Internet as it is experienced in Russia and in the Russian language (2021, p. 291).

Asmolov & Kolozaridi also argue that the recent history of the Russian Internet is defined not by 'increasing state control of Runet but a gradual replacement of Runet by the whole Internet in Russia' (2021, p. 291). However, this understates the role of increasing state interference in the Russian Internet, and the way in which this has led Russian Internet users to favour international media platforms and websites.[3] This is perhaps best captured by the replacement of Russian blogging website LiveJournal by YouTube as the centre of oppositional discourse in the late 2010s. LiveJournal, on which Navalny, amongst others, first came to prominence, was pressured into moving its servers to Russia and in 2016 and in 2017 banned political content (Lonkila et al., 2021), leading many oppositional figures (including Navalny) to move their content to YouTube (Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2021).

The increasing internationalisation of the 'Internet in Russia' poses significant problems for the Russian state, whose attempts to control the online space are hamstrung by two factors; the so-called 'dictator's dilemma', whereby policies limiting Internet access are forestalled by 'the potential economic consequences of such a decision, fear of popular unrest or the undermining [of] a regime's democratic image or other sources of regime legitimacy' (Wijemars, 2021, p. 17), and Ethan Zuckerman's related 'cute cat theory' (2007), according to which activists should post political content on platforms on which pictures of 'cute cats' are posted, thus ensuring that the government will avoid shutting them down in order to avoid angering a previously apolitical segment of the population (Lonkila et al., 2021).

Instead of straightforwardly blocking popular websites such as YouTube the Russian state has therefore opted for interference in the forms of surveillance, co-option and repression. Thus, *Roskomnadzor* (or, less snappily, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications,

[3] The Russian Internet has historically been defined by the preference for Russian sites over their international/American counterparts (e.g. social media sites *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* over Facebook, Rutube over YouTube and Russian search engine Yandex over Google). As of March 2021, Yandex was narrowly more popular than Google, while Facebook-owned messaging application WhatsApp was ranked fourth, *Vkontake* fifth, and Instagram eighth. YouTube remained secure in third place (Mediascope, 2021).

Information Technology and Mass Media) cooperates with the Federal Security Service (FSB) in order to carry out surveillance (Gaufman, 2021), while all Russian internet service providers are required to install the System of Operative Search Measures (SORM), a surveillance system which is believed to use an intrusive technology called 'deep packet inspection', which 'allows ISPs not only to monitor […] traffic but to filter it, suppressing particular services or content' (Soldatov and Borogan, 2015, p. 168). The Russian state has also tried to control social media by legislative means – demanding (largely unsuccessfully) that international platforms store data on Russian users within the country, and requiring (again, unsuccessfully) that bloggers with over 3000 daily views register as 'media outlets' (Gillespie, 2017, p. 261).

Meanwhile, the state has tried to co-opt popular video bloggers through the (once again, largely unsuccessful) formation of 'bloggers' councils', while one popular blogger, Sasha Spil'berg, even spoke to the State Duma and posted an – exquisitely uncomfortable – interview with Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii on her YouTube channel (the video, on which comments have been disabled, has just over one million views as of 30 May 2021) (Spilberg, 2017; Wijermars, 2021). Alongside these rather ham-fisted attempts to co-opt 'youth culture', the state has also sought to exercise tools of repression – perhaps most famously in the case of Pussy Riot (Rutland, 2014; Yusupova, 2014), but also in the case of blogger Ruslan Sokolovskii, who was arrested and eventually given a three-and-a-half year suspended sentence for playing Pokémon Go in the All Saints' Church in Yekaterinburg (Cresci, 2017), and the numerous individuals who have been prosecuted and even jailed for liking and reposting content on social media (Klepikova, 2018).

YouTube, therefore, is a contested space – one which, even despite state attempts to control it, remains a platform for political and ideological contestation, as content producers have taken advantage of its relative freedom in order to produce content which is openly critical of state policy and the ideological narratives which it seeks to promote.

However, it should nevertheless be noted that Russian YouTube remains embedded within the ideological and socio-political structures of both the Russian state and the global capitalist system. As such, in addition to being subject to the profit-driven mechanisms of YouTube's algorithms, which provide greater exposure to those videos more likely to become popular,[4] specifically Russian YouTube content is conditioned by the ideological field of Russian identity in which it is produced, and therefore must inevitably engage with dominant discourses of identity, even as it seeks to dispute them. And indeed, the most successful YouTube channels are those which derive legitimacy from their selective reproduction of such discourses.

Ultimately, then, YouTube facilitates a process of ideological contestation with potentially radical implications, even as such content remains embedded within both the capitalist, profit-oriented model of a corporation-dominated online space and the field of Russian national identity. Political opposition on YouTube, although subject to the 'rules of the game' established by both Russia's historico-ideological development and the hegemony of global capitalism, may nevertheless productively exploit the ambiguity generated at the meeting point of these two distinct ideological systems, and in doing so use the relative freedom of the online space to contest and undermine state authority.

[4] The mechanisms by which YouTube determines what content to promote and recommend to users remain largely opaque. However, it has been observed that the algorithms are influenced by stakeholders' interests and, ultimately, shape the nature of participation on YouTube by pushing content in a direction which is most likely to generate profit (Burgess & Green, 2018; Postigo, 2016).

Chapter Three – From Online Contestation to Radical Opposition

3.1 Yury Dud – Profitable Patriotism

In 2016, Yury Dud, a journalist previously best known for his work as editor-in-chief of the website *sports.ru*, launched the YouTube channel *vDud',* on which he has interviewed a range of notable public figures – ranging from rappers and actors to politicians, journalists and dissident oligarchs – and produced a number of documentary films dealing with subjects ranging from nineties popular culture to the somewhat weightier issues of the HIV epidemic in Russia and the Stalinist purges. Dud's YouTube channel has not only spawned a host of copycat channels which mimic both the presentation and content of his interviews (Lopaeva, 2020), but has made Dud one of the most famous figures in contemporary Russia, particularly amongst young Russians. Remarkably, a poll conducted in April 2020 by the Levada Centre found that, when respondents were asked whom amongst contemporary Russian figures they considered most inspiring, Dud trailed only President Vladimir Putin amongst those aged 18-24, and was ranked in the top twenty across all age groups (Podosokorsky, 2020). As of 28 May 2021**,** the *vDud'* YouTube channel has 9.17 million subscribers and over 1.4 billion total views.

While a number of scholars have discussed the reasons for Dud's massive popularity amongst young Russians (Nemchenko, 2020; Podosokorsky 2018, 2020; Strukov, 2021; Vitvinchuk 2018), they have tended to see Dud's success as rooted in his presentation and have consequently not investigated fully the subversive qualities of his work. Vitvinchuk (2018) draws attention to Dud's systemic violation of the norms of conducting interviews, for example in his use of swearwords and his willingness to confront and even argue with interviewees, while others have underlined Dud's ability to appeal to a wide range of audiences (Nemchenko, 2020; Podosokorsky, 2020). However, Dud's popularity should be seen as stemming not

simply from the engaging form of his films, but from their content, as they respond to a demand for 'original' content from a youth disillusioned with state television and offer a form of political opposition through their renegotiation of understandings of national identity. By analysing two documentaries – *Kolyma: Birthplace of Our Fear* (25 million views) and *Antokha from Magadan* (9.8 million views), we may explore in more detail the dynamics and limits of Dud's opposition, focussing on his treatment of the legacy of the Soviet past and Russia's relationship with Europe.

Nikolai Podosokorsky identifies the publication of Dud's film *Kolyma* on 23 April 2019 as the key moment marking his transformation 'from a popular videoblogger to a social actor' (2020, p. 65). Dud claims to have made the film – which is structured as a road trip along the Kolyma Highway from Magadan to Yakutsk, interspersed with interviews with figures including journalists and activists from the Far East of Russia, museum curators and descendants of Gulag prisoners – in response to a poll from the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (*VTsIOM*) which indicated that almost half of Russians aged 18-24 had never heard of the Stalinist Purges (*vDud'*, 2019a, 0:02:38).[5] However, although the film is presented as an educational documentary, its frank retelling of an uncomfortable and under-discussed episode of Russia's twentieth-century history cannot be seen as straightforwardly neutral. Noting that 'official' Russian history under Putin has been remoulded to produce a narrative of stability and national strength, Pearce argues that '[i]n creating a success story […] certain things do not fit. Examples […] would be the revolutions, Aleksandr Kerensky's leadership *and the Stalinist terror* [emphasis added]' (2018, p. 11). Seen in this light, *Kolyma* is not simply a neutral recounting of the past, but in fact represents a dissenting response to Putin-era

[5] The Kolyma Highway, one of the major infrastructure projects undertaken in the Russian Far East during the 1930s, was built with the labour of Gulag prisoners. Described vividly in Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, the Kolyma peninsula was notorious even amongst labour camps for its brutal conditions and correspondingly high death toll (Barnes, 2011; Shalamov, 1994).

constructions of Russian history – a rejection of narratives of stability, strong leadership and national strength and, in the film's emphasis on the human cost of the Purges – 20 million prisoners and 2 million deaths – a recentring of popular conceptions of the Stalin era away from the victory in the Second World War and towards the massive suffering inflicted by the Soviet state on its citizens.

The subversive dimension of Dud's account of the Purges is made even clearer in the film's concluding monologue:

> We travelled the Kolyma Highway *because it's not about our past, it's about our present*. Fear is a stubborn thing. Fear is the greatest enemy of freedom. Fearing nothing would be stupid and foolish. But to fear a rustle, a look, and – most importantly – your own opinion, means never taking a risk, becoming interested in new things, or *developing yourself, your community and your country*. […] Don't be afraid. Respect yourself. Maybe then our country won't witness any more times when people are treated worse than animals. [emphasis added] (*vDud'*, 2019a, 2:16:04)

To understand better the form of opposition voiced here, we may consider briefly the phenomenon of Aesopian language, a technique used in Russian and Soviet literature to conceal subversive meanings in apparently innocuous texts. Lev Loseff describes a system of 'screens' and 'markers' which serve to conceal and reveal the subversive meanings contained within a text (1984, p. 52). Thus, Dud's emphasis on the importance of 'developing yourself, your community and your country' acts as a 'screen', while the concluding sentence and the allusion to 'our present' serve as 'markers', pointing towards the political implications of what at first glance appears to be a statement couched firmly within a late-capitalist discourse of self-improvement and one of patriotic social activism. *Kolyma* thus both offers a response to officially promoted narratives of history and criticises social and political apathy, urging the film's viewers to consider actively the political situation in Russia of 2019.

Antokha from Magadan, while not as impactful as *Kolyma*, offers a further example of Dud's contestation of authoritative constructions of Russian identity. The film, in which Dud and

Anton Miznikov ('Antokha'), the driver from *Kolyma*, travel together to Spain and Portugal (it is Anton's first trip outside of the former Soviet Union), places itself from its opening in opposition to official discourses around 'Europe', as Dud says:

> "But alongside that they have already been telling us for many years how everything outside Russia is bad – migrants, gay parades, a lack of spirituality – but you already know all about that. Our opinion is that travel is a fundamental part of growth and progress. If you see how the world is elsewhere, *then it is much easier for you to remake and improve your own world.*" [emphasis added] (*vDud'*, 2019b, 0:00:31)

As in *Kolyma*, the critique of state narratives is dressed up in terms of personal self-improvement – that is to say, within neoliberal discourses of the 'self as project' (McGuigan, 2014), however, the political implications lurking behind this Aesopian 'screen' are unmistakable. The comparison of Russia with Europe continues throughout the film, for example when Dud compares Bilbao with the Russian industrial city of Nizhnie Tagila and asks whether a 'Bilbao effect' (whereby the city was regenerated through investment in the cultural sector) would be possible in Russia. Needless to say, the response is less than enthusiastic.

However, while Dud's films offer a dissenting response to official narratives of both the past and Russia's relationship with Europe, we should note that these responses are nevertheless firmly centred within Russian national discourse, and thus refer principally to Dud's 'patriotism' for legitimacy. Thus, during *Antokha*, Dud presents an advert in which he drives to Tver, a city near Moscow. At the end of the advert Dud says, "[T]ravelling is great everywhere – whether it's Europe, where we'll go back to after this ad – or [Dearest Mother] Russia" (*vDud'*, 2019b, 0:13:42). Similarly, in an interview with Alexei Navalny and his wife after his poisoning, Dud presents an advert for English lessons, in which he appeals to young Russians to learn English in order to find work in Russia with international companies (*vDud'*, 2020, 0:09:46). Dud, even as he renegotiates authoritative understandings of Russia's

relationship with Europe, nevertheless grounds this critique within a pre-established patriotic discourse – in other words, while visiting Bilbao may indeed be wonderful, a trip to Tver is certainly no worse.

Stuart Hall argues of political contestation, 'Opposing arguments are easy to mount. Changing the terms of an argument is exceedingly difficult, since the dominant definition of the problem acquires, by repetition, and by the weight and credibility of those who propose or subscribe it, the warrant of "common sense"' (2005, p. 77). A similar process may be observed here; any critique of the 'official' ideologies of the Russian state is necessarily located in the same discursive field as those ideologies, and as such cannot help but reproduce at least some of their hegemonic values. Dud, therefore, even as he makes an 'opposing argument' about what the Russian nation should be, nevertheless voices this argument in terms legitimated by the 'consensus' and, as such, roots his authority to speak in both his patriotism and concern for the improvement of Russian citizens and their nation.

Finally, it is important to note that Dud is embedded not only within the ideological system of 'Russian identity', but also within that of global capitalism. One of the best-paid figures of Russian YouTube, Dud is estimated to have earned 57.5 million roubles (644,000 euros) in 2019 (TNV, 2020), while an advert in one of his videos is thought to cost 1.2-2 million roubles (13,400-22,400 euros) (360TV, 2017; Masal'tseva, 2018). As such, there is a limit to Dud's opposition not only in its voicing in the hegemonic terms of 'patriotism', but in the need for stability stemming from his financial stake in the system – paradoxically, YouTube provides Dud with the opportunity to produce (monetisable) oppositional content, but it is this very monetisability which sets the limits of his opposition. Therefore, although the films of *vDud'* offer a degree of genuine contestation of authority and critique of Russian state ideology, this critique is tempered by its embeddedness in the discourses and operations of both 'the nation' and global capitalism. As such, Dud, although provided with a broadcasting platform in the

international space of the 'Internet in Russia', finds his opposition limited through its enmeshing within capitalist structures. Ultimately, the form of opposition espoused by Dud is a comfortable, non-revolutionary one, which satisfies the demands of his audience without presenting a radical – or revolutionary – challenge to the ideological consensus or political order in which it is produced.

3.2 Alexei Navalny – Instrumentalising the 'People' and the 'Nation'

While, as Terry Eagleton observes, any radical political movement must rely on 'the poor, contaminated instruments which […] history has handed it' (1990, p. 27), it is nevertheless true that transformative, revolutionary movements do emerge from the 'contaminating' flow of 'history'. In order to investigate how such a radical politics may emerge – and the possibilities and limits of such movements – we will examine the online activity of the Anti-Corruption Foundation and its leader Alexei Navalny, whose success has to a large extent relied on the instrumentalisation of ideas of the 'nation' and the 'people' in order to synthesise a cohesive oppositional movement in Russia.

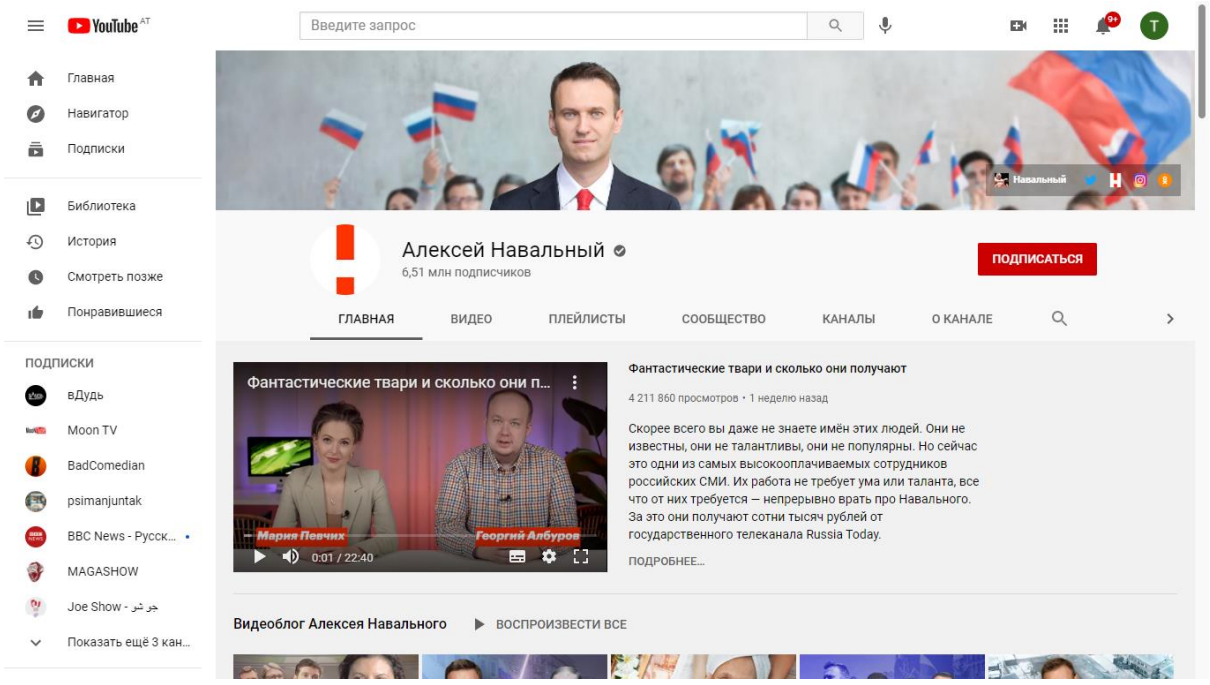
A number of studies have explored the nationalist bases of Navalny's politics (Kolstø, 2016; Laruelle, 2013; Moen-Larsen, 2014), while others have pointed to its populist mode of articulation (Aburamoto, 2019; Glazunova, 2020a, 2020b; Lassila, 2016). This analysis will build in particular on the work of Marlene Laruelle, who has explored the tensions between liberalism and nationalism in Navalny's movement, and of Jussi Lassila, who has used Laclau's theory of populism to analyse the effectiveness of Navalny's activism. Here, we will explore further the role played by populism in Navalny's opposition, primarily through analysis of Navalny's two most-watched YouTube investigations – *Don't Call Him Dimon* [*On vam ne Dimon*] (43 million views), an investigation of then-Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev's

corruption, and *Putin's Palace* [*Dvorets dlia Putina*] (116 million views),[6] a similar investigation of the construction of a Black Sea palace for President Vladimir Putin at the estimated cost of at least 100 billion roubles (1.12 billion euros).

Proceeding from the observation that 'nationalism has no predetermined political orientation, merging easily with the politics of both the left and the right' (2013, p. 277), Laruelle's analysis of Navalny's nationalism notes both his failure to articulate definite policy positions (for example, how he would respond to the labour shortfall created by his proposed end to visa-free movement for Central Asian migrants) and his use of a mode of anti-migrant discourse established by the Kremlin, as he 'wields the vocabulary shared from Putin to the ultranationalists in speaking of Russians as "locals" or "indigenous"' (2013, p. 284).

Examples of Navalny's instrumentalisation of mainstream national(ist) discourses (in the forms of anti-migrant rhetoric and a corresponding emphasis on 'Russianness') are not hard to find. Here we may cite just two. The first, a screenshot from Navalny's YouTube page (Figure 1),

Figure 1: Screenshot of Navalny's YouTube channel main page



[6] Although a significant proportion of these views are likely to have been by non-Russians, an 8th February Levada Centre poll indicates the extent of the film's impact in Russia. It found that over a quarter of Russians had watched the film, while only 31% of respondents claimed not to have heard of it (Meduza, 2021).

features a banner image in which Navalny is foregrounded against a background of white-skinned supporters waving Russian flags. Navalny is visually placed amongst both the 'people' and the iconography of the 'nation', and his political authority as 'leader' is founded on the legitimising force of the two. A further example is found in his May 2018 blog post 'How to Keep Busy While Under Arrest' [*Chem zaniat'sia pod arestom*], in which he explains his decision to begin learning the computer language Python. Humorously explaining this decision as the result of the authorities' refusal to allow him to take up wakeboarding, he observes, '[Learning] a foreign language is boring, and it's impossible to practise the correct pronunciation (*unless, of course, you are studying Uzbek)*' [emphasis added] (Naval'nyi, 2018). This off-hand comment offers a valuable insight into the mode of anti-migrant discourse utilised by Navalny – it at once demeans Uzbek language and culture, while tapping into a prejudice against perceived Central Asian criminality (Laruelle observes that, contrary to Navalny's 2013 claim that Central Asian and South Caucasian migrants were responsible for over half of crimes in Moscow, in fact only 1.7% of crimes were committed by foreign nationals (2013, p. 283)). Navalny, then, albeit in a very different mode to Dud, is engaged in a similar process of utilising authoritative national discourses to legitimise his opposition.

However, while Dud offers a milder, non-radical mode of opposition, Navalny has succeeded in crafting a mass movement, perceived by the Kremlin as a genuine threat.[7] Mark Galeotti recently described Navalny's political effectiveness as follows:

> Navalny was increasingly becoming a lightning rod to which all the various energies of the general dissatisfaction within the country could come together. This issue of what I've called "the coalition of the fed-up" [*koalitsiia zadolbannykh*] is a genuine concern if you're in the Kremlin because there are a lot of people now who are not very happy with the status quo. As we saw with the protests that took place on his arrest, Navalny in some ways was giving permission for people to come out and protest, to say, "We are fed up, we have

[7] As of May 2021, the Russian authorities appear to be working towards declaring the Anti-Corruption Foundation and 'Team Navalny' extremist organisations in advance of parliamentary elections in autumn, potentially criminalising any involvement in their activities (Meduza, 2021).

> had enough." They don't necessarily actually have any positive feelings towards Navalny. They certainly don't think he has the answers to their problems. But nonetheless they just wanted to make their problems known.' [edited for clarity] (Galeotti, 2021)

This description corresponds more or less exactly to Laclau's description of the formation of popular movements – both in terms of the role of the leader and in the formation of a system of 'equivalential demands'. Thus, Galeotti's 'coalition of the fed-up' is essentially analogous to Laclau's 'people' – it is a unified political group constructed from a 'plurality of democratic demands' (Laclau 2005, p. 95), a key precondition of whose formation is 'an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the "people" possible' (2005, p. 74). Similarly, the description of Navalny as a 'lightning rod' echoes Laclau's observation that 'the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality […] is inherent to the formation of a "people"' (2005, p. 100).

In addition to the 'equivalential articulation of demands', Laclau identifies two further preconditions for the emergence of the 'people' as a radical political actor; 'the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the "people" from power' and 'the consolidation of the equivalential chain through the construction of a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links' (2005, pp. 74-77). While the latter precondition has arguably not been fully achieved by Navalny's movement (and, indeed, may be one of the principal reasons for its failure thus far to bring about political change), the construction of an 'antagonistic frontier' between 'people' and 'elites' has played a major role in the development of Navalny's 'populist' discourse.

Lassila notes that, for Navalny, the most effective method of producing an 'equivalence of demands' has been focussing on 'Russians' antipathy to corruption and the regime's incapacity to adhere to the rule of law' (2016, p. 129). Through this focus on corruption, Navalny has been able to effect a 'desacralisation' of power in Russia, emphasising both the distance

between political elites and ordinary Russia citizens (of whom Navalny, of course, is one) and thus delegitimising the claims to popular support on which the Putin regime has to a large extent relied.

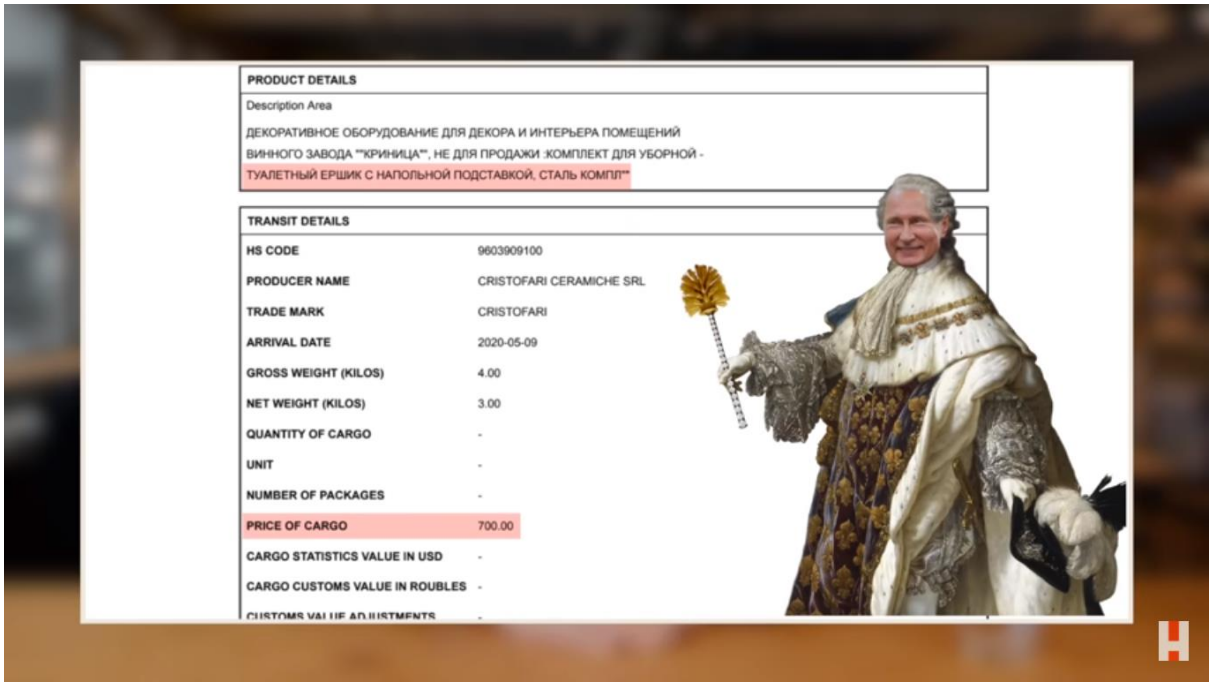
In *Don't Call Him Dimon*, Navalny exposes the methods by which then-Prime Minister and former President Dmitrii Medvedev exploited his position in order to acquire a vast property empire (including two yachts, property across Russia and a lavish Tuscan villa) with an estimated value of 70 billion roubles (1.13 billion euros at 2017 exchange rates) (Aleksei Naval'nyi, 2017). However, more interesting than the sheer scale of theft is the way in which Navalny exposes it. Much of the evidence gathered in the investigation is taken from Medvedev's personal Instagram account, as Medvedev's own attempt to 'speak directly' to the people through social media is attacked by Navalny (a tactic consistent with Jan-Werner Müller's argument that populists rely on a 'direct connection' with the people (2017, p. 35)). Having thus undermined Medvedev's preferred mode of communication with the 'people', Navalny seeks to emphasise the distance between 'people' and 'elite' by comparing Medvedev to the Russian Imperial aristocracy. Thus, before showing footage of Medvedev's house in his ancestral Kursk *oblast'* [province], Navalny observes, 'Just like other corrupt Russian officials, Medvedev sees himself as a nobleman of sorts. And what kind of nobleman doesn't have a familial estate?' (Aleksei Naval'nyi, 2017, 0:17:52).

The comparisons between the contemporary Russian elite and Imperial nobility are even clearer in Navalny's 2021 investigation *Putin's Palace*. This investigation, described by Navalny as a 'psychological portrait' of Putin (Aleksei Naval'nyi, 2021, 0:00:59), represents an aggressive attempt to delegitimise Putin's authority, as Navalny constructs an 'antagonistic frontier', dividing the people and Navalny on one side from the hypocritical and corrupt elites led by Putin on the other.

Thus, in addition to Navalny's observation of the uncanny resemblance between the entrance to Putin's palace and the Romanovs' Winter Palace in St Petersburg, Putin is continuously shown in mocking faux-imperial caricatures throughout the video, such as when Navalny discusses the now infamous 700 euro toilet brushes with which an outbuilding of the palace vineyard is equipped (Figure 2). Pointedly, Navalny compares the cost of these toilet brushes to the average annual Russian pension, underlining once more the 'frontier' separating Putin from the 'people' (Aleksei Naval'nyi, 2021, 1:18:03).

Alongside characterisations of Putin and the governing elite as a new, Imperial ruling class, Navalny also compares them to 'thieves in law' [*vory v zakone*], the Russian class of 'professional' thieves which developed in the Soviet Gulag, even describing the common fund with which the palace was funded as an *obshchak* – a word for the common money-pot used by groups of *vory* (Galeotti, 2018; Aleksei Naval'nyi, 2021, 1:35:34). However, the Russian ruling class are, in Navalny's eyes, not just corrupt and criminal – they are also hypocrites. He at several points highlights Putin's abrupt transformation from Soviet apparatchik to Orthodox believer, and, in the section of the film showing the palace's interior, devotes particular

Figure 2 Tsar Vladimir, pictured with royal sceptre



attention to the existence of a private casino (casino gambling is, with very few exceptions, illegal in Russia (Leitzel, 2019)). This exposure of Putin's hypocrisy is often carried out through montage, as Navalny's claims of Putin's corruption are directly juxtaposed with quotes from Putin himself. For example, after describing Putin's involvement in a scheme to profit from the sale of Russian natural resources abroad in the early 1990s, the video shows a quote of Putin saying, "This is our homeland, it is the most important thing [*samoe dorogoe*] we have"' (Aleksei Naval'nyi, 2021, 0:10:57). Putin is shown here not only to be a hypocrite, but his claims to patriotism are shown (presumably, in distinction from Navalny's) to be false.

Navalny's claims to patriotism and his authority as legitimate representative of the 'people' are evident at the film's conclusion, when he identifies himself with the 'we' of the 'Russian people', declaring, 'Step by step we are going to live better and more comfortably. All that we have to do is to stop tolerating [elite corruption]' (Aleksei Naval'nyi, 2021, 1:51:22). Arguing in the same dialogue that 'the very state has been transformed into an instrument for theft', Navalny fulfils a further condition of Laclau's construction of an antagonistic frontier. As Laclau observes, once demands 'overflow' the limits of the institutions they are directed against, the 'people' may emerge as a radical political force. Thus, Navalny here is speaking on behalf of the people *against* the institutions of the Russian state, which he sees as irredeemably corrupt and incapable of satisfying the people's demands.

Navalny's investigations, then, constitute one of the key instruments with which he both delegitimises the Russian ruling elite and simultaneously constructs the 'people' as a political force. Ultimately, Navalny's instrumentalisation of both the 'people' and the 'nation' has transformed him into an effective and threatening oppositional figure. However, as Lassila notes, Navalny's remoulding of the ideological bases of the Putin-era state into a mode of popular discourse means it remains unclear what precise form his movement would take were it ever to succeed in taking power (2016), an observation which accords with Laclau's comment

that as ‘popular identity becomes increasingly full from an *extensional* point of view […] it becomes *intensionally* poorer, for it has to dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous’ (2005, p. 96).

While the ultimate political trajectory of Navalny and the Anti-Corruption Foundation remains unclear, their successes offer a clear example of the way in which radical political opposition may emerge from a wider field of national and political ideology. Through the use of the participatory and communicative possibilities of modern online media, Navalny has crafted a radical political movement which, even as it reproduces and perpetuates many of the hegemonic values of the dominant system, has nevertheless reformulated and expressed them in a new and subversive mode, and thus created a genuine and threatening mass opposition movement in contemporary Russia.

Conclusion

Online political opposition in Russia, being simultaneously located 'online' and 'in Russia', finds itself embedded within and shaped by two competing ideological regimes. However, this dual location does not limit the development of opposition, and instead the interplay of these divergent value systems creates a space for the expression of radical, dissenting ideas and, consequently, for the emergence of a genuine political opposition. While this thesis has offered an initial examination of the interactions of national and global capitalist ideologies and the political implications of this process, it is clear that further study of the possibilities for dissent presented by online social media in diverse institutional and ideological settings is needed.

This thesis has analysed the ideological bases of political opposition in contemporary Russia, and the way in which opposition is both facilitated and shaped by its expression on YouTube. An exploration of national and popular identities allowed the development of a theoretical account of the way in which political opposition may emerge from within the pre-existing field of national identity, while a subsequent analysis of media theory explored the way in which YouTube, as a global, imperfectly participatory space, serves as a platform on which opposition may develop.

Examination of constructions of Russian national identity and the role of mass media in contemporary Russian politics foregrounded an analysis of two case studies of opposition on Russian YouTube. Ultimately, these highlighted the way in which oppositional critiques of authoritative ideology and political practice often meet with greatest success when they reproduce and instrumentalise certain widespread, hegemonically valorised elements of the broader fields of both global capitalist ideology and Russian national identity.

While this thesis has offered a wide-ranging overview of the relationship between national identity and online media, and examined the way in which it is both facilitated and transformed

through its expression on YouTube, there remains significant scope for further study. Future works should aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of the political role of YouTube – in Russia and elsewhere – and to conceptualise more precisely the way in which political opposition, particularly in authoritarian settings, may emerge from the interplay of different orders of ideological regimes. Focussing on the role of online media in the development of political opposition, further study may reveal valuable insights into both the operations of opposition movements and the vulnerabilities of the regimes they oppose.

However, while future research will doubtless reveal further dimensions to the relationship between YouTube and political opposition, it is clear that, at the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third decade as president of Russia, as the country's *de facto* opposition leader sits in prison and independent opposition figures and media face unprecedented levels of harassment and threat from the authorities, developing a deeper understanding of opposition to authoritarian rule in Russia is more relevant a task than ever before.

References

360TV. (2017, December 21). *Skol'ko stoit reklama vo "vDud'": Amiran Sardarov rasskazal o propasti mezdhu dokhodami blogerov.* https://360tv.ru/news/dengi/jurij-budet-dud/

Aburamoto, M. (2019). The Politics of Anti-Corruption Campaigns in Putin's Russia: Power, Opposition, and the All-Russia People's Front. *Europe-Asia Studies, 71*(3), 408–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1577359

Alexa. (2021). *The top 500 sites on the web.* Retrieved May 24, 2021, from https://www.alexa.com/topsites

Aleksei Naval'nyi. (2017, March 2). *On vam ne Dimon.* [*Don't Call Him Dimon*] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7_GF9g&t=1088s&ab_channel=%D0%90%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B9%D0%9D%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9%D0%90%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B9%D0%9D%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9Verified

Aleksei Naval'nyi. (2021, January 19). *Dvorets dlia Putina: Istoriia samoi bol'shoi vziatki.* [*Putin's Palace. History of World's Largest Bribe*] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipAnwilMncI&t=5588s&ab_channel=%D0%90%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B9%D0%9D%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9

Althusser, L. (2004) Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (2nd ed., pp. 693-702). Blackwell Publishing.

Anderson, B. R. O. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. ed). Verso.

Asmolov, G. (2014). The Kremlin's cameras and virtual Potemkin villages: ICT and the construction of statehood. In S.G. Livingston (Ed.). *Bits and atoms: Information and communication technology in areas of limited statehood* (pp. 30-46). Oxford Univ. Press.

Asmolov, G. & Kolozaridi, P. (2021). Run Runet Runaway: The Transformation of the Russian Internet as a Cultural-Historical Object. In D. Gritsenko, M. Wijermars, & M. V. Kopotev, *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (277-296). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bakhtin, M., Holquist, M., & Emerson, C. (2011). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (18. paperback printing). Univ. of Texas Press.

Barnes, S. A. (2011). *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*. Princeton University Press.

Brubaker, R. (1996). *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511558764

Buckley, S. (2020). *YouTube and the Public Sphere: What role does YouTube play in contributing towards Habermas's notion of the public sphere?* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Cardiff University.

Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory culture*. Polity.

Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2018). *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Second edition). Polity Press.

Burr, V. (2015). *Social Constructionism* (Third edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Calhoun, C. J., & Sennett, R. (Eds.). (2007). *Practicing Culture*. Routledge.

Conversi D. (2007). Mapping the Field: Theories of Nationalism and the Ethnosymbolic Approach. In A.S. Leoussi, & S.E. Grosby (Eds.), *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations* (pp. 15-30). Edinburgh Univ. Press.

Cresci, E. (2017, May 11). Russian YouTuber convicted for playing Pokémon Go in church. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/11/pokemon-go-russian-youtuber-convicted-playing-church-ruslan-sokolovsky

Eagleton, T. (1990). Nationalism: Irony and Commitment. In T. Eagleton, F. Jameson, E.W. & Said. *Nationalism, colonialism, and literature* (pp. 23-42). University of Minnesota Press.

Eagleton, T. (1998). *Ideology: An Introduction*. London: Verso.

Enikolopov, R., Petrova, M., & Zhuravskaya, E. (2011). Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia. *The American Economic Review, 101*(7), 3253-3285. Retrieved May 22, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41408737

Franklin, S. (2004). Russia in Time. In S. Franklin, & E. Widdis. (Eds.). *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction* (pp. 11-29). Cambridge University Press.

Franklin, S., & Widdis, E. (Eds.). (2004). *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text*, *25/26*, 56. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240

Freeze, G. L. (Ed.). (2009). *Russia: A History* (3rd ed). Oxford University Press.

Gadzhiev, K. (2018). Rossiiskaia federatsiia: Natsional'noe gosudarstvo ili gosudarstvo narodov?. *Polis, Politicheskie issledovaniia, 3*, 130–146. https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2018.03.09

Galeotti, M. (2018). *The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia*. Yale University Press.

Galeotti, M. (Host). (2021, May 1). In Moscow's Shadows 31: Navalny, Patrushev, Orban, and more [Audio podcast episode]. In *In Moscow's Shadows.* https://www.buzzsprout.com/1026985/8440668-in-moscow-s-shadows-31-navalny-patrushev-orban-and-more-reloaded

Gaufman, E. (2021). Cybercrime and Punishment: Security, Information War, and the Future of Runet. In D. Gritsenko, M. Wijermars, & M. V. Kopotev. *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (115-134). Palgrave Macmillan.

Gehlbach, S. (2010). Reflections on Putin and the Media. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *26*(1), 77–87. https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.26.1.77

Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. Blackwell Publishers.

Gel'man, V. (2020). The Politics of Fear: How the Russian Regime Confronts Its Opponents. *Russian Social Science Review, 61*(6), 467–482. https://doi.org/10.1080/10611428.2020.1852033

Gillespie, T. (2017). Regulation of and by platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick & T. Poell, *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (1st edition). SAGE inc.

Glazunova, S. (2020a). *Digital media as a tool for non-systemic opposition in Russia: A case study of Alexey Navalny's populist communications on YouTube* [PhD, Queensland University of Technology]. https://doi.org/10.5204/thesis.eprints.205667

Glazunova, S. (2020b). 'Four Populisms' of Alexey Navalny: An Analysis of Russian Non-Systemic Opposition Discourse on YouTube. *Media and Communication*, *8*(4), 121–132. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i4.3169

Google. (n.d.). *Upload videos longer than 15 minutes.* Google, YouTube Help. Retrieved May 23, 2021, from https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/71673?co=GENIE.Platform%3DAndroid&hl=en

Grishin O. E., & Pronina O. S. (2016). The Role of Private Channels in the Formation of National Identity in Russia. *Post-Soviet Issues*. (1), 92-101. (In Russ.) https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2016-0-1-107-116

Gritsenko, D., Wijermars, M., & Kopotev, M. V. (2021). *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Groys, B. (1992). Russia and the West: The Quest for Russian National Identity. *Studies in Soviet Thought, 43*(3), 185-198.

Habermas, J. (1999). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (10. print). MIT Press.

Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who Needs Identity?. In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1st ed., pp. 1-17). SAGE Publications.

Hall, S. (2005). The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies. In T. Bennett, J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, J. & Wollacott,. *Culture, Society and the Media* (pp. 52-86). Taylor and Francis. http://qut.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=242285

Hall, S. (2006). Encoding/Decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe & P. Willis, *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972 – 79* (pp. 117-127). (Transf. to digit. print). Routledge [u.a.].

Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1st ed). Pantheon Books.

Hobsbawm, E. (1992). *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (2nd ed., Canto). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL0521439612

Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T. W., & Schmid Noerr, G. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press.

Human Rights Watch. (2021, January 25). Russia: Police Detain Thousands in Pro-Navalny Protests. https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/25/russia-police-detain-thousands-pro-navalny-protests

Jenkins, H. (2007, May 27). Nine Propositions Towards a Cultural Theory of YouTube. *Confessions of an Aca-Fan.* *http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/05/9_propositions_towards_a_cultu.html*

Jenkins, H. (2009). What Happened Before YouTube. In J. Burgess, & J. Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (pp. 109-125). Polity.

Jørgensen, M., & Phillips, L. (2002). *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. Sage Publications.

Kim, J. (2012). The institutionalization of YouTube: From user-generated content to professionally generated content. *Media, Culture & Society, 34(1*), 53–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711427199

Klepikova, T. (2018). Digital Russians' Home and Agora: The Runet Between the Private and the Public Spheres. In *Privatheit in der digitalen Gesellschaft* [Privacy in a Digital Society] (pp. 235-257), S. Burk. (Ed.). Duncker & Humblot.

Knobel, B. (2020). *The Great Game* and the evolving nature of political talk shows on Russian television. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *36*(4), 346–364. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1772664

Kolstø, P. (2016). Crimea vs. Donbas: How Putin Won Russian Nationalist Support—and Lost it Again. *Slavic Review, 75*(3), 702-725. doi:10.5612/slavicreview.75.3.0702

Laclau, E. (1977). *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*. NLB.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. Verso.

Laclau, E. (2006). Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics. *Critical Inquiry, 32*(4), 646-680. doi:10.1086/508086

Laruelle, M. (2014). Alexei Navalny and challenges in reconciling "nationalism" and "liberalism". *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *30*(4), 276–297. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2013.872453

Lassila, J. (2016). Aleksei Naval'nyi and Populist Re-ordering of Putin's Stability. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *68*(1), 118–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1120276

Leitzel, J. (2019). Vice policy in Russia: Alcohol, tobacco, gambling. *Policy Studies*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1666099

Leousii, A. S. & S. Grosby. (2007). Introduction. In A.S. Leoussi, & S. E. Grosby (Eds.), *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations* (pp. 1-14). Edinburgh Univ. Press.

Litvinenko, A. (2021). YouTube as Alternative Television in Russia: Political Videos During the Presidential Election Campaign 2018. *Social Media + Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984455

Lonkila, M., Shpakovskaya, L. & Torchinsky, P. (2021). In D. Gritsenko, M. Wijermars, & M. V. Kopotev. *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (135-154). Palgrave Macmillan.

Lopaeva, S. (2020, September 18). Russian journalists leave TV behind for YouTube. *International Journalists' Network*. https://ijnet.org/en/story/russian-journalists-leave-tv-behind-youtube

Loseff, L. (1984). *On the beneficence of censorship: Aesopian language in modern Russian literature*. O. Sagner in Kommission.

Manskii, V. (Director). (2018). *Svideteli Putina* [Putin's Witnesses] [Film]. Vertov; GoldenEgg Production; Hypermarket Film.

Masal'tseva, M. (2018, April 2). *Skol'ko stoit reklama u Iuriia Dudia, Nikolaia Soboleva, Kati Klep i drugikh populiarnykh blogerov.* Afisha. https://daily.afisha.ru/news/15773-riab-poschitalo-skolko-stoit-reklama-u-yuriya-dudya-nikolaya-soboleva-kati-klep-i-drugih-blogerov/

McGuigan, J. (2014). The Neoliberal Self. *Culture Unbound*, 6, 223-240.

Mediascope. (2021). *Top-10 resursov.* Retrieved May 31, 2021, from https://webindex.mediascope.net/top-resources

Meduza. (2016, September 13). *Piat' internet-resursov oboshli pervyi kanal po okhvatu auditorii*. https://meduza.io/news/2016/09/13/pyat-internet-resursov-oboshli-pervyy-kanal-po-ohvatu-auditorii

Meduza. (2021a, February 8)**.** Levada's latest: One in four Russians have watched the 'Putin's Palace' investigation, but a third of them think it's fake. https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/02/08/levada-s-latest

Meduza. (2021b, April 16). Clearing the way: Moscow prosecutors want to ban the Anti-Corruption Foundation and 'Team Navalny' offices as extremist organizations. https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/04/16/clearing-the-way

Moen-Larsen, N. (2014). "Normal nationalism": Alexei Navalny, LiveJournal and "the Other". *East European Politics*, *30*(4), 548–567. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2014.959662

Moore, D. (2001). Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique. *PMLA, 116*(1), 111-128. Retrieved May 29, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/463645

Müller, J.-W. (2017). *What Is populism?* Penguin Books Ltd.

Naval'nyi, A. (2018, May 17). *Chem zaniat'sia pod arestom* [How to Keep Busy While Under Arrest]. *Naval'nyi*. https://navalny.com/p/5867/

Norris, S. M. (2012). *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism*. Indiana University Press.

Oates, S. (2013). *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere*. Oxford University Press.

Ovcharova, S. (2017). The Kremlin Sets Its Eyes on YouTube. *New Eastern Europe, 06(29),* 68-74.

Nemchenko, L. (2020). Strategies for Working with Soviet Past in the Post-Soviet Cultural Space (The Cases of TV-series Thaw, Kolyma Tales Performance by Yeltsin Centre's 'V tsentre' theatre studio and Yury Dud's YouTube film Kolyma – Birthplace of Russia's Fear). *KnE Social Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v4i13.7727

Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The virtual sphere 2.0: the internet, the public sphere and beyond. In A. Chadwick, & P. N. Howard. (Eds.). *Routledge handbook of Internet politics* (pp. 230-245). Routledge.

Pearce, J. C. (2018). *The Use of History in Putin's Russia* [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]. Anglia Ruskin University.

Podosokorsky, N. N. (2018). "A Face from the Screen." Wherein Lies the Secret of the Popularity of the Talk Show "*vDud'"*?. *The Art and Science of Television, 14.3,* 151–166. https://doi.org/10.30628/1994-9529-2018-14.3-151-166

Podosokorsky, N. N. (2020). Evolution of Yury Dud: From a Popular Video Blogger to a Public Figure. *The Art and Science of Television, 16*(4), 65–82. https://doi.org/10.30628/1994-9529-2020-16.4-65-82

Pomerantsev, P. (2015). Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): The Kremlin's Information War. *Journal of Democracy 26*(4), 40-50. doi:10.1353/jod.2015.0074.

Putin, V. (2010, January 22). *Presedatel' Pravitel'stva Rossii V. V. Putin vystupil na zasedanii Gosudarstvennogo soveta Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Pravitel'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii.* http://archive.government.ru/special/docs/9065/

Riabov, O. (2020). The Symbol of the Motherland in the Legitimation and Delegitimation of Power in Contemporary Russia. *Nationalities Papers*, *48*(4), 752–767. https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.14

Rogov, K. (2018). The Art of Coercion: Repressions and Repressiveness in Putin's Russia, *Russian Politics, 3*(2), 151-174. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00302001

Rutland, P. (2014). The Pussy Riot affair: Gender and national identity in Putin's Russia. *Nationalities Papers, 42*(4), 575–582. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.936933

Salikov, A. (2018). Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Rethinking the Public Sphere in the Age of Social Media. *Sotsiologicheskoe Obozrenie / Russian Sociological Review*, *17*(4), 88–102. https://doi.org/10.17323/1728-192x-2018-4-88-102

Securities and Exchange Commission. (n.d.). *Form 10-K – Alphabet Inc.* United States Securities and Exchange Commission. https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1652044/000165204421000010/goog-20201231.htm

Service, R. (2015). *The Penguin History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-first Century*.

Shalamov, V. T. (1994). *Kolyma tales*. Penguin.

Shklar, J. (1995). Political Theory and Ideology. In P. Schumaker, D. C. Kiel & T. W. Heilke (Eds.), *Great Ideas/Grand Schemes: Political Ideologies in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (1st ed., pp. 4-14). McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages.

Siebert, F. (1963). The Authoritarian Theory of the Press. In F.S. Siebert, T. Peterson, & W. Schramm. *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do*. University of Illinois Press. https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctv1nhr0v

Slezkine, Y. (1994). The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism. *Slavic Review*, *53*(2), 414-452. doi:10.2307/2501300

Smith, A. D. (2009). *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Repr). Oxford University Press.

Soldatov, A., & Borogan, I. (2017). *The Red Web: The Kremlin's Wars on the Internet* (First Edition, First Trade Paperback Edition). PublicAffairs.

Sasha Spilberg. (2017, April 21). *Video s ministrom kul'tury!!! Vladimir Medinskii i Sasha Spilberg* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVLzn0NSSGc

Strukov, V. (2021). Digital Journalism: Toward a Theory of Journalistic Practice in the Twenty-First Century. In D. Gritsenko, M. Wijermars, & M. V. Kopotev. *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (155-170). Palgrave Macmillan.

Suny, R. G. (2001). The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, "National" Identity, and Theories of Empire. In R. G. Suny, & T. Martin. (Eds.). *A state of nations: Empire and nation-making in the age of Lenin and Stalin* (pp. 23-66). Oxford University Press.

TNV. (2020, March 6). *Stalo izvestno skol'ko Iurii Dud' i Kseniia Sobchak zarabatyvaiut v* YouTube. https://tnv.ru/news/culture/86399-stalo-izvestno-skolko-yuriy-dud-i-kseniya-sobchak-zarabatyvayut-v-youtube/

Tolz, V. (1998). Forging the nation: National identity and nation building in post-communist Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *50*(6), 993–1022. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139808412578

Tolz, V., & Teper, Y. (2018). Broadcasting agitainment: A new media strategy of Putin's third presidency. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *34*(4), 213–227. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1459023

vDud'. (2019a, August 23). *Rodina nashego strakha/ Kolyma - Birthplace of Our Fear* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo1WouI38rQ&ab_channel=%D0%B2%D0%94%D1%83%D0%B4%D1%8C

vDud'. (2019b, December 17). *Antokha. Puteshestvie iz Magadan v Evropu/Journey from Magadan to Europe (English subs)* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvDwwHIugqg&ab_channel=%D0%B2%D0%94%D1%83%D0%B4%D1%8C%D0%B2%D0%94%D1%83%D0%B4%D1%8CVerified

vDud'. (2020, October 6). *Naval'nye – interv'iu posle otravleniia/The Navalniys Post-poisoning (English subs)* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vps43rXgaZc&ab_channel=%D0%B2%D0%94%D1%83%D0%B4%D1%8C%D0%B2%D0%94%D1%83%D0%B4%D1%8CVerified

Vitvinchuk, V. V. (2018). Transformation of the interview genre in the modern media space: Media chronotope and communication tactics. *Voprosy Zhurnalistiki*, *4*, 73–80. https://doi.org/10.17223/26188422/4/3

White, S., I. McAllister, & S. Oates. (2002). Was It Russian Public Television That Won It? *Press/Politics* 7(2): 17-33.

Wijemars, M. (2021). The Digitalization of Russian Politics and Political Participation. In D. Gritsenko, M. Wijermars, & M. V. Kopotev. *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (15-32). Palgrave Macmillan.

Yaffa, J. (2020). *Between Two Fires* (First edition). Tim Duggan Books.

Yusupova, M. (2014). Pussy Riot: A feminist band lost in history and translation. *Nationalities Papers*, *42*(4), 604–610. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.923391

Zubrzycki, G. (Ed.). (2017). *National matters: Materiality, culture and nationalism*. Stanford University Press.

Zuckerman, E. (2007, July 16). The Connection between Cute Cats and Web Censorship. *Ethan Zuckerman*. https://ethanzuckerman.com/2007/07/16/the-connection-between-cute-cats-and-web-censorship/