

Can Russia switch off the net?

Keir Giles dissects reports of Kremlin moves to control cyberspace

As recently as November 2012, I was able to write in *The World Today* that although ‘the Russian authorities already possess extremely strong legislative tools for controlling internet content, they ordinarily apply these with a very light touch’.

Now, less than two years later, the situation has changed beyond recognition. The legal and administrative instruments for controlling what online have been strengthened, and the debate between security officials and commercial service providers on the threats and opportunities presented by the internet has been decisively concluded in the former’s favour.

So when media reports emerged that the Russian Security Council was to debate cutting Russia off from the internet during crises, it appeared entirely plausible in the context of the steps already taken by the Kremlin to control the flow of information in and out of the country.

The story appeared to have been leaked by one or more of the commercial service providers that would have to be involved in flicking the so-called internet kill-switch. Until very recently, internet companies in Russia were operating in a relatively benign environment despite their business model being at odds with some of the basic Russian principles of information security.

Some Russia experts described the disconnection proposal as technically feasible, even if expensive and complex. A decision to cut internet communications would cause instant and enormous commercial losses. However, although the security calculus involved in the decision might make little sense to developed western nations, Moscow has repeatedly shown that it is content to accept a loss of revenue and reputational damage in the interests of what it sees as a strategic gain.

These initial media reports were swiftly denied by Russian officials, who offered

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in their place a much less plausible scenario: that Russia was in fact drawing up contingency plans in case the rest of the world decided to cut it off from the internet.

That suggestion is both politically bizarre and operationally unfeasible. Russian explanations of how and why it would be done, in the context of tightening US and European sanctions against Russia, hinged on the notion that the US-based Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which is responsible for some technical aspects of the internet, would operate as a puppet of the US government. This not only misrepresents the role and powers of ICANN; it also ignores the fact that this would be antithetical to United States policy, which is to promote the freedom of information on the internet – including in Russia.

Finally, it was reported that the internet had not been discussed at all by the Security Council.

Details of what precisely lay behind the story remained murky at the time of writing. It may be that commercial providers or journalists misinterpreted the original scenario. Equally, they may have been bang on target, and received an official denial when this appeared embarrassing. Either way, the fact that the extraordinary story was taken seriously is indicative of the current Russian media environment where anything is possible.

Recent months have seen an increase in

tempo of restrictive measures by the Russian authorities intended to address a lack of control over the internet in Russia. The internet had been the last available channel through which Russians could easily access global media reporting after older media had been reined in.

The dangerous and subversive nature of the medium has led to Russia grafting Cold War notions of information security on to the internet, and security officials will see this as a long-overdue clampdown.

President Putin has made it clear that the internet is a CIA project, and Russia’s most popular search engine a western plot. A new law forces any website with more than 3,000 readers a day to register the owner’s true identity, and submit to tougher constraints and penalties than those imposed on traditional media outlets. The formerly independent social media site VK, a Russian equivalent to Facebook, has been taken under full control by a Kremlin-friendly business. Anonymous wifi use is now in effect illegal, although there is confusion over how this regulation can be implemented.

The result of this process is the increasing isolation of ordinary Russians from any information that does not conform to the Kremlin narrative of what is happening around them.

State-controlled Russian media are presenting their audiences not just with a distorted picture of current events in Ukraine, but also a surreal and unrecognisable version of the world elsewhere.

In this context, some officials may well have believed it possible to isolate Russia from the global internet, and then explain to disaffected Russian internet users that this had been done by the United States and its lackeys.

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