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# Managing public outrage: Power, scandal, and new media in contemporary Russia

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## Abstract

Over the past three decades, scholars studying the phenomenon of political scandal have mostly based their works on the premise that scandals can only occur in liberal democracies. Contradictory to this assumption, however, some of the most heavily discussed phenomena in contemporary semi-authoritarian Russia are scandals emanating from the new, vibrant sphere of social media thriving on a largely unfiltered internet. How are these ‘internet scandals’ impacting politics in the semi-authoritarian political environment? To address this and related questions, I juxtapose two case studies of police corruption scandals that erupted in the social media sphere in 2009/2010. Drawing on the findings, I argue that Russia’s ruling elites are presently very much capable of managing these outbursts of public outrage. Mainly with the help of the powerful state-controlled television, public anger is very swiftly redirected towards lower-level authorities and foreign, supposedly hostile powers.

## Keywords

activism, blogs, corruption, hybrid, protest, Russia, scandal, social media, YouTube

## Introduction

Fundamentally, we believe that scandals can only occur in liberal democracies. (Markovits and Silverstein, 1988: 8)

This quotation is taken from the introductory chapter to one of the most cited volumes on the politics of scandal, edited by Andrei Markovits and Mark Silverstein in 1988.

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Markovits and Silverstein (1988: 9) conceived of a political scandal as 'a betrayal of the public trust in terms of the accountability and process of the liberal democratic state'. According to their approach, in liberal democracies two inherently antithetic principles have to be balanced: (1) the need for power and (2) the simultaneous need to curtail power in order to guarantee the individual's autonomy from the state. In this perspective, the quest for political power at the expense of due process emerges as the driving force behind the phenomenon of political scandal. A strong faith of the members of a society in the liberal process arises as a necessary precondition (Markovits and Silverstein, 1988: 7–9).

Since Markovits and Silverstein published their volume in 1988, most authors (with rare exceptions being, for instance, Klier et al., 1989, and Sabrow, 2004) have followed them in their basic assumption quoted above. 'Power and control bodies must not coincide' concurs Neckel (2005: 103) nearly twenty years later. 'That is why there are no political scandals in dictatorships, with the possible exception of those that the ruling powers publicly stage themselves because of internal power struggles' (Neckel, 2005: 103). In the same vein, Esser and Hartung (2004: 1048) understand scandals 'in the sense of being possible only in open and democratic societies with a free press', arguing that scandals under Eastern Germany's communist regime 'simply could not exist'. Hondrich (2002: 48) points to the fact that the crimes of Stalin did not erupt into scandals at their time, but were unveiled only by his successor Khrushchev years later.

In 2004, the *American Behavioral Scientist* added a series of high-profile articles to the academic discourse by publishing two special issues dedicated to the topic. However, the two editors again restricted the scope of their global, comparative approach to 'Political Scandal and Media Across Democracies' (Tumber and Waisboard, 2004a, 2004b). This article aims at going beyond this traditional strand of literature, challenging it in at least two points: (1) Over the past two decades, most scholars have based their studies on Markovits and Silverstein's basic assumption that scandals can only occur in liberal democracies. Thus, this study wants to raise the question: What specific patterns of scandal communication can be observed in the semi-authoritarian political environment of contemporary Russia? (2) Most studies on scandals were authored before the rise of the internet and social media. Therefore, this article seeks to take under scrutiny scandals that emanate from the new sphere of social media. How are such 'internet scandals' impacting politics in contemporary Russia?

To embark on this new path of research seems even more timely, as a large number of semi-authoritarian, so-called 'hybrid' regimes (cf. Bogaards, 2009) have only recently emerged in the 'third wave of democratization' (Huntington, 1991) since the mid 1970s and especially after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s. Since then, a large 'grey area' of political regimes has evolved that can neither be regarded as classic authoritarian nor as fully-fledged democratic. Trying to capture the nature of these new forms of rule, scholars have developed a whole series of concepts of so-called 'democracies with adjectives' (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). Russia is typically considered one of these new 'semi-authoritarian', 'semi-democratic', 'defective', 'sovereign', or 'guided' democracies. While at least semi-competitive elections are held on a regular basis, civil rights and political liberties such as the freedom of association or the freedom of the press continue to be severely restricted (Freedom House, 2010). Last but not least, this article aims

to enrich the broader, currently on-going academic debate on the question of whether the internet is to be seen rather as a 'technology of liberation' or as one of 'control' (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010: 44; Diamond, 2010). Do scandals that emanate from the new sphere of social media actually 'empower' Russian citizens?

To address these and related questions, the article adopts the case study method, and more specifically the approach of 'process tracing' as proposed by George and Bennett (2005: 73–88). Accordingly, the study will proceed in four steps: (1) The next section develops a research design. It sketches out the research objectives, carefully selects two cases of internet scandals and then outlines theoretical concepts to be observed. (2) Subsequently, the two case studies are presented. (3) The third section discusses the two cases in comparison, and (4) in the final section conclusions are drawn and directions suggested for promising avenues for future research.

## **Research design and socio-political background**

In this section, the research design of the study is developed in five steps (George and Bennett, 2005: 73–79). First, the research objectives are elaborated. Second, the variables to be observed are selected. Then, two case studies are deliberately chosen for investigation. Fourth, the variance of the variables is described and, fifth, questions to be asked of each case are formulated.

### *Elaborating research objectives*

This study hopes to generate significant contributions, primarily of idiographic and heuristic value (George and Bennett, 2005: 75), to the academic literature on political scandal arising from the new sphere of social media. While the findings are expected to be valid primarily in the socio-political context of contemporary Russia, a certain hypothetical and explanatory value with regard to the complex interrelation between new media, power and scandal in other semi-democratic and authoritarian societies is intended.

### *Selecting variables to observe*

There is a multitude of sophisticated conceptualizations of the phenomenon of political scandal. Most of these definitions stem from the disciplines of sociology, communication and political science, and have been tailored to analyse scandals in Western, democratic societies (Hondrich, 2002: 40; Neckel, 1989: 56; Thompson, 2000: 13; Tumber and Waisbord, 2004a: 1032). To study scandals in the hybrid polity of contemporary Russia, a rather lean definition proposed by Esser and Hartung (2004) seems most suitable. Esser and Hartung (2004: 1041) conceive of a scandal 'as the intense public communication about a real or imagined defect that is by consensus condemned, and that meets universal indignation or outrage'.

In order to identify meaningful and relevant variables for observation, the context of both the Russian semi-pluralistic media environment and the Russian semi-democratic political system have to be considered. As to the Russian media system, this study

distinguishes four spheres of media (see Figure 1) that differ mostly according to their position vis-à-vis the ruling elites: (1) official mass media, (2) mainstream mass media, (3) liberal-oppositional mass media, and (4) social media.

The most powerful outlets in the first sphere of official media are the three most-watched national TV channels: *Perviy Kanal*, *Rossiya 1* and *NTV*. These channels are controlled by the ruling elites, either explicitly via state-ownership or implicitly via ownership of state enterprises (see Mickiewicz, 2006: 6–7; Oates, 2007: 1284–1288). To secure control, ‘trusted’ persons from the state apparatus are appointed to key positions of these media organizations at regular intervals (Simons, 2010: 25–26). In addition, weekly meetings between Kremlin officials and top television directors are reported. In these meetings, Kremlin officials allegedly go as far as to hand out talking points and recommend approaches for news coverage of the upcoming topics of the week (Baker and Glasser, 2005: 294). As a result, these official media outlets must be regarded as finely tuned propaganda tools that herald the political line of Russia’s ruling elites around the two central figures Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitriy Medvedev. Voices opposing this ‘tandem of power’ are hardly ever quoted.

The second category is the sphere of mainstream mass media, flagshipged by a range of widely circulated newspapers such as *Trud* with roughly 220,000 printed issues daily or *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* with approximately three million readers (both figures as self-provided by the publishing houses). These media outlets are either owned by wealthy individuals or by large corporations, whose profits are heavily dependent on the

	<b>Official Mass Media</b>	<b>Mainstream Mass Media</b>	<b>Liberal- Oppositional Mass Media</b>	<b>Social Media</b>
Channel of Distribution	Broadcast / Print / Internet	Print / Internet / Radio	Print / Internet / Radio	Internet (Network Structure)
Examples of Media Outlets	<i>Perviy Kanal</i> , <i>Rossiya 1</i> , <i>Rossiskaya Gazeta</i> , <i>NTV</i>	<i>Komsomol'skaya Pravda</i> , <i>Izvestia</i> , <i>Trud</i>	<i>Novaya Gazeta</i> , <i>gazeta.ru</i> , <i>Echo Moskvyy</i> , <i>The New Times</i>	Forums, Blogs, Microblogs, Social Networks
Attitude towards the Ruling Elites	Unconditional support	Largely loyal but selectively critical	Highly critical	Varying
Influence of the Ruling Elites on the Published Content	High	Medium	Low	Low
Audience	Large	Medium	Marginal	Marginal

**Figure 1.** The four spheres of the contemporary Russian hybrid media system

benevolence of the power centre. Therefore, the political reporting of these media is, in broadest terms, supportive of the semi-authoritarian regime, even though selected measures of the 'tandem of power' may be occasionally criticized.

The third sphere of liberal-oppositional media sharply opposes the regime and advocates Western, liberal-democratic values. The audience of these media outlets is relatively small. Probably the most renowned publication, the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, comes out only three times a week with slightly over 110,000 printed issues (NTS, 2010).

'Social media' are understood in the following as 'a group of Internet-based applications [...] that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61). In this article, primarily the content of blogs, microblogs, social networks and forums will be analysed under this category. Roughly 70 percent of Russian internet users had established a profile on a social networking site in 2008 (see Alexanyan, 2009: 1–4). As of April 2010, approximately 34 percent of all Russians were accessing the internet at least once a week (VCIOM, 2010).

At the time of research in summer 2010, not only freedom of the press was constricted in Russia's 'defective' democracy but also the right to free assembly was curtailed. Protests organized by a coalition of opposition groups under the slogan 'Strategiya 31' on the 31st day of each month were repeatedly dispersed by the police, with opposition leaders and participants being temporarily detained. Nonetheless, according to polls carried out by various institutions, approval rates of the two leading figures Medvedev and Putin continued to range high, between 59 and 73 percent (Economist, 2010).

As to the key policies pursued by the 'tandem of power', Medvedev was heavily popularizing and propagating a political strategy of 'modernization' (Kamyshev, 2010). In accomplishing this goal, he obviously considered the new medium of internet and e-government tools of signal importance. Other repeatedly announced political goals were the 'fight against corruption' and the 'reform of the police' (Ryzhkov, 2010). While Russia's police forces have traditionally been perceived as extremely corrupt, the situation seemed to become unbearable in 2009 after police officers had murdered several civilians (O'Flynn, 2009).

In this socio-political context, when comparing communication patterns of scandals, the following four themes merit consideration: (a) the travelling of news memes and specific interaction patterns between the three traditional spheres of media and the new, networked sphere of social media; (b) the strategies of the ruling elites in dealing with scandals arising from the new sphere of social media; (c) the possible consequences of the scandals for the social practices of 'corruption' and the 'rule of law'; (d) an evaluation of the success of 'scandal management' by the ruling elites.

### Selecting cases

In the process of case selection, only scandals were taken into consideration that (a) emanated from the new sphere of social media and that (b) were widely covered in the mass media. After screening roughly a dozen possible instances that occurred during the two-year period 2009/2010, I decided to juxtapose two largely similar cases that greatly differ in one key area: in their potential to endanger the legitimacy of the ruling elites. In the first case study (the 'Living Shield'), the scandal posed only a minor threat to the

ruling elites, mainly because the whistle-blower cooperated with the authorities. In the second case study (involving the so-called ‘honest police Major Dymovskiy’) the whistle-blower refused to collaborate; the scandal was perceived as a major threat by the ruling elites. Aside from this fundamental difference, the two cases were similar in their key features: Both scandals erupted after individuals had uploaded videos to YouTube in approximately the same time period between late 2009 and early 2010, both received considerable public attention, and both touched upon the very sensitive topic of police misconduct and corruption.

### Research questions

To observe the theoretical concepts indicated above, the following questions guide the two case studies:

1. *Travelling of News Memes and Patterns of Communication.* How did the scandal erupt in the sphere of social media, at what point did it spill over to the various spheres of traditional mass media, and what impact did traditional mass media have on the eruption of the scandal?
2. *Strategies of the Ruling Elites.* How was the scandal covered and framed in the sphere of official media (i.e. in the tightly state-controlled TV channels)? What real-life measures were undertaken by the authorities (ousting of officials, lawsuits, pressure on media outlets, etc.)?
3. *Impact on the Rule of Law and Corruption.* Were the scandalous persons punished for their perceived transgressions, and were they punished according to the law? Did media coverage of the scandal, most probably, deter future transgressors from similar misconduct and corruption?
4. *Success of the Strategies of ‘Scandal Management’ of the Ruling Elites.* Overall, did media coverage of the scandal rather weaken or strengthen the legitimacy of the ruling elites and the political regime as a whole?

On the basis of these four groups of questions, the first case study, the so-called ‘Living Shield’ scandal, will be taken under scrutiny in the next section.

### Case study I: The ‘Living Shield’ scandal

On 7 March 2010, 29-year-old Stanislav Sutyagin uploaded a self-recorded video to YouTube (Sutyagin81, 2010). The three-minute clip shows the young man talking to his webcam, giving a detailed account of how he was stopped by the Moscow traffic police on a city highway two days before at 5.30 a.m. Together with several other drivers, Sutyagin was ordered to park his old Mercedes crosswise to the road. A couple of minutes later, suddenly, a car appeared and rushed through the roadblock at high speed, damaging Sutyagin’s Mercedes and endangering him and the other drivers who had all remained in their vehicles. It was only then that Sutyagin realized that he had been taking part in a ‘human roadblock’, a ‘Living Shield’ (Russian: *Zhivoy Shchit*) set up by the

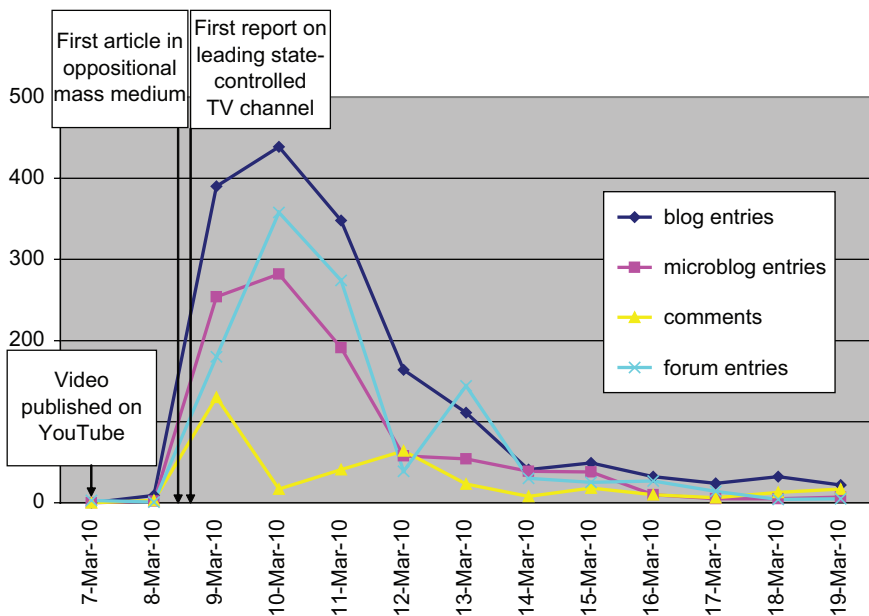
policemen in a hunt for escaping criminals. In his YouTube video titled *Zhivoy Shchit*, Sutyagin (Sutyagin81, 2010) complains:

Aren't our lives worth anything in our Russian state? [...] I think this is utter lawlessness. The most interesting thing is that they [the policemen] told us openly: Look, guys, you won't get anything [for your damaged vehicles]; we haven't caught the criminals!

*News memes and patterns of communication*

How did Sutyagin's video statement erupt into a scandal on the Russian internet? Figure 2 shows the mentions of the term *Zhivoy Shchit* in the days after the video was uploaded. The numbers were compiled with the help of the blog search tool *Puls blogosferi* (2011) provided by the leading Russian search engine *Yandex*. The tool allows tracing separately the number of (a) blog entries, (b) microblog (mostly Twitter) entries, (c) comments, and (d) forum entries. As the term *Zhivoy Shchit* is only very rarely used in common Russian language, we can assume that close to all of the counted items are related to Sutyagin's YouTube message.

The four graphs in Figure 2 trace the number of daily mentions of the term *Zhivoy Shchit* in the sphere of social media. As can be seen, the intensity of communication reached its peak on 10 March, three days after Sutyagin had uploaded his video message. On that day, at least 450 blog entries were authored on the topic. In the three days that followed the peak, the intensity of communication decreased steadily. In the days after 14 March, it evened out to a rather low level. From these findings, we can



**Figure 2.** Mentions of the term *Zhivoy Shchit* ('Living Shield') in the sphere of social media



draw three preliminary conclusions: (1) The Living Shield scandal was discussed with similar intensity in blogs, microblogs and forums; (2) The intensity of communication reached its peak three days after the video was published; (3) The scandal engaged the sphere of Russian social media for a relatively short period. After one week, the discussions rapidly ebbed.

How did the three spheres of official, mainstream and liberal-oppositional media contribute to the emergence of this pattern of communication? The first mass medium to pick up the event was the oppositional online newspaper *Gazeta.ru* (2010a). It published an article about Sutyagin's message two days after the video had been uploaded, on 9 March at 12.29 p.m. The sphere of official mass media also reacted astonishingly quickly. Only a few hours after *Gazeta.ru* had published the first article, *Vesti Moskva* (a local appendix to the main news program on the TV channel *Rossiya 1*) reported the incident shortly after 5 p.m. (*Vesti Moskva*, 2010a). Within hours, other state-controlled and mainstream media outlets followed suit. In the next days, the scandal was prominently covered in all four media spheres.

As these findings reveal, the Living Shield scandal reached its peak in the sphere of social media only *after* it already had been extensively covered in the spheres of oppositional, mainstream, and even official mass media (see Figure 2). On 8 March, the day before the mass media picked up the scandal, only 9 blog entries had discussed the term *Zhivoy Shchit*. The overwhelming majority of the more than 450 blog entries posted on the next day appeared after the scandal was reported by oppositional, mainstream and even state-controlled mass media.

### *Strategies of scandal management pursued by the ruling elites*

How did the major state-controlled television channels frame the Living Shield incident? As pointed out above, the first broadcast by *Vesti Moskva* (2010a) appeared astonishingly quickly, only five hours after the scandal was first brought to the attention of a wider audience by the online newspaper *Gazeta.ru* (2010a). Not only the speed but also the technical and human resources employed by the state-controlled television channel were impressive: already this very first broadcast features a 3D animation of the accident, alongside an interview with the blogger Sutyagin. It announces that the scandal is being investigated.

On the same evening at 9 p.m., the most popular Russian newscast *Vremya* (2010a) dedicates a four-minute item to the incident. Various speakers of the traffic police apologize. In the afternoon of the next day, 10 March, the news program *Vesti Moskva* (2010b) reports that the Duma, the Russian parliament, will supervise the investigation, and that another government body, the Public Chamber, has offered to provide legal support to the affected drivers. Another *Vesti*-newscast promulgates that the two criminals who rushed through the roadblock have finally been caught (*Vesti*, 2010). Two – supposedly guilty – Georgian men are shown and rudely questioned in front of the running TV cameras. The story line is continued on the next day, 11 March, with a newscast in which the chief of the Moscow traffic police, Sergey Kazantsev, bestows a certificate of bravery to the blogger Sutyagin (*Vremya*, 2010b). In addition, Sutyagin is presented with a clock. On the same day, the radio channel *Vesti FM* (2010) heralds: 'The reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has been prepared by bloggers.'

## *Rule of law and corruption*

Were the culprits of the Living Shield scandal punished? According to media reports (*Gazeta.ru* 2010b), the chief of the Moscow traffic police Kazantsev received a 'strong reprimand'; the police officer who led the operation was dismissed; and one of the ordinary police officers who participated in the operation was sentenced to one year in prison. Thus, it can be argued that the outcome of the Living Shield scandal most probably had a deterring effect: particularly low- and mid-level police officials might be afraid of comparable misconduct and corruption in the future. In this regard, it can be inferred that the new sphere of social media is contributing to a certain 'control'- or even 'muckraking'-function of the Russian media, as it is typically cherished in Western democracies.

But, was the rule of law enforced? As a closer look reveals, the scandal was not resolved according to provisions of law and with the help of independent courts, but rather pursuant to the strategies of various political actors and institutions in their struggle for power. First, the affected drivers were not paid fixed sums of indemnities established by a court verdict but their cars were repaired in the workshop of the Moscow traffic police on the personal order of police chief Kazantsev. Then, the parliament exceeded its constitutional competencies by publicly declaring that it would supervise the investigation. Third, the harsh prison sentence for the low-ranking police officer was criticized by many observers as the 'sacrifice of a pawn' (Abstract2001, 1999; *Gazeta.ru*, 2010b) staged by the ruling elites. On the day of the court verdict, the state-controlled TV channels could herald in the main evening news: 'Police inspector sentenced for endangering the lives of drivers' (*Vremya*, 2010c). In other words, a rather arbitrary jail sentence for an ordinary police officer was framed as a major victory of the ruling elites in the fight against corruption. To summarize, the Living Shield scandal may well have helped to curtail corruption and misconduct of lower- and mid-level officials. Yet, it did not contribute to the strengthening of a culture of the 'rule of law' in contemporary Russia.

## *Success of 'scandal management'*

In broadest terms, the message that remained with the majority of Russian media recipients can be summarized as follows: 'Misconduct and arbitrariness of our police force were, at least in the case of the Living Shield scandal, tackled efficiently by our political leaders with the help of critical citizens and the new technology internet. State bodies – the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the parliament, and the public chamber – were cooperating efficiently to thwart this nuisance.' Hence, the Living Shield scandal did not weaken but rather strengthened the legitimacy of the ruling elites and the semi-democratic regime as a whole. With the whistle-blower Sutyagin willingly cooperating, the outburst of public outrage erupting from the sphere of social media could be quickly tamed and deflected towards low-ranking police officers and foreign, supposedly hostile powers (two Georgian criminals). However, these strategies of scandal management are much more difficult to pursue, if the whistle-blower refuses to cooperate – as was the case in the scandal under scrutiny in the following section.

### Case study II: Police Officer Dymovskiy

On 5 November 2009, the ‘honest police Major Aleksey Dymovskiy’, as he would later be dubbed by various media outlets, uploaded two videos of approximately six minutes length to YouTube (Meechael, 2009a, 2009b). The two clips showed the mid-level police officer in his uniform against a blue background, speaking out calmly but frankly about corruption and misconduct in the police forces of his home town Novorossiysk in Southern Russia:

I am talking to those officers for whom words like ‘honour’ or ‘dignity’ are not just words or sounds. [...] I have worked for the police for ten years. Ten years I gave away for my motherland. [...] I tried to create something fair, something just. [...] I have lost two wives who refused to stay with me because my working schedules were not very, how can I say, ‘steady’. [...] Our bosses treat us like cattle. [...] I am talking also to you Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] [...] Please understand me. I love my work, I love my work. But I can’t stand fulfilling plans by detecting crimes that do not exist and by arresting people that are not guilty. [...] I will resign. (Meechael, 2009a)

### News memes and patterns of communication

How did Dymovskiy’s video message erupt into a scandal in the sphere of social media? To trace the intensity of scandal communication, the *Puls blogosferi* tool was employed to search for items containing the word ‘Dymovskiy’. As no other person with the same name was popular in November 2009, we can assume that close to all items that quoted the name were discussing the YouTube messages of the ‘honest police Major Dymovskiy’. As Figure 3 shows, a pattern of communication comparable to that in the first case study emerged. The peak intensity of communication was reached on 10 November, five days after Dymovskiy had uploaded his clips to YouTube. Communication levelled off after 13 November, though discussions still flared up occasionally in the weeks thereafter. As

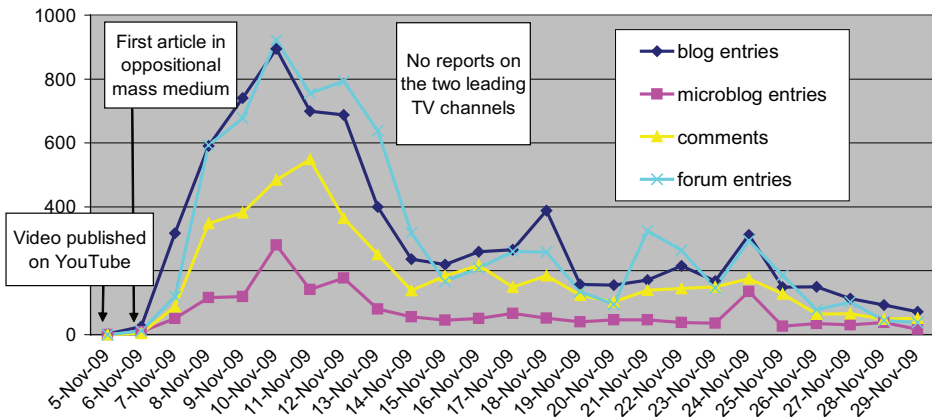


Figure 3. Mentions of the term Dymovskiy in the sphere of social media

Figure 3 illustrates, the scandal was discussed in the sphere of Russian social media for a much longer time period than the Living Shield incident. Microblog entries played a minor role in this case study. This is probably due to the fact that the Dymovskiy scandal occurred five months before the Living Shield incident, when Twitter was far less popular with Russian internet users.

How did the four spheres of media interact in the emergence of this scandal? Dymovskiy published his videos on a Thursday evening. In the sphere of social media, the first major discussions broke on Friday night, primarily in forums. Again, liberal-oppositional mass media were the first to pick up the scandalous news. *Gazeta.ru* (2009a) published a first article on the very same Friday evening at 9.03 p.m. At 11.15 p.m., the radio station *Ekho Moskvy* (2009) followed suit. Major mainstream media picked up the story on Saturday. The sphere of official media, however, reacted very reluctantly in this case study. The main newscasts *Vremya* and *Vesti* on the two leading state-controlled TV channels completely ignored the incident. The third channel *NTV* reported the story on Saturday, 7 November, in the 8 p.m. evening news (*NTV*, 2009). It followed up on Sunday and Monday, but then stopped coverage.

These findings suggest at least four conclusions: (1) Just as in the Living Shield case, oppositional and mainstream mass media played a crucial role in catalysing the outbreak of public outrage in the sphere of social media. (2) However, on the three leading state-controlled TV channels information about the incident was deliberately suppressed. (3) Nonetheless, the intensity of scandal communication in the sphere of social media was definitely not lower than in the Living Shield scandal. (4) Consequently, the information blockade of the state-controlled TV channels could not prevent the eruption of the scandal in the spheres of social, oppositional and mainstream media.

### *Strategies of 'scandal management'*

After posting his videos on Thursday, 5 November, and gaining rapidly in popularity over the weekend, the 'honest police Major Dymovskiy' held news conferences in Krasnodar on 9 November and in Moscow on 10 November. Even though these news conferences attracted flocks of journalists, none of the three major TV stations covered the events (BBC, 2009: 6). In the mainstream print media, several acts of blatant censorship occurred. For instance, the country's most popular tabloid title *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, despite having hosted Dymovskiy's news conference in Krasnodar, later removed nearly all information about the scandal from its website (BBC, 2009: 6).

Why did the state-controlled TV-channels react, unlike in the first case study, with an information blockade? Obviously, the responsible decision-makers had realized rather quickly that the 'honest police Major Dymovskiy' was a difficult character to handle. According to a forum entry of a fellow policeman (Alexpolice, 2009), Dymovskiy was interviewed by journalists of the state channel *Rossiya 1* only a few hours after his video messages started to gain popularity. However, this footage was never broadcast. In the weeks to come, according to media reports (*Gazeta.ru*, 2009b), Dymovskiy did not only refuse a proposed meeting with generals of the Ministry of Internal Affairs but also, on 20 November, even a meeting with Putin himself. Very bluntly, Dymovskiy claimed that a meeting with Putin would be an 'offence to his honour'.

The issue became even more delicate for the ruling elites, as law enforcement officials from all over the country started to follow Dymovskiy's example, uploading approximately half a dozen similar self-recorded messages to the net (BBC, 2009: 2–3). This wave of public denunciations was soon branded by the media as the 'Dymovskiy effect'. Infatuated by the sudden spate of support, Dymovskiy declared that he intended to found his own party on 23 November. On 28 November, protests were organized in Dymovskiy's name with the help of a Facebook group, but only 100 people took to the street in St. Petersburg.

On 22 January 2010, Dymovskiy was arrested after having been sentenced by a court for fraud. Reputedly, the 'honest police major' had stolen a battery out of the car of a criminal several years ago. On 18 February, it was announced that Dymovskiy would be subjected to psychoanalytical analysis, obviously in a Soviet tradition of dealing with dissidents. A few days later, Dymovskiy's lawyer was found beaten up in the street with his legs, arms and fingers broken. The allegedly guilty person was later acquitted. According to the official version, the suspect had only wanted to help the lawyer when he saw him being beaten up by strangers. On 7 March, Dymovskiy was preliminarily released. Yet a law suit with a maximum of ten years prison was announced to be pending.

On 23 March, Dymovskiy was found guilty of libelling two of his Novorossiysk colleagues in his video-messages by a local court. He was sentenced to pay 50,000 roubles (approximately US\$1600) to each of them and to apologize publicly. On 27 March, a court refused Dymovskiy's plea to be reinstated as a police officer in Novorossiysk. In early April, Dymovskiy published two more video messages, this time addressed to President Medvedev. Yet Dymovskiy's second series of video clips (Dymovskiy, 2010) attracted considerably less attention in all media spheres, including that of social media. His power to draw public attention had vanished.

### *Rule of law and corruption*

Unlike in the first case study, none of the nuisances made public were abolished, and none of the culprits denounced by the police major and his followers were punished. On the contrary, two of the accused corrupt lower-level police officials were even compensated 50,000 roubles for libel. Moreover, several obviously biased court sentences against Dymovskiy most probably substantiated the widespread belief among Russians that their judicial system is highly corruptible and prone to the pressure of powerful interests. Thus the perceived outcomes of this scandal, very likely, did not deter government officials from taking bribes and were even detrimental to the belief of common Russians in the 'rule of law'.

### *Success of 'scandal management'*

Were the ruling elites successful in managing the Dymovskiy scandal? Overall, the impact of the Dymovskiy affair on common Russians can be considered as rather limited, as the leading state-controlled TV channels did not cover the scandal at all. According to a survey of the independent polling institute Levada Centre carried out at the end of November 2009, approximately 84 per cent of all Russians either had not

heard about the Dymovskiy affair or had only a vague notion what it was about (Levada Centr, 2009). However, on the other hand, this survey evidences that a substantial proportion of 16 per cent of Russians – and among them the more educated and the more politically interested – had followed the scandal and its outcomes rather closely. This proportion of the population was, most probably, left with a series of rather negative impressions. In essence, the course of the Dymovskiy scandal and the reactions of the authorities vividly showcased the helplessness of the central government in effectively tackling the problem of widespread police corruption. Consequently, in this case study, the endeavours of the ruling elites to avert political damage can be considered as only partly successful.

## Discussion

Comparing the two case studies examined in the previous sections along the four dimensions elaborated in this article, several conclusions can be drawn.

### *News memes and patterns of communication*

In both case studies, the majority of blog, microblog and forum entries appeared in the new sphere of social media only *after* the scandal had been reported extensively by traditional mass media outlets. Thus, even though both scandals emanated from the sphere of social media, and even though both were perceived widely as ‘internet scandals’ by the Russian public, traditional mass media played a crucial role not only in the outbreak but also in the framing of the two scandals.

### *Strategies of ‘scandal management’*

In a first step and wherever possible, the ruling elites sought to collaborate with the whistle-blower who had uploaded the scandalous materials. If the whistle-blower agreed to cooperate, as in case study 1, a favourable (re-)framing of the scandalous events in the sphere of official media was pursued. In the newscasts of the powerful state-controlled TV channels, (1) public outrage was very swiftly deflected towards lower level authorities and foreign, supposedly hostile powers; (2) the impression was created that the political elites were not only tolerating freedom of speech but even fighting police corruption efficiently with the help of critical citizens and the new technology internet; (3) moreover, the scandal was instrumentalized to generate public support for a specific political goal (the pending reform of the police forces) and (4) to strengthen the position of the ‘tandem of power’ in an internal power struggle (by putting pressure on the powerful but lethargic bureaucracy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs).

The opportunities for such a deft reframing of a scandal seem limited, though, if the whistle-blower refuses to cooperate, as happened in case study 2. In this case, information about the scandal was banned from the sphere of official media and, as far as possible, suppressed in mainstream mass media. Simultaneously, a toolkit of real-life pressure mechanisms was employed, consisting mainly of obviously rigged court sentences against the whistle-blower and physical violence.

### *Rule of law and corruption*

In the Living Shield scandal, selected culprits were punished for their misconduct. These widely reported sanctions had, most probably, a deterring effect on other low- and mid-level police officers. By contrast, in the second case study (the Dymovskiy affair), none of the nuisances made public was abolished, and none of the denounced culprits was punished. In this case, widespread impressions of impunity for corruption were reinforced. From these outcomes, we can infer that the new sphere of social media can help to limit misconduct and corruption among low- and mid-level officials – yet only if vital interests of higher level elites are not affected. Only with this restriction, we can assume that social media in Russia fulfil a certain democratic ‘control’ or even ‘muckraking’ function.

Do scandals arising from the new sphere of social media contribute to a strengthening of the rule of law? As the two case studies illustrated, this is most probably not the case. In the Dymovskiy scandal, the law was bent rather bluntly to bring about a series of highly questionable court sentences that pressured the whistle-blower to stop his political activities. In the Living Shield scandal, selected culprits were punished and all victims compensated, but these sanctions were not imposed according to provisions of law. Rather, the measures were carried out on the personal orders of high-ranking officials, in line with their political strategies in the struggle for political power.

### *Success of ‘scandal management’*

As the two case studies illustrated, Russia’s ruling elites are currently very much capable of managing public outrage arising from the new sphere of social media according to their specific political aims. Thus, these scandals are currently not posing a serious threat, neither to the reputation of Russia’s ruling ‘tandem of power’ nor to the perceived legitimacy of the semi-authoritarian regime as a whole. This is partly due to the fact that the new, unfiltered sphere of social media has to be seen as functioning in symbiosis with three other spheres of mass media, with the most powerful of these being the sphere of tightly state-controlled, official media. In addition, public outrage can easily be tamed because other state bodies that typically control executive power in developed democracies, such as independent courts or legislative institutions, are weak. Yet, to a certain degree, the success of ‘scandal management’ in this hybrid media landscape seems to depend on the willingness of the whistle-blowers to collaborate.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to Markovits and Silverstein’s basic assumption quoted as an epigraph to this article, scandals can not only occur in liberal democracies but also in semi-authoritarian environments. A strong faith of citizens in the liberal political process (Markovits and Silverstein, 1988: 6–7) does not seem to be a necessary prerequisite for political scandal. As the two case studies presented in this article vividly illustrated, public outrage over key political issues can also be sparked by blatant violations of moral feelings deeply rooted in the populace. Russian citizens were not outraged because the culprits of the scandals had broken the law. Nor did they later care if the perpetrators were punished

according to it. Rather, Russian citizens were appalled because they shared the deep moral feeling that the occurrences were so despicable that they simply should not happen in their country.

More central to the understanding of political scandal in semi-authoritarian environments seems Neckel's claim that 'power and control bodies must not coincide' (Neckel, 2005: 103). As a matter of fact, the scandals presented in this article could not have occurred without the existence of certain 'spheres' of media that functioned independently of central power. The relative weight of these media spheres, their respective political ideologies, and their internal structures seem to be crucial variables that determine the course and outcome of political scandals in a context that might be called a 'hybrid' media system. In this context, the unfiltered sphere of social media must be conceived of as only one of various media spheres. A key point that this article suggests for future research is therefore that we should look at new media more as they function in tandem with other spheres of traditional mass media rather than as isolated forms of communication.

How can the empirical findings of this article be interpreted in the light of the current academic debate on the 'liberating role' of the new technology internet (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010: 50; Diamond, 2010)? Would the two scandals under investigation have happened before the rise of social media networks? And if so, how? As to the first case study of the Living Shield scandal, a nearly identical incident happened in 2008 in Minsk, the capital of the neighbouring Belarus, in a comparable socio-political environment – yet without any involvement of social media. Interestingly, the course and even the outcome of the scandal (the punishment of the various ranks of police officers) were largely identical. The most striking difference was that the information about the incident reached the Belarusian mass media not through a YouTube video, but through the attorney of one of the affected drivers who filed a lawsuit (*Naviny.ru*, 2008). Accordingly, it took nine days for the scandal to erupt in the Belarusian case, in comparison with only four days in the Russian. As the contrast case suggests, the new sphere of social media did no more than accelerate the course of the Living Shield scandal. The interpretation of the event as an 'example of the power of blogs and bloggers' (Abstract2001, 2009), expressed by many Russian observers, thus seems clearly misleading.

By contrast, the Dymovskiy case study would definitely not have happened before the rise of social media. This scandal, in its very core, seemed to be rooted in the video message itself. What Dymovskiy said, was not 'scandalous'. The police officer was only speaking out things that everybody knew, i.e. that the Russian police are corrupt. Perceived as 'scandalous', though, was the fact that the situation had become so bad that a middle rank police officer would be frustrated enough to sit down in front of a webcam, record a video, upload it to the internet – and thereby destroy his entire life. Had Dymovskiy contacted journalists at national newspapers with his 'disclosures', his story would most probably never have been published. Even the video messages of his immediate followers, who recorded similar clips, were already attracting much less public attention. Thus, Dymovskiy's rise to popularity seems partly due to the fact that he was the first police officer using the new technology to denounce police corruption.

In addition, however, the outbreak and the course of the scandal were strongly characterized by new avenues of social action opened up by the new technology: First of all, Dymovskiy could record and distribute his video message at virtually no cost. Second, the video message was not only broadcast once and in a short-cut version, as could have also



happened on traditional TV. Instead, the clip was accessible for all citizens online at all times, in full length, and again at virtually no cost. In particular, the clip was freely accessible to all gatekeepers of the traditional mass media spheres who could pass on the news, with minimal delay, to the huge audiences of their outlets. It was under these very specific conditions that the ordinary police officer Dymovskiy could rise to enormous popularity within less than a week. In this sense, the new sphere of social media actually empowered Dymovskiy – a voice that, in a traditional media environment, would never have been heard.

At the same time, however, the two case studies also showcase the limits of the ‘liberating potential’ of the new technology. In both scandals, social media were of no help in ‘following up’ the scandals. The harsh sentence for the low-ranking police officer in the Living Shield scandal, for instance, and the complex idea of his trial being staged by the ruling elites did not spark peaks of intense communication in the blogosphere. Meanwhile, the attention of the networked crowd had shifted to other, more ‘outraging’ issues: new scandals. Following up events and reaching a wider audience with coherent political messages, though, seems crucial for a public sphere if the goal is to effectively control and challenge those in power and enforce the rule of law.

Thus, in the end, technology appears to be ‘merely a tool’, as Diamond (2010: 72) noted, with people, organizations and governments making the difference. Scandals emanating from the new sphere of social media can be both beneficial and detrimental to the democratization of authoritarian regimes. Yet, it seems obvious that in recent years, ‘ground swells of public conversation around politically inflammatory topics’ (MacKinnon, 2008) have been among the severest challenges to political elites in non-democratic regimes that emanated from the new networked spheres of social media. Thinking of these outbursts of public outrage as ‘scandals’, as proposed in this article, seems an imaginative and prolific way to generate a deeper understanding of these phenomena: firstly, because this approach relates the subject to a strong body of literature deeply rooted in the disciplines of sociology, communication and political science; and secondly, because it turns the lens beyond specific patterns of communication within the social media sphere to a broader context of socio-political and cultural factors. For these reasons, the approach proposed in this article seems to open up promising avenues for further comparative research across cultural and political contexts. While the scope of this article was limited to two case studies from Russia, it would be valuable to see how the findings are paralleled by or deviate from those, for instance, related to internet scandals in China, Arabic countries, or other regions of the world.

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