



Disguising the Internet? Website Design and Control in Russia

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Abstract: Research into the media and journalism in contemporary Russia usually focuses on coercion exerted on critical journalists and censorship of their publications. The present study aims to discuss and extend this analysis by examining the role of forms and technical design in the construction of control over public sphere. Since the 2000s, the Russian internet has been characterised by considerable inventiveness. New online sites were innovative both by their critical contents and their new designs. However, this inventivity has been progressively emptied of its alternative stance. Taking one case study, the recent history of the lenta.ru website, this research takes a serious look at what has become of this 'site' as an object hijacked by a pro-government editorial line that has assumed the aesthetics and functionalities designed for an independent site. The sliding of the new content into the old design raises the question of how alternative aesthetics are appropriated by official journalists in contemporary Russia. The construction of acceptable forms of control over the Runet through appropriation of digital innovations is a way of reconsidering the soft constraints that affect public sphere.

Keywords: Russia, internet, design, coercion, public sphere

On 12 March 2014, Galina Timchenko, editor of the Russian news site lenta.ru was fired by the site's owner, Aleksandr Mamut. This dismissal followed a warning from Roskomnadzor, the communications surveillance body, criticising the inclusion in an article of a hyperlink to the site of a Ukrainian nationalist. Timchenko's dismissal was considered in the independent Russian media as an illustration of the increasing political pressure on free media. Half of lenta.ru's editorial staff resigned after she left. Timchenko was replaced by Aleksei Goreslavskii, a journalist from the official media known for his loyalty to the government line. Lenta.ru was not shut down but continued its activities with the new team working on its premises and publishing on its site. This example is emblematic but not unique. It belongs to a long history in which journalists are regularly replaced while their media still operate (Oates 2007). This replacement of individuals while the publication con-

tinues raises the question of the political consequences of this continuity of forms on Russian public sphere.

Since the early 2000s, a large number of independent operators have taken advantage of the possibilities provided by the internet to establish new virtual places for publishing in Russia. A remarkable digital inventiveness has spread across the Web, providing visibility for projects that are innovative both in form and content (Alexanyan and al. 2012; Chapman 2014; Deibert, Rohozinski 2010; Gorham and al. 2014; Toepfl 2011). Since the start of the 2010s, and especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the authorities have gradually taken over these spaces to spread the official line and promote digital conservatism (Strukov 2016). This political coercion takes the form of ‘powerful state-run technologies for the manipulation of mass opinion’ (Bassin et al. 2016) as well as an increasing number of censorship mechanisms supported by stricter legislation up to and including the blocking of websites on Russian territory, such as *grani.ru* and *kasparov.ru*. In the spring of 2017, the failed attempt to block the Telegram app showed the technical limits of state control over the Russian internet. However, blocking is not the only form of censorship. Control has also insinuated itself into the digital design that has emerged from the independent web culture. In this article I provide evidence for this take-over of critical forms by conventional contents, using a viewpoint taken from digital sociology (Denouel and Granjon 2011). Internet sociologists emphasise the importance of digital ‘design’ as a ‘process of applying technology to political ends’ (Badouard 2014). Typography and online media features are part of the political grammar of the websites. A combined analysis of the content and form of the take-over enables us to re-examine political constraints in the Russian media world. An art of misappropriation is becoming established. Setting aside cultural arguments that Russians are passive towards politics (Shlapentokh 1995) and institutional paradigms of authoritarian coercion (Ambrosio 2016), I refer to the ways public sphere is controlled, involving both people and things, that gives a clearer insight into the workings of a domination that imposes itself by being accepted (Chateauraynaud 2015). The alternative forms are reproduced but their sense changes, a development analysed during the Soviet period by Alexei Yurchak as a ‘heteronymous shift’ (2003: 481). In Yurchak’s analysis, society managed to appropriate official soviet forms. In contemporary Russia, I examine how, in a reversal way, state actors appropriate alternative forms. The hijackings in the media world are part of the staging of political ritual and the creation of institutional facades (Pisano 2010), the organisation of pro-government demonstrations (Hemment 2012) and the misuse of democratic concepts and references by official institutions (Daucé 2013, on the notion of civil society). Symmetrically to the ‘tricks of democracy’ (Linshan and Thireau 2010), these games reveal the tricks of authoritarian government, based on mimicry (Oushakine 2001), forgery (as in Bessy and Chateauraynaud 1995) and, in the present case, the hijacking of digital design. This design appropriation belongs to the broader tendency of postmodern use of liberal/alternative forms in Russia. P. Pomerantsev describes a ‘post modern authoritarianism’ which is able to ‘marry authoritarianism and modern art; to use the language of rights and representation in order to validate tyranny’ (Pomerantsev 2013). Evidences of this trend are obvious in television, cinema and pop culture. For example, Irina Anisimova’s study of postmodern appropriation of ‘edgy’ symbols for the Sochi shows that imperial ideology and postmodernist aesthetics can lead to an unexpected convergence (Anisimova 2018). These analysis have a value that goes beyond

the Russian example and apply to the new forms of domination in public sphere in other illiberal countries.

By focusing on the role of design in the occupation of digital space, this article contributes to the consideration of the place of things in the pragmatics of power in Russia. Unlike the semiological approach that sees things as signs that connote cultures and positions in social space, ‘the point is to examine the use and operation of things so as to do justice to their relative autonomy from the scripts intended to determine their future’ (Dodier 1997). Relationships between humans and non-humans are the temporary, negotiated effect of encounters between heterogeneous bodies that remain uncertain (Latour 1994). From this perspective, things can escape from the scripts laid down by their designers (Conein et al. 1993). This approach is useful to examine the social dynamics involved in appropriating digital things. On the internet in Russia, this object-based approach shows that political dynamics are constantly being redefined. The hijacking of the codes of digital design is part of the creation of political constraint via digital objects.

In the first part, I present the inventive history of the new Russian media in the 2000s, within an emerging market of online news and digital journalism. During this period, *lenta.ru* stands out as a success story. Its digital inventiveness is not only content-based, it is also correlated with new design, concerned with elegance and international recognition. In a second part, I show that design progressively became the mirror of politically differentiated media in Russia. Strategies for standing out in design were invented as the Russian Web developed, which raises the issue of the political importance of aesthetic appearances. In a third part, I analyse how this consistent story of aesthetic inventiveness and connection to global culture is hijacked when sites are taken over by pro-government teams loyal to the official narrative while maintaining the earlier form. Here the digital object escapes from its designer and is appropriated by competing actors. This ‘autonomy from the scripts’ raises the question of the public’s reaction to editorial changes within former forms. This research is based on an investigation held in Moscow from 2012 to 2018. I interviewed a large number of journalists, including the main people affected by the change in the *lenta.ru* editorial staff (editor, journalists), members of support services (marketing, public relations) and designers of the *lenta.ru* website. This paper is part of a broader survey of Russia media people for a research project on the reconfiguration of freedoms and constraints in the Russian media world.¹

Creative design in Russia’s new online media

Any examination of Russian online media requires a look back at their brief history. Although Soviet media did see some significant changes in the late Soviet period (Roth-Ey 2011, *Cahiers du monde russe* 2015), the post-Soviet upheavals radically altered a media landscape that was brutally exposed to the market and democratisation (Mickiewicz 1999). Faced with competition, the commercial rules were imported and contributed to the convergence between the Russian media and their European counterparts in the 1990’s. In this new context, visibility has become vital. On television, a new aesthetic inspired by Western canons has appeared. ‘Aesthetically, Russia’s national television news looks like a carbon

¹ This project has been supported by the Institut Universitaire de France, of which the author was a junior member from 2013 to 2017.

copy of CNN or BBC' underlines P. Pomerantsev (2013). For newspapers, the 'front page' became a 'shop window' intended 'both to present the day's news ranked by importance according to editorial preferences and also sell the entire package to the reader by making it desirable to read' (Hubé 2008, 2010). The visual appearance of the Russian media was transformed by harsh economic competition and the development of advertising. While the economic difficulties of the Russian press have been amply documented, this aesthetic aspect of change has not been greatly analysed.

In the early 2000s, after Vladimir Putin was elected President, political control over the media developed. The case of the NTV television channel is emblematic of the coercion exercised over the media as soon as Putin was installed. In 2001, the journalists of this liberal channel who had criticised the war in Chechnya were forced to resign when the channel was bought out by Gazprom. The channel continued, with the same title and design, but run by a team loyal to the new President. At that time, the NTV design was meticulously maintained by the new team of journalists even as the editorial line was favourable to the government. The importance of media format is noted by such observers as Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, who observe that 'the president never missed an opportunity to exploit the resources of television in his attempt to construct a "virtual" freedom in which the surface appearances of democratic culture are replicated in meticulous detail but without the substance and structures of democracy to sustain them' (Hutchings and Rulyova 2009).

Critical commitment of Russian online media

The gradual deployment of the internet across Russia enabled sites to appear that were freed from the constraints of traditional media (television, radio, print). New media emerged and contributed to the diversification of the internet landscape. These pure players found their place just as the traditional media were being brought back under control in the early 2000s (Mickiewicz 2008; Burrett 2010; Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013). Throughout that decade, sites emerging on the Russian internet criticised the pressure being exerted on the traditional media. Websites for general information (gazeta.ru, lenta.ru, grani.ru, ej.ru), political commentary (polit.ru) or cultural news (colta.ru, snob.ru) were set up by young journalists, alternative investors and innovative IT professionals. By the early 2010s, these sites were almost free areas where new models of journalism could be tried and tested. In this liberalised digital environment, journalists expressed critical opinions and helped uncover political scandals, especially involving elite corruption (Toepfl 2011). During demonstrations against election fraud in 2011-2012, they joined the marches and covered the protests. Their independent editorial line with respect to the authorities was consistent with their political commitment. Young journalists graduated in social science and many of them were active members of opposition movements. As a former gazeta.ru journalist who joined lenta.ru explained in 2012, 'The gazeta.ru editorial team is made up of opponents. I myself took part in the Solidarnost movement in 2005. V. was a member of the youth wing of Ryzhkov's Republican Party. S. was jailed for six months. He belonged to anti-Fascist groups ... A lot of opposition militants

were hired by gazeta.ru'.² Following Chapman (2014), we can also assume that independent media became oppositional to carve out a consumer niche opposite to state media outlets.

By late 2013, lenta.ru dominated the online news community. According to available figures, it was the most visited and most quoted news site³. It had nearly a million website visitors every day. According to the comScore company,⁴ this popularity put it fifth in Europe by readership in April 2013. Gazeta.ru was in December 2013 the second most popular news site in Russia. According to its marketing manager it was visited by 10 million people a month in 2012: 'In 2010, we had 4 million visits a month. We are on a good growth curve.'⁵ The website claimed to be the internet source with most influence on business people. With their soundly established reputations, the two sites were ranked alongside the main Russian print and radio titles: *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti* and *Ekho Moskv*y (seen as references in the media community).

Competing for visibility in digital space

As they developed, Russian online media gradually became part of economic competition. Their profitability has increased thanks to advertising revenues and support from private investors. Their dissemination has been facilitated by the gradual deployment of the Internet throughout the country. At the beginning of the 2010's, contents on informational websites were free of charge and this free access seemed natural. Lenta.ru and gazeta.ru covered their operating costs with advertising revenue and support from private owners. Achieving profitability was central to their business model. To increase and monetise their audience, they developed in addition to their editorial staff, marketing and sales departments that engaged in public relations, branding and loyalty programmes. According to Maria Travnikova, manager of that department on gazeta.ru, 'the marketing department's mission is to promote the brand via partnerships'.⁶ This promotion involves close attention to design and the aesthetics of websites. Although designed originally as replicas of print media formats, they gradually escaped from their traditional models and invented new publishing formats to enhance their visibility and functionality.

The aesthetics of online sites became a matter of journalism. They were designed jointly by editorial staff, marketing departments and web designers, looking for consistency between a site's design and its editorial line (Badouard 2014). On the one hand, the editorial staff designed formats that suited the content they were producing. On the other, the marketing departments stressed the consistent construction of an identifiable brand that could be monetised in digital space. These visibility strategies took the form of complete revamping of site design, positioning the sites between the worlds of advertising, video games, films and publishing. The websites innovated with multimedia (text, video, photo), interactivity with readers and presence on social media. In this way designers played a central role in the artistic

² Interview by author and Ivan Chupin with Aleksandr Artemev, a journalist at gazeta.ru, 1 November 2012.

³ See Medialogia ratings for 2013: http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/federal_media/2812/2013/0/

⁴ ComScore is a US site that analyses online browsing data. http://www.comscore.com/About_comScore/comScore_Fact_Sheet

⁵ Author's interview with Maria Travnikova, marketing manager at gazeta.ru, 28 August 2013.

⁶ Author's interview with Maria Travnikova, marketing manager at gazeta.ru, 28 August 2013.

and technical presentation of Runet. They invented logos, typefaces and visuals that marked out each site.

As economic competition grew, technical innovation accelerated and audiences expanded, many web designers emerged in Russia. In the years around the millennium, Artemy Lebedev (born 1975) was the leading web designer. Considered to be the first on the Russian internet, he produced many websites for both public and private customers. His studio designed the first version of the lenta.ru site in 2004. As Web 2.0 developed, technical functions for interactivity with readers appeared. Media revamped their websites to include blogs, forums, comments and videos. The visual and functional design work was outsourced. This encouraged the diversification of internet design companies. In 2013, lenta.ru gave up its earlier visual identity designed by Artemii Lebedev's studio. It launched its new design, produced by Charmer Studio. According to Galina Timchenko, then editor in 2013, 'We recently launched a new design. We still have problems with video on internet. We would ultimately like to become a meta-mass media (rather like a press agency)'.⁷ The new design was intended to improve the site's visibility, diversify its visual material and revise the place given to readers' comments so as to dominate the online news market.

Political implications of media design

In Russia in the early 2010s, online innovation occurred in a context of relative lack of interest from the authorities. As Galina Timchenko said in 2013, 'The government long thought that the internet was of no interest, that we had no clout. Just two years ago, we were marginal. Two years ago, Peskov [Putin's press secretary] called in editors from internet media for the first time. And yet by then, Lenta was getting 700,000 hits a day'.⁸ This media audience reached its peak in 2011-2012, when the alternative media covered the citizen protests against election fraud (Kackaeva 2013, Daucé 2016, Gabowitsch 2017). During the demonstrations, it used its technical functionalities (live content, video, photo and text) to cover the protests. Russian online media at that time appeared as the vanguard of a modern and open society, perfectly included in the new international trends of digital culture. They even raised democratic hopes in the Russian public space, thanks to citizen involvement and horizontalisation of communication (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, 2013). This political openness was correlated with technical choices belonging to international design culture. As suggests Soren Pold, the interface is not only a technical tool, it is 'the basic aesthetic form of digital art' (Pold 2005). In Russia, media actors became progressively interested in design which 'convey distinction and exclusivity' (Chapman 2014) correlated with political challenges.

Design, a matter of 'political viewpoint'

To understand the struggle for influence over media forms, it is worth looking into the world of digital designers and the political implications of their profession. This under-researched aesthetic dimension is part of the political challenges that inform the Web. In the mid-2010s, the design community became pluralistic and competitive. In Moscow several studios spe-

⁷ Author's interview with Galina Timchenko, editor of lenta.ru, 26 August 2013.

⁸ Author's interview with Galina Timchenko, editor of lenta.ru, 26 August 2013.

cialised in design for online media. In addition to Art. Lebedev, the market was divided between three main studios: Charmer, Nota.media and Monographic. Charmer Studio⁹ dominated the independent online media scene in Moscow in the mid-2010s. It was founded in 2011 by three young creators (Aleksandr Gladkikh [design], Andrei Starkov [development] and Anastasia Sokirko [branding]) who quickly gained a good reputation among journalists and media owners.¹⁰ Charmer Studio created design for a large number of alternative websites. Its work is recognizable by sharing same sources of inspiration: the importance of typography, the sobriety of beautiful photographs, clean graphics, sober colours, etc. After making their name with the *lenta.ru* site, they were asked to revamp sites for other independent media. Charmer Studio did the site design and development for *Colta* (2013), *Meduza* (2015), *Arzamas* (2015), *Vedomosti* (2015), *Takie Dela* (2015), *Afisha Daily* (2015), *Novaya Gazeta* (2016) and also for public or para-public groups (*Profmedia TV*, 2013). All these media belonged to the liberal and autonomous independent journalism movement. The studio's competitor, *monographic.ru*, produced sites for *Afisha*, *Slon*, *Dozhd*, *gazeta.ru*, *LiveJournal*, also part of the liberal media community. Another studio, *Nota.media*, refreshed the pages of *Ekho Moskvy*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Edinaya Rossiya*. This last contract, for the government party *United Russia*, positioned the studio in the ranks of those loyal to the official line.

Table 1. Some examples of the digital aesthetic of the Charmer studio

2013	Lenta.ru	
2013	Colta.ru	
2015	Meduza.io	
2015	Arzamas.academy	
2015	Vedomosti.ru	
2015	Takie Dela	
2016	Novaya Gazeta	

Source: Françoise Daucé

⁹ <http://charmerstudio.com/strana-kotoroy-net/>; <http://www.sostav.ru/columns/newart/2007/0034/> [Strana kotoroj net: spetsproekt lenta.ru]

¹⁰ Daria Cherkudinova. Charmer studio: [kak frilansery vorvalis' na rynek mediadizajna.] 3 October 2013. <http://www.the-village.ru/village/business/svoemesto/152429-studiya-charmer>

According to their customers, each studio has a specific identity, particularly from an aesthetic point of view which is also a political identity. As Charmer Studio staff say, ‘There are two other companies who do media portals: Monographic and Nota.media. Nota.media couldn’t work with lenta.ru for reasons of political viewpoint, unlike us. For many sites the positioning of those they work with is important, and Nota did the Edinaia Rossiia site and the Ekho Moskvyy one’.¹¹ After designing for Lenta, Charmer Studio was contacted by a number of media companies. Given the large number of potential customers, Aleksandr Gladkikh says that his team make political choices. Charmer Studio was offered a contract by the far-right Sputnik i Pogrom site but refused to work for this nationalist publication. However, this decision does not mean a desire for a clear commitment in politics. Charmer Studio ‘does not design opposition party sites so as not to do politics, our members do not support an ideology’.¹² Although the design studios do not directly declare their political commitments, their work belongs to different ideological spheres. However, it is important not to lay down hard and fast political identities because these tend to be more vague. The Charmer Studio staff say, ‘Perhaps we influenced the design of the liberal sites but the other sites have changed too, like LifeNews. Everyone’s developing simpler designs and typefaces’.¹³ Some conservative sites take inspiration from the aesthetic codes of the global community. The LifeNews site, for example, takes on the codes of the alternative media. Principles similar to those at Charmer Studio are spreading throughout the Russian media by imitation.

Russian design in a globalising world

The dominant aesthetics on Runet come from the artistic preferences and graphical choices of the designers. Those who work for the liberal or alternative media see their work as belonging to a globalising culture where the graphical and aesthetic models of European and English-speaking culture circulate. These references are shared by journalists and graphic designers, who often follow the lead of English-speaking media. Maria Travnikova of gazeta.ru says openly of her newspaper, ‘It’s a professional press medium, like the Guardian’.¹⁴ Similarly a journalist says, ‘Our model at gazeta.ru is the Guardian’.¹⁵ At Charmer Studio, ‘we look at examples abroad. In the United States, we look at what Vox Media are doing: new formats, new interfaces for various types of content (photos, lessons, videos, tests, articles, etc.) ... We also look at what the Guardian are doing. This newspaper analyses, explains and tests its design with its readers. They listen to their readership when they revamp their site. I haven’t seen that anywhere else’.¹⁶ Alternative designers take their inspiration from global artistic references. A member of Charmer Studio underline European influence inspiring the team : ‘Sasha [Gladkikh] was recently at the design museum in Barcelona. We are inspired by Swiss design, particularly the Swiss school of typography, which is a reference of quality. For the site we looked at what the French company Area 17 is doing,¹⁷ they are a reference for media work. We’ve been monitoring them for eight or nine years. They’re the people

¹¹ Author’s interview with Charmer Studio staff, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

¹² Author’s interview with Charmer Studio staff, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

¹³ Author’s interview with Charmer Studio staff, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with Maria Travnikova, marketing manager at gazeta.ru, 28 August 2013.

¹⁵ Interview by author and Ivan Chupin with Aleksandr Artemev, journalist at gazeta.ru, 1 November 2012.

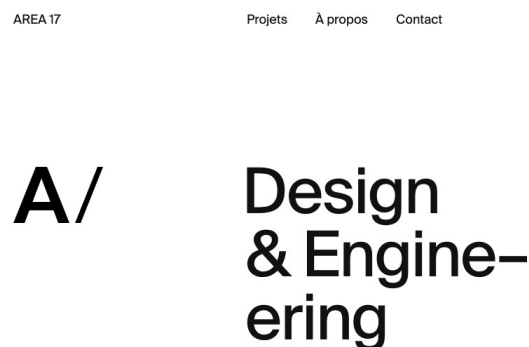
¹⁶ Author’s interview with Charmer Studio staff, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

¹⁷ Who revamped the sites of Télérama, Opéra National de Paris and Arte (author’s note).

who made us want to make our sites look good. There are only four or five references like this in the world'.¹⁸ Western cultural references are preferred by Charmer Studio's design. After the lenta.ru site was revamped, Charmer Studio got a prize from the Society for News Design (based in United States) in March 2013. The judges said, 'Overall we were inspired by the amazing creativity of Russian news design on the web. Many sites and apps impressed us but Lenta.ru rose above the rest. The site is beautifully designed with the right amount of clean and relaxing white space throughout the entire navigation experience. The type treatment is perfect and precise in terms of hierarchy. ... Also, the superb photo editing and the restrained yet consistent color palette make this site a pleasure to view. It has the classic elegant look of big news site, yet still feels approachable, with its own fresh style touches. This is especially impressive given the amount of stories it produces and the size of its audience.'¹⁹ Charmer's aesthetic choices facilitate its international recognition.

The designers at Studio Charmer favour pure aesthetic forms, often playing with black and white colours and using original and sophisticated western typographies. They thus distinguish themselves from the colourful or exuberant graphic choices of other designers. They generally prefer international Latin spellings over spellings inspired by the ancient Cyrillic alphabet. The studio's website is only in English.

Figure 1. French Studio Area 17: a source of inspiration for Charmer Studio in Moscow



Source: <https://area17.com/fr>

Figure 2. The Internet site of Charmer Studio



Source: <https://charmerstudio.com>

¹⁸ Author's interview with Charmer Studio staff, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

¹⁹ <https://www.snd.org/2013/03/meet-snds-2012-worlds-best-news-sites-and-apps-sb-nation-lenta-ru-and-the-guardian-and-observer-ipad-app/>

Media appearances subverted

Starting in 2012, as political pressure on Rунet grew, Russian alternative media have gradually faced increasing difficulties. Political, legal, economic and technical controls have emerged (Daucé 2014). As newsrooms were taken over by pro-government teams, the question obviously arises of what pressures are exerted on journalists and how their articles are censored, but site design too deserves attention. Although journalists were the first victims of this tightening grip (Chupin and Daucé 2017), digital objects were also involved in new forms of control. Lenta.ru, which had become the reference news site, is an emblematic example of this growing disconnection between the site and its content. Its format, designed and thought out according to the aesthetic rules of the global Web imported by Charmer Studio, was taken over by a pro-power staff. This overturning of practice (Jouët 2000) is not a trivial matter. The site moved away from the scripts intended to determine its identity. This case study opens up an analysis of how political activities are guided by the unexpected use of digital design. The case of Lenta is not singular, it raises the broad question of the future of digital forms in a changing political world.

Editorial reversal

The consistency between design and politics in the Russian internet community as perceived by journalists and designers was challenged by the take-over of digital media after 2012. The appropriation of digital objects by pro-government operators shows new form of control based on hijacking visual and technical identity. In independent sites, many journalists were replaced by teams loyal to the government after Crimea was being annexed and war began in the Donbas in 2014. The dismissal of journalists transformed the editorial policies of the media concerned (Chupin and Daucé 2017). New controls and regulations were widely condemned by international organisations, such as Reporters without borders, as an illustration of the authoritarianism and censorship that hamper the Russian media.

In Lenta.ru, in March 2014, Galina Timchenko was fired by the site's owner and replaced by Aleksei Goreslavskii from an openly pro-government website. Iliia Krasilschik, editor of the Afisha newspaper close to Lenta.ru journalists, publicly attacked on his Facebook page the new editor in chief described as a 'friend of the Kremlin'. The founder of Lenta.ru, Anton Nosik, told the UK Financial Times, that Aleksei Goreslavskii had earlier done an editorial clear-out at the Gazeta.ru website, and 'now Gazeta.ru is not very different from any government-run, government-sponsored media. You can predict its stand now on any issue in which there is an official Kremlin position'.²⁰ To support Galina Timchenko, the Lenta.ru team of young journalists signed a collective letter headed 'To our dear readers from your dear editorial team'. They said, 'We consider that this appointment is a direct pressure on the Lenta.ru editorial team. The firing of an independent editor and appointment of a more easily manipulated one, directly from offices in the Kremlin, is an infringement of the media law that prohibits censorship'.²¹ The Lenta.ru letter was signed by 80 people, mainly journalists and also Aleksandr Gladkikh, artistic director and founder of Charmer Studio, and Aleks Chirokov, web designer. Most of the Lenta team resigned after their editor was fired, and were replaced

²⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/c87047d0-aa06-11e3-8497-00144feab7de>

²¹ <https://lenta.ru/info/posts/statement/>

by pro-government journalists. However, the new team made no changes to the lenta.ru website. The design outlived its creators and the designers who invented it, and became available for an editorial line contrary to the political and moral principles supported by its authors.

Audience loyalty

This take-over raises the question of the reaction of the audience of the websites concerned. In their farewell letter, the Lenta team wrote, ‘The sad thing is not that we no longer have jobs. The sad thing is that it looks as if you no longer have anything to read’.²² Although the most committed readers did protest against Galina Timchenko’s sacking and changed their browsing habits, most of them remained strangely loyal to the website. Surprisingly even, reader reaction was less hostile to the change of editorial team than to the design and aesthetic changes introduced in 2013. Back then, the audience did not appreciate the new look. Many readers criticised the site’s new visual identity. Charmer Studio’s designers explained it thus: ‘Readers get used to their site, they have been reading it for five years and become aggressive if you change the site. After the change to Lenta, we got nearly 200 letters of criticism’.²³ Reader reaction to the design change was clear, as seen by the comment threads and forums discussing the 2013 design.²⁴ One blogger wrote, ‘So, Lenta has changed, has refreshed itself, so to speak. The Charmer company (clearly ‘exercising its charm’) has charmed Lenta, Well honestly, I can’t, I can’t do anything with it. Not read, or search, or support. Why? ... I can’t stand the waste of time! And my travel time to where I usually go has increased 100%, from one to two clicks’.²⁵ This discontented reader shows the audience’s sensitivity to changes to media formats and their user-friendliness. Design has a lasting effect on readers’ usage and they react negatively to any changes to their browsing habits.

Strangely then, in 2014, when the editorial line changed, reader criticism seemed to be less violent. The sociologists at the Levada Centre note that ‘the change in editorial staff passed virtually unnoticed by lenta.ru readers. In 2014, the site was accessed by 9-10% of Russians, now [in 2017] by about 7% (virtually unchanged given the survey margin of error). Meanwhile, the audience for Meduza²⁶ in two or three years has stayed at about 1%’. Dmitri Volkov and Stepan Goncharov, who did the research, thus show the stability of audience despite the change in content (‘content critical of the Russian government has become less frequent’) (Volkov and Goncharov 2017). This point is well known to the Charmer Studio designers, who blame the audience’s inertia: ‘People are lazy. ... Most of them have no preference among media sources, they don’t know what’s happening. For example, lenta.ru has not lost many readers since the change in editorial team. People continue to look at the site. Only a tiny group interested in politics and Azar’s interviews have shifted. For the others, since the design hasn’t changed, it’s often seen as being the same thing’.²⁷ Changes to the editorial team, not directly visible, remained almost unnoticed. For these invisible changes, readers find it hard to formulate any criticism. The site is still up, its look is similar. The loyal editorial team have kept the innovative formats. In this new situation, lenta.ru’s site designers

²² <https://lenta.ru/info/posts/statement/>

²³ Interview with Charmer Studio team, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

²⁴ <https://roem.ru/21-01-2013/137550/lentaru-vpervye-otkazalas-ot-dizayna-studii-lebedeva/>

²⁵ <https://well-p.livejournal.com/661169.html>

²⁶ The site founded in Riga by the former lenta.ru team.

²⁷ Interview with Charmer Studio team, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

asked to have their logo removed, but their design remains: ‘Generally after two years we take our name off a site. We no longer have any contact with the new Lenta team. We asked them to remove our logo’.²⁸ In 2018, the lenta.ru site design launched in 2013 is still in use and the site is ranked third most cited online media in Russia, after rbc.ru and gazeta.ru.²⁹

Following this take-over operation on the lenta.ru site, the later careers of the two successive editors, Galina Timchenko and Aleksei Goreslavskii, illustrate the political reconfigurations occurring on Runet. Galina Timchenko moved to Riga to create a new website, Meduza, and asked Charmer Studio again to design it. She chose exile in Latvia to escape the political pressures in Moscow and continue publishing an independent online media in a new format. After three years at lenta.ru, Aleksei Goreslavskii was promoted to the presidential administration in July 2017. He was appointed deputy head of the social projects directorate in charge of digital projects. As a former administration employee puts it, ‘Goreslavskii is highly experienced in working with modern media. Now that new formats [novye formaty] are dominant and youth-related projects are increasing in number, it makes sense to recruit this kind of specialist’.³⁰ The importance of formats is here underline, showing the interest of official circles for a deep understanding of online news codes.

Conclusion

The appropriation of the independent site lenta.ru by a loyalist editorial staff offers the opportunity to analyze the diversion of scripts from alternative digital designs to support Russian official discourses. This survey invites us to take the expression ‘Charming on the runet’ seriously. By paying attention to the question of aesthetic forms and their uses, a comprehensive approach to political domination in Russia is possible. In our case study, the contents are consistent with the form that carries them. By appropriating alternative media spaces, the official project gets a liberal appearance. This misappropriation contributes to the friendly appearance of political coercion. The case of lenta.ru is not unique. It even seems typical of practices to regain control over the media since the early 2000s. Several sites and newspapers have been invested by teams supporting official policies: NTV, Itogi, Kommersant Vlast’, Nezavisimaia Gazeta, Izvestia, gazeta.ru, rbc.ru. as a result of changes that leave previous media appearances intact. These examples enrich the reflection on the practices of political control in Russia. The repertoire of coercion, while undeniable, is articulated with a repertoire of tricks that involves mimicry, counterfeiting, facade, theatre and, in this case, disguise. The latter ensures a soft takeover of opposition sites and makes it difficult for the public to critically decode these reversals of influence. In this context, public mobilization is all the more difficult because the loyalist actors who invest alternative spaces are not simply concealers or opportunists, foreign to the liberal and independent aesthetics they take in hand. As anthropologists know, practices that seem contradictory to foreign observers are not necessarily so for actors (Yurchak 2003). The supporters of official journalism, who embody the conservative and patriotic values promoted by the government, are also attached to the

²⁸ Interview with Charmer Studio team, 25 October 2016, Moscow.

²⁹ <http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/federal/5830/>

³⁰ Vladimir Dergachev. [Byvshii glavred Lenta.ru budet kurirovat’ internet v Kreml’e.] 25 July 2017. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/07/2017/5977331b9a7947207cf791b6>

liberal and Western aesthetic of contemporary design. The heteronomous shift in post-Soviet Russia cannot be reduced to former authoritarianism over society. Rather, we are witnessing the invention of acceptable forms of control in liberalized societies. This agility is not specific to the Russian world. In other countries and contexts, the kind aesthetics of conservative, even radically reactionary projects also contribute to their success.

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