Chapter 3

ICT and Transmedia Storytelling for Democratic Development in the Russian Political Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the implementation of information and communication technology (ICT) and transmedia storytelling in Alexey Navalny’s political campaign during the 2013 Moscow mayoral election in Russia. The aim is to analyze how the use of ICT across multiple media platforms contributed to the development of democratic practices in the Russian political landscape. Navalny’s westernized, bottom-up political campaign was innovative in the country because it involved novel manners of engaging the public via online fundraising, door-to-door canvassing, engagement of volunteers, digital projects, and meetings with voters, for instance, which were not common practices at the time in Russia. Although Navalny lost the election, his candidacy represented advancement in terms of the use of ICT and transmedia storytelling to promote democratic development in the midst of autocratic Russia. If the democratic progress in the country will be maintained, it remains to be seen. The methodological approach is based on the transmedia analytical model developed by Gambarato (2013).

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INTRODUCTION

For several years, the mayoral elections in Moscow were deliberately cancelled, and the mayor was directly appointed by the Kremlin (Indina, 2014). However, the 2013 Moscow mayoral election was shaken by the opposition candidate Alexey Navalny and his westernized, grassroots political campaign. Navalny is a lawyer, whistleblower, and staunch activist fighting against endemic corruption in Russia. In 2010, his anti-corruption blog posts (Navalny, n.d.) and website (RosPil, 2014) became digital phenomena. Since then, he has become a protagonist in Russian politics. His 2013 campaign was replete with innovations in the Russian context, such as online fundraising, door-to-door canvassing, engagement of volunteers, digital projects, and meetings with voters, for instance. Although he lost the election, his candidacy represented advancement in terms of both the use of new media and the promotion of democratic practices in the midst of autocratic Russia. Considering that Navalny almost succeeded in challenging the Kremlin candidate, the campaign destroyed the myth that the current government would always win, even in a fair election. The chapter’s goal is to analyze the transmedia strategies (Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018) of Navalny’s campaign in order to highlight how the use of information and communication technology (ICT) concretely contributed to the democratic development in Russia (Gambarato & Lapina-Kratasyuk, 2016; Gambarato, 2018).

The 2013 Moscow mayoral election was the very first social media election in Russia, and its roots can be traced to the 2011–2012 opposition movement. Navalny’s campaign was an extension and consequence of this movement, which involved fundraising for rallies and the creation of Facebook groups aiming at gathering people offline during the opposition protests, among others. In the summer of 2013, Navalny started campaigning using techniques that were new and even unknown in Russia, including ICT solutions such as online fundraising. Online tools were primarily created to pave an easier path for Navalny’s supporters to become volunteers and spread the word about his political proposals, democratizing access to information. As the opposition candidate, he had limited access to mainstream media, especially television; therefore, the online campaign and its consequent expansion into offline activities were the alternative channel to reach the public in a legitimate, democratic manner.

In the context of the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, Russian political landscape played a leading role. Thus, this chapter first briefly introduces the Russian electoral system and explains the rise of Navalny. The theoretical framework explores the conceptualization of transmedia storytelling (Freeman & Gambarato, 2018) in the context of participatory politics and the methodological approach, based on the transmedia analytical model by Gambarato (2013), is presented and applied to Navalny’s grassroots campaign, demonstrating how it incorporates ICT solutions in a
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