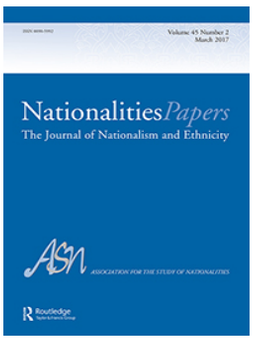

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"We need more clips about Putin, and lots of them:" Russia's state-commissioned online visual culture

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In this article, we examine how the Putin government is attempting to respond and adapt to the YouTube phenomenon and the vibrant oppositional online visual culture on Runet. We show how these processes are giving rise to new forms of state propaganda, shaped and driven above all by the quest for high-ranking search-engine results and the concomitant desire to appeal to the perceived new sensibilities of the Internet generation through the commissioning and production of "viral videos." We focus in particular on the videos created by Iurii Degtiarev, a pioneer in the development of this genre, whose works we explore in light of the "Kremlingate" email leaks, which offer inside information on the strategies and aims being pursued on the online visual front of the campaign to manage the Russian mediascape, and Degtiarev's own reflections on this subject. Examining the output of young creatives patronized by the Kremlin offers a "bottom-up" view to supplement studies of the Russian ideological and media landscape as shaped by "political technologists" such as Vladislav Surkov and Gleb Pavlovskii.

Keywords: social media; state propaganda; authoritarianism; viral video; Iurii Degtiarev

In late February 2015, as the first anniversary of the Crimean annexation approached, the tongue-in-cheek neo-imperialist animated online clip *I'm a Russian Occupier* [Ia—russkii okkupant] went viral and caused a global media sensation.[1] Released on YouTube, the clip was watched almost five million times within the first week, and was translated into 10 languages (Medvedev 2015).[2] Curiously, the waves of interest in the clip would appear to have been carefully orchestrated. In early March, the "fun production studio" "My Duck's Vision," a Russian company specializing in the production of viral video clips, issued a press statement claiming authorship of the clip and also revealing the fact that those who had commissioned it were "linked to the state" and were people "at the top" (cited Medialeaks.ru 2015). A fortnight later, the studio's founder, the hipster, and Internet entrepreneur Iurii Degtiarev gave an interview to Fairfax media, in which he stated that the clip had in fact been commissioned by the Russian Orthodox Church. "This wasn't our idea," Degtiarev said. "We were paid for this commission, but

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for us this was just a stupid scenario, we made it for the sake of a joke" ("'Ia—russkii okkupant': voina rolikov" 2015). As *RT* (*RT*, formerly known as *Russia Today*) noted with evident amusement in its coverage of the episode, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter who broke the story was unable to conclude whether this was propaganda, satire, or trolling ("Sydney Morning Herald: videorolik … " 2015). The episode illustrates how Degtiarev promotes his videos through a series of stage-managed revelations that capture the imagination of traditional media, as well as individuals on the web.

The case of *I'm a Russian Occupier* is only one of the most recent and most widely known examples of what amounts to a new genre of propaganda,[3] and which this article takes as its subject: the phenomenon of the state-commissioned "viral video." In the article, we examine how the Putin government is attempting to adapt and respond to the YouTube phenomenon, and a new vibrant online visual culture, with mass audiences, more broadly. We show how these processes are giving rise to new forms of state propaganda, shaped and driven above all by the quest for high-ranking search-engine results and the concomitant desire to appeal to the perceived new sensibilities of the Internet generation through the commissioning and production of viral videos. We focus in particular on the videos created by Iurii Degtiarev, creator of *I'm a Russian Occupier* and several other high-profile exemplars of this new genre,[4] and a pioneer in its development. As we shall show, this online state propaganda is more ideologically ambiguous than we might expect, even when it comes to not just the Putin leadership cult, whose postmodern nature has already been explored by a number of scholars (such as Johnson 2009; Cassiday and Johnson 2010; Goscilo 2013), but, more surprisingly, the cult of the victory in the Great Patriotic War.

We are interested in the ways in which the Russian state is responding to the emerging new online visual culture, and how the state is attempting to appropriate this new medium or media tool and adapt it to fit its own needs and cultural practices (see further Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Rogers 2009; Gerhards and Schäfer 2010; Fedor 2013). In this respect, our study also positions itself within the growing literature on "networked authoritarianism,"[5] which focuses on how repressive states are appropriating and adapting online technologies to serve new ends (MacKinnon 2012; King, Pan, and Roberts 2014). Authoritarian regimes have embraced new technology: analysis conducted by Rød and Weidmann (2015, 2) shows a positive correlation between authoritarianism, and a state's willingness to "support the internet." Thus autocrats are, they argue, aware of the prospects offered by the Internet for surveillance, and of the potential for maintaining "a tightly controlled sphere of public opinion." Many authoritarian regimes avoid overtly censoring online dissent, preferring instead to challenge dissenters to "affirm the futility of activism" (Deibert et al. 2010; Pearce and Kendzior 2012, 2).

How is access to information managed in authoritarian states? The best known example from Putin's Russia is the "troll-factories," where teams of individuals are paid to post on social media and newspaper commenting sites. These efforts involve faking activity, rather than censoring it (Chen 2015). Another approach is to make sanctioned content easily accessible: few Russians will read the *New York Times*; the authorities know they only need 51% of popular votes to win an election. So rather than blocking access to foreign sources, they ensure that most Russians come into contact with foreign opinion by proxy of news agencies specializing in translating texts about Russia into Russian. Texts are carefully selected, and the accuracy is variable, but journalists covering foreign reactions are more likely to copy–paste from the sanctioned translations than seek out and translate their own examples (see Fredheim 2015). On social media, unknown actors regularly spam hashtags favored by opposition politicians,

effectively displacing conversation, and making it unlikely that anyone clicking a trending topic will encounter oppositional material (Fredheim and Filer 2016). The Kremlin even invests in tech projects such as news aggregators that exclusively harvest stories from state-controlled outlets. The popular news aggregator "Mediametrics" (http://mediametrics.ru), which offers a "live" view of which stories are attracting the greatest attention on social media, is curated by the presidential administration. Here is a new approach to information management: rather than attempting to manipulate or "game" third-party algorithms that determine what material is shown to whom, this is an attempt to directly control the mechanisms of filtration. Popular oppositional material could be prevented from ever reaching the top of the ranking, while independent publications might be excluded altogether, as happened to TV Rain in August 2014 (Likhachev 2014; The Insider 2015). Thus, a range of mechanisms ensures that access to information is difficult (though not impossible).

When it comes to Russian state propaganda, or, to use a more neutral term, state information management techniques, an important role is played by private individuals who are hired and paid to produce content, sometimes on a semi-clandestine basis. Iurii Degtiarev is one such individual. He is representative of a class of online media entrepreneurs who, together with the new media themselves, are also shaping the emerging state ideology, and who thus warrant our attention.

We have chosen to focus on Degtiarev and his works for several reasons. First, Degtiarev is at the forefront of the process of adapting state propaganda in response to the rise of Internet visual culture. Sometimes referred to as one of the "fathers of Russian video-blogging," he is one of the key players in the field of online visual culture and viral marketing in Russia.[6] His works include several of the most viewed examples of the viral video genre. Examining the output of young creatives patronized by the Kremlin can offer a "bottom-up" view to supplement studies of the Russian ideological and media landscape as shaped by "political technologists" such as Vladislav Surkov and Gleb Pavlovskii (Wilson 2005; Okara 2007; Sakwa 2008; Mäkinen 2011; Pomerantsev 2014). Where these ideologues often speak in abstract terms, Degtiarev's output constitutes tangible evidence of how theory translates into practice, in what turns out to be a rather messier and less linear process than the standard model of a top-down "Kremlin propaganda machine" would suggest. Moreover, Degtiarev has reflected frankly on his work in the form of media interviews, which are readily available online. And finally, additional information on Degtiarev and his output can be found in the "Kremlingate" e-mail leaks, which offer inside information on the strategies and aims being pursued on this online visual front of the campaign to manage the Russian mediascape.

We begin by providing a brief introduction to the Putin government's response to the advent of the Internet, outlining its fears, particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring and the 2011–2012 protests, and the basic strategies employed to combat this perceived threat. This is followed by a brief discussion of one set of the primary sources used in researching this article: the e-mail leaks (in 2012, and 2014–present) of state correspondence illuminating the rationale and workings of the government's online information management processes. Next, we examine the rise of oppositional visual culture on YouTube as a political threat to the Putin government's legitimacy. We then proceed to sketch out a profile of Iurii Degtiarev and the history of his media career, placing these in the context of a new political environment where elites recognize the power of social media. Along the way, we explore Degtiarev's clips in the light of the leaked correspondence and his own commentary on these clips and on the Russian media scene more broadly.

The state colonization of Runet

In April 2016, head of the Russian Federation's (RF) Investigative Committee Aleksandr Bastyrkin identified the Internet as a key tool for the "hybrid warfare" being waged against Russia ("Eks-glava FSB uvidel … " 2016). The war in Ukraine has seen a fresh wave of attempts to legislate, with a view to controlling online communication (Soldatov and Borogan 2015). The key features of state policy in this sphere were laid down earlier, in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the revolutionary potential of new media that it revealed, and the short-lived "Snow Revolution" or "Bolotnaia" protest movement in Russia in 2011–2012. Bolotnaia further reinforced the Kremlin's view on the threat posed by the Internet as the catalyst and enabler of "color revolutions" (see esp. Horvath 2012).

A speech delivered by Vladislav Surkov, then deputy head of the presidential administration, addressing a group of student representatives from US universities at an event organized by the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs (Rosmolodezh') on 18 November 2011, offers a useful glimpse into the Kremlin's thinking. In the speech, Surkov drew a sharp contrast between the brutal and backwards methods used to suppress Arab protests, and the Russian government's "ultra-modern" approach:

> There was a picture that stuck in my mind, when people on camels moved in against the demonstrators on Tahrir Square. This is a very good metaphor … when a regime answers its opponents with people riding camels, then this means that there's something seriously wrong with people's heads. That means they don't understand anything at all, when this is the last resource capable of preserving the regime – well, this says that the system is absolutely schizophrenic. We're not going to send camels in, we are going to fight using modern technology, and I assure you, we are going to win. (see transcript of speech in Zhilin 2011)

From the context, it was clear that by modern technology, Surkov meant Internet technology. He also reflected in the speech on the ways in which the Internet was changing the political and media landscape in Russia, and what the authorities could do to combat a perceived American hegemony online. Surkov emphasized the fact that the Russian government was not going to take the route of censoring the Internet; he admitted that there were efforts underway to "counteract tendencies negative for us, but we are doing this according to the rules – we don't shut down [ne vykliuchaem] resources, like some countries, we don't block sites, like some countries" (Zhilin 2011).

Of course, it is now well established that the Russian government does in fact shut down oppositional Internet resources from time to time, via cyber-attacks that it orders with a view to temporarily overwhelm particular sites at particular critical points, on election days, and so on. For instance, in *Red Web*, Soldatov and Borogan (2015) show how the security services have developed technological solutions to surveillance: through black boxes implementing so-called SORM (System of Operative-Investigative Measures) technology, intelligence agents can access not only metadata, but also the contents of messages sent across the network. Other projects rely on automated speech and facial recognition; the latter is currently used to identify football hooligans, though the potential for targeting individuals at anti-regime rallies is obvious.[7] As of 2012 and especially after the 2014 Crimean annexation, a series of additional legal and technical restrictions on online media have been implemented.

What we are interested in here, however, are not the repressive measures aimed at censoring and controlling, but the "third-generation" (Deibert et al. 2010) measures associated with another facet of the Kremlin's information strategy: the drive to enter and master the online space, to take it over, and to reshape it to suit their own ends. The key word that Surkov used to describe state policy on the Internet was *osvoenie* – a term that is commonly

used as a euphemism for colonial conquest and invasion; literally, to make one's own, or to master. Surkov used this term at several points in his discussion of the Internet: he acknowledged, for example, the political danger posed by online technology, but asserted: "That's life, this is nothing terrible, we shall master it [*budem osvaivat'*], work is underway" (see transcript of speech in Zhilin 2011).

Insider correspondence as a source of information on the state media policy

An important source of information on the ways in which this "work is underway" is provided by a series of leaked e-mails. This correspondence offers insights into the rationale and strategies being employed, and the aims being pursued, as well as details of the relationships between government agencies and producers of content such as Degtiarev. We provide a brief overview of this set of primary sources here, before moving on to the main body of the article, where we zoom in for a closer view of Degtiarev, his work and views, and his relations with the government, as illuminated by these leaked sources.

The first of the leaks occurred in February 2012, when hackers broke into and published online the e-mail correspondence on this topic belonging to Kristina Potupchik and Vasilii Iakemenko, respectively, the press secretary of the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi and the then head of Rosmolodezh'. At least for the period 2008–2011, virtually all the government's digital efforts were incubated through the pro-Putin youth group Nashi and Rosmolodezh'. The leaked correspondence gave insight into how these efforts were organized, and confirmed the fact that the government – by proxy of Nashi and other organizations that masqueraded as part of a "civil society" – was investing large resources in attempting to find covert ways of shaping and controlling the online media landscape with a view to securing Putin's re-election.

Media scrutiny of the leaks centered on the way Nashi attempted to control the news agenda by paying subordinates to promulgate pro-Putin messages (Elder 2012; Seddon 2014a). One email reports on a meeting where Iakemenko outlined the organization's policy toward paid comments under online news articles:

> Commenters had to be "people with balanced language, who write well, not idiots [*debily*], [who are] capable of maintaining a debate, of developing it. They will comment on our posts, on forums – basically slandering the opposition and praising Putin. … [creating] the impression that the majority supports us." (Kashina 2011)

More recent leaks have been read as part of internal Kremlin power-games, with various interpretations as to who is orchestrating the leaks having been offered, primarily on the basis of which highfliers in the presidential administration had yet to be incriminated (see Seddon 2014b; Vinokurova 2015). Based on the leaks, it appears that the current effort to manipulate the online space is being conducted from inside the presidential administration. Numerous ex-Nashi activists have cropped up in the leaks, none more so than the organization's former Press Secretary Kristina Potupchik, now working for Volodin's team.

Taken together, it is possible to identify three main information management concerns as emerging from this set of sources: in some cases, the presidential administration successfully dictates messages through pliant journalists or editors, but often they work through the informal method known as *dzhinsa* (*lit.* jeans or denim) where positive coverage is paid for. Because this is expensive, even for the Kremlin, coverage is often encouraged through publicity stunts. Second, the correspondence reveals a growing awareness of the importance of social media and user participation. The strategists behind the campaign appear to believe that a systematic manipulation of social media and newspaper commenting sections can influence public opinion, both at home and abroad. Third, the messages

reveal a preoccupation with rankings of all sorts: trending hashtags on Twitter, top videos on YouTube, viral social media content, and the most shared news articles.

Three principal methods are employed to achieve these management objectives: provoking, faking, and regulating. Scandalous and often crude publicity stunts are designed to provoke a viral response, resulting in competing information being displaced. Fake Internet activity such as commenting through sock-puppet accounts, manipulating online polls, or systematic up- or down-voting of shared material creates the impression that the regime is popular and helps to promote and spread sanctioned content. Finally, regulation works by restricting the rules of communication by ensuring that the likelihood of independent or oppositional content entering the public gaze remains low. Methods used range from operating blacklists among TV pundits, to algorithmically filtering out content from rankings, to drowning out messages centered on a Twitter hashtag. These three methods come together in the government's preoccupation with manufacturing online viral videos – to which we now turn.

YouTube as political threat

In many ways, the sphere of online video culture is the most recent and most important frontier of cyberspace[8] from the point of view of the state colonization project – the most important, because it is on this front that the opposition to the Putin regime has been most effective in getting its message across on a mass scale.[9]

As Rutten, Fedor, and Zvereva (2013, 173) have argued, new media scholarship has been slow to catch up with the increasingly visual nature of Russian online media culture and the declining importance of text-based blogs in Russia. Led by Facebook, social media platforms have embraced and optimized their pages for video content. Content providers, from news media to businesses and other institutions, have had to adapt their campaigns as Facebook's algorithms have developed (Shields 2016). Simultaneously, Russian online media are changing: Russian Internet users are moving away from the characteristically logocentric nature of Russian media exemplified by the Russian version of LiveJournal, which was previously the major platform for oppositional ideas and which, it has often been argued, represented a kind of heir to late Soviet cultural phenomena such as samizdat and kitchen-table conversations (see for example Gorny 2007).

Online video clips in contemporary Russia are arguably the twenty-first-century equivalent of the pornographic postcards of Rasputin and the Empress that were circulating in the lead-up to the revolution (Figes and Kolonitskii 1999), and which were at once a symptom and a catalyst of the tsarist regime's profound crisis of legitimacy. The Russian population enthusiastically consumed a diverse array of different types of clips, circulated on a mass scale over the past few years and especially since autumn 2011. A few examples from the creative explosion sparked by the Bolotnaia protests include a vast host of satirical animated cartoons (in one popular example, Putin morphs into Mr. Burns from the Simpsons, then into Gaddafi, and finally into Mubarak on a life support system);[10] fake news items based on manipulated and doctored real video footage showing Putin behind bars and on trial;[11] damning video footage that was unavailable on state-controlled TV, such as the spectacle of Putin being booed at a boxing match[12] – arguably a crucial turning point in the erosion of his legitimacy; and various ridiculous state-produced clips, such as Medvedev's video promoting badminton,[13] which made him a laughing stock and which his press secretary later described as the biggest mistake of his presidency (cited in Rozhkov 2012; see Gorham 2014 on online policies during the Medvedev interlude). A number of

documentary short film projects chronicled the protest movement, offering powerful visual evidence of state violence, such as the clip of the sadistic brutality that was applied by the riot police arresting Aleksei Navalny in December 2011.[14] The audiences for these videos are huge and often run into millions. And as we shall show, the government is acutely conscious of the power of this new medium, and has developed a range of projects in an attempt if not to stem this flood of oppositional videos, then at least to find a way of handling it, as well as experimenting with attempts at harnessing the power of this new medium and reshaping it to different ends, including through engaging the services of young media producers such as Iurii Degtiarev.

Iurii Degtiarev and the rise of online video culture in Russia: "a million cool suggestions"

In February 2011, Kristina Potupchik proposed hiring Degtiarev to develop online media materials targeting young people. Degtiarev's creative talents were held in high regard at Rosmolodezh', and he was paid good money for his efforts; leaked documents indicate that in November 2011, for example, Degtiarev was paid the equivalent of over £70,000 (Potupchik 2011c). Below we sketch out a potted history of Degtiarev's career making videos on political commission.

Degtiarev, the self-defined "trickster-media-activist,"[15] is at the forefront of efforts to adapt state propaganda to exploit the affordances of Internet visual culture. His activities straddle the divide between entertainment, propaganda, and viral marketing; he styles himself as someone able to create content that appeals to the younger, Internet generation, and to reverse Russia's fortunes in the global information war.

By his own account, Iurii Degtiarev was a pioneer in the realm of online video content production. In a 2016 interview in which he reminisced on his career, he commented that he was unusual in specializing in video clips back in the mid-2000s, at a time when everyone else was making demotivators (on demotivators: Lastouski 2013): "We were the only ones who made videos on a permanent basis under a single brand" (cited in Sdobnov 2016). Indeed, he claims he set a new trend, and inspired others to take up video. In the same interview, Degtiarev commented on the path that had led him to "produce political content in the framework of collaboration with Rosmolodezh'" from 2009: "Politics, propaganda, manipulations [*vbrosy*] – I've been interested in all this since childhood. Just like Mussolini" (cited in Sdobnov 2016).

Born in 1986, Degtiarev reportedly holds a Canadian university degree in art history as well as a management qualification from a Moscow university, and has worked for, among others, the patriotic Internet newspapers Vzgliad and Dni.ru. Degtiarev is something of an *enfant terrible*, and in general seems to cultivate an image that is a mixture of hipster, prankster, and thug, at one point publicly threatening to beat up rival Internet entrepreneur, head of the *VKontakte* social networking service Pavel Durov, for example (Likhachev 2012). In 2006, Degtiarev founded the "fun production studio" called My Duck's Vision, which produces viral videos, at least sometimes, as the leaked e-mails show, on direct commission from the government. He boasts of having produced the most popular Russian viral video ever, and in general, the studio's videos consistently get high view counts.

Viral video and global "information war"

My Duck's Vision rose to prominence during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War after producing a parody clip of a girl sucking on a Chupa-Chup and slandering Russian

soldiers.[16] The clip was made in response to a notorious American Fox News item that manipulated footage by cutting a section in which an Ossetian girl thanked Russian soldiers for helping her ("Interv'iu s redaktorom … " 2009). Degtiarev's parody clip made it into the Yandex top list on its first day, and was also shown on Russian TV news ("Interv'iu s redaktorom … " 2009). He later commented on the anti-Georgian clip: "For us this was an act of patriotism. I'm not much of a patriot [*ia ne ochen'-to patriot*], but I saw that we had fucked up [*prosrali*] the information war". He said he had learned a lot from this episode:

> [a]part from our video, there was basically no other video-reaction to the conflict on Runet … the whole world followed the war based on the orchestrated footage produced by Western agencies, with the same old lady always lying there among various ruins with various wounds … An information war was underway, and not a single soldier was fighting on our side. ("Interv'iu s redaktorom … " 2009)[17]

In order to fight this information war, Russians had to change their attitude toward the Internet, and become more active in commenting and responding to news. To this end, Degtiarev argued:

> We need studios, we need respected video-bloggers with at least 20,000 or so subscribers, with their own micro-army. That kind of blogger comments on the news, and 20,000 of his virtual soldiers will make a video on any theme – he only has to give the order. ("Interv'iu s redaktorom … " 2009)

Elsewhere he emphasizes the need for charismatic video-bloggers to inspire and mobilize Russians to become warriors and "agents of influence" in this information war ("Istoriia uspekha Iuriia … " 2010). In other words, there is a clear and explicit ideological dimension and drive to Degtiarev's work. The main content here, as in the Putin regime's emerging state ideology more broadly, is anti-Westernism, augmented with a dose of conspiracy theorizing.[18]

In interviews, Degtiarev has made it clear that he is sympathetic with the view that YouTube (which is owned by Google) is part of an American conspiracy for world domination. He said of YouTube that he did not think that this was:

> business as such. Because "YouTube," according to one theory circulating in one way or another on the internet, is a weapon for information warfare, specifically American [information warfare] … It's not my theory, I just like it. It's obvious that is, most likely, possibly, yes. Because it would be stupid not to use such a massive machine [*makhina*] for some kind of information wars. ("Novyi media-biznes" 2011)

He has often pointed out that the main Internet services (such as Twitter and Wikipedia) all "have their roots in the West," and that hence:

> we are surrounded [*okruzheny*]. We simply need to know how to defend ourselves. And the defense, in this particular case, the soldiers in this information war, are precisely video-bloggers, it seems to me, even in the West they call video-bloggers the "pyjama army." Because sitting at computers and without leaving the house, they can, in principle, raise up a sufficient number of human masses *[sic]*, implant some ideas to them. The West understood this long ago, but Russia somewhat underestimates all this power. ("Istoriia uspekha Iuriia … " 2010)

One role in which Degtiarev fought this information war was as the head of an experimental government initiative aimed at fencing off the Russian Internet, and channeling content nationally, via the creation of a Russian alternative to YouTube, RuTube (created 2006). In 2008 he was appointed chief editor of RuTube; Gazprom purchased RuTube the same year ("Novyi media-biznes" 2011). By his account, the RuTube directors had been impressed by My Duck's Vision's videos, and approached him with an offer of work aimed at creating more initiatives in a similar vein ("Interv'iu s redaktorom … " 2009). It seems probable that in this role Degtiarev was responsible for the publicity stunt used

to promote the platform in which the RuTube servers were blessed by an Orthodox priest in 2011 ("RuTube" 2011).

RuTube is part of the ongoing government campaign to create a "sovereign Russian internet," geared to meet the needs of "sovereign democracy" ("Suverennyi internet: razdroblenie … " 2016). Irina Yarovaia's comment on this topic typifies the official view: "[t]he internet destroys the concept of the border, the concept of sovereignty. And modern communications make it possible to encroach upon sovereign domestic interests and to violate principles of national security" ("Iarovaia uvidela v … " 2014). The RuTube initiative was thus aimed at offering an alternative to YouTube, with an emphasis on careful moderation and organization of content ("Interv'iu s redaktorom … " 2009). Degtiarev has since left RuTube; the platform still exists, but it would appear to have proved to be a rather abortive, ultimately half-hearted enterprise that has failed to replicate the appeal of YouTube.

From at least 2009, and especially during the unrest that followed the *rokirovka* – the Putin–Medvedev "castling move" of autumn 2011 – Degtiarev received a series of government commissions to produce video content. We turn now to take a closer look at some examples of these.

Creating "visual support" for the "Putin brand"

In April 2011, Potupchik put down in writing some worries about the state of Putin's image:

> Putin must become a brand again, but right now he's not a brand – he's something that rides on brands, advertises brands, uses brands and works for brands. More image projects (like putin-party, vkontakte groups) must work for him. The visual support has to become powerful, with his personal participation … and also without it, with the help of souvenirs, our events under his brand, statements by celebrities. (2011a)

One of the products apparently linked to this aim of restoring the fortunes of the Putin brand was a clip that Degtiarev made and sold to Potupchik for release on Putin's 59th birthday in October 2011.[19] The clip exemplifies this ironic, consciously self-reflexive form of online visual state propaganda.

The clip appears to have been conceived by Degtiarev. On 23 August 2011, Potupchik described Degtiarev's idea for a birthday clip for Putin in an e-mail to a subordinate:

> He told me about it in detail – like putin's a baby and an angel's talking to him and telling him what a great man he's going to become and all this is visualized. The clip will be huge b/c it will be released on putin's birthday so it's logical. And at the start there will be surkov's words about how Putin was sent to us by god … I think we should let iura make it, I'm sure we won't regret it [*here and elsewhere, we have attempted to reproduce the original orthography and style of the mails, as far as possible – JF & RF*]. (Ivanov 2011)

Degtiarev's standing as Nashi's "go-to" person for online content, the amount of freedom that he enjoys in this role, and also the casual attitude taken when it comes to spending taxpayers' money are suggested by her interlocutor's response: "I already told Iura long ago that I'll pay for everything he does. Including the failures" (Ivanov 2011).

The clip is simultaneously a manifestation of the Putin leadership cult and an ironic comment on it, referencing embarrassing moments such as the Black Sea "amphora" incident, or the claim that Putin's rise was divinely ordained – both staple targets of oppositional satire. In its attempt to use irony and humor to distance itself from the cult, while at the same time identifying with the very object that it mocks, the clip shares some features with the late Soviet and post-Soviet genre of *stiob* (on this, see Yurchak 2006; Gabowitsch 2009). The tongue-in-cheek references to the Putin cult set up a complicity between the

audience and the creator. In general, the political messages communicated in this and other videos produced by Degtiarev's studio deliberately and consistently draw attention to their own inherently unreliable, mediated nature. In some cases, it is quite hard to tell the difference between pro-Putin and anti-Putin videos. This muddying of the waters enables all oppositional voices to be discredited as potentially manufactured. And it also means that conversely, and ingeniously, pro-Putin propaganda can be cast as produced by enemies intent on subverting the regime. As Pomerantsev puts it,

> [I]f Soviet measures went to great lengths to make their forgeries look convincing, now the Kremlin doesn't seem to care if it is caught: The aim is to confuse rather than convince, to trash the information space so the audience gives up looking for any truth amid the chaos. (2015)

In its ironic, satirical referencing of the Putin leadership cult, this new propaganda also has a lot in common with postmodern commercial advertising. Such campaigns might parody themselves by laying bare the ways in which they intend to manipulate the consumer, or use devices and methods drawn from surrealism to avoid delivering a straightforward message (see further Gibbons 2005). And indeed as we have seen, figures such as Potupchik (2011a) refer to Putin as a "brand," and they routinely use marketing techniques and language in this connection.

Reflexivity and satire are not new elements of the Putin leadership cult. In 2009, Johnson suggested that much of the Putin paraphernalia on sale in Moscow during a 2006 visit seemed "on balance, more ironic than reverent" (2009, 3). But what is new is the self-conscious attempt to appeal to a generation that has been raised on the Internet, and that is much more aware of manipulation. How, then, do you go about producing a leadership cult for these "digital native" kids?

First, you look for someone who is able to speak to them "in their own language." This quest is a recurring theme in the Potupchik correspondence, with one pitch from August 2011 describing: "A project for an animated film … Mission: to create a Russian pop culture phenomenon which will speak with teenagers in their own language" (Tomilin 2011b). This particular proposal suggested a three-pronged approach to this problem, which is worth quoting at some length. The project aimed to create a cartoon serial with a mission to:

> 1) consistently parasitize on images of the '90s and '00s, ironically deconstructing them; 2) reflect the dramatic change between us and the generation of the fathers; and 3) win the trust of the target audience and help it via entertainment and nostalgia to find its place in life and find a sense of self, inculcate genuine values through rebellion – and thereby fill the "ideological vacuum" currently existing in Russian society. (Tomilin 2011b)

Ultimately this project, as fascinating as it sounds,[20] does not seem to have been funded, however, and instead a work plan, undated and unsigned but apparently produced by Potupchik around this time, contained the following suggestion:

> Vkontakte, rutube and youtube – I propose handing this field over to Diagterev [*sic*] and tasking him with creating clips about Putin. He already has a huge audience of school children. School children are active and they disseminate internet links like crazy. This resource is more effective than *zhezhe* [LiveJournal]. Plus, I'm sure that Diagterev will have a million more cool suggestions. (in Pribylovskii 2012)

This quote exemplifies the acute awareness within Nashi of the shift toward a greater importance for visual rather than text-based online media. There are many such passages in leaked correspondence. For example, Potupchik (2011d) noted in a memo in autumn 2011 that while LiveJournal was rapidly losing popularity, video blogging on the YouTube platform

was experiencing huge audience growth. In fact, the government was arguably somewhat slow to recognize this significant shift in what Rogers (2009) has called "online media hierarchies of credibility." Various commentators in Russia had long been asserting that LiveJournal was becoming exhausted and losing its credibility (see Podporina 2007), and that oppositional activity was tending to migrate elsewhere, in particular social networks and other video-hosting platforms.

Importantly, as the Potupchik quote shows, this project is not so much, or not only, an ideological campaign to win the next generation's hearts and minds, as it is an attempt to turn school children's propensity to take clickbait to the advantage of the state. For our purposes, this is perhaps one of the most striking revelations offered by this leaked correspondence: the degree to which online activities are driven by a desire to generate high search engine rankings at any cost and by any means. Ideological considerations come a far second to this end. It is also ironic that the agency responsible for youth affairs would wish the videos in question – most of which as we shall see rely on sex and violence to attract viewers – on Russia's children. It is hard to see how these videos help to further "traditional values."

Search engines as arbiters of reputation

The leaked correspondence shows that an overriding concern here is with search engine results. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the makeup of the daily top 10 YouTube videos, and other such online rankings, is an obsession for the government image-makers. It is clear from the correspondence that they see as their key task to ensure that when you type "Putin" into a search engine, the first page of the results brought up by that query should show respectable levels of support translated into the proportion of "positive" search results. This is a kind of equivalent of the front-page headlines of a printed newspaper. The correspondence contains evidence of attempts to manipulate search results in order to guarantee that a YouTube search for the key word "Putin" will return top 10 videos which paint a picture less dire than the real situation, that is, which will contain at least a few examples of positive videos, and therefore reinforce the notion that the regime is not experiencing a serious crisis of legitimacy. For bureaucrats, search engine rankings also offer a way of quantifying their achievements and justifying their continued existence. Thus, Nashi employees and agents often included screenshots of the front page of search results when reporting on their work and claiming payment.

On the whole, the officials seem less concerned with recruiting new supporters than with simply creating the appearance of popular support for Putin. This, then, is one way in which this new technology is shaping and driving political agendas. Search engines are now the key arbiters of reputation. Admittedly, many Western governments also monitor their online reputation, and may even seek to bolster it with ads during election campaigns, but state-sponsored subterfuge on this scale is as yet undocumented and hard to imagine (but, see Fredheim and Filer 2016).

One peculiarity of the Russian approach is the exploitation of informal channels to create media storms that help promote video content. In November 2011, for instance, then President Medvedev met with pro-Kremlin bloggers. The bulk if not all of the invited guests owed their credentials to various Nashi initiatives, from Potupchik's own "Medvedev Girls" campaign, through the traffic-vigilantes StopKham, paid bloggers, and My Duck's Vision. The whole affair was carefully stage-managed by Nashi so as to maximize media coverage about its online efforts. The script for the event stipulated that Degtiarev would tell Medvedev about the "'Spasibo', Eva!" project, in which "he brings together all the cool [*krutye*] videobloggers, those with potential, and mentors and promotes them." First

among Degtiarev's "cool videobloggers" was Artur Gal'chenko, better known by the pseudonym Sam Nikel'. Nikel', who features in virtually all of My Duck's Vision's early videos, was also present at the meeting with Medvedev. He helpfully offered to advise the president on how to grow the following for his video blog, launched in October 2008. But, as mk.ru asked in its coverage of the event, did the president realize that the young man:

> caused a stir at Seliger this summer, when, during Vladimir Putin's visit, he pushed his way through to the Prime Minister and shook his hand. On the internet you can find a video, according to which 30 days prior to this historic event Sam Nikel' walked the streets and grabbed (literally) cute girls' breasts. (Galimova 2011)

The description offers an accurate summary of the video in question; it also echoes a (rather cruder) press release, drafted by Degtiarev and distributed to the Russian media via Nashi (MDVision 2011).

Degtiarev is an eloquent spokesman in particular for the "viral effect," whereby viewers themselves send links to other people, with its ability not only to increase audiences but also to ensure a much higher quality of viewing, less random and more active than the manner in which people consume TV content ("Istoriia uspekha Iuriia … " 2010). He also made bold claims about the imminent demise of old media. In 2010 he predicted a – rather scary, dystopian – future in which, "In ten years' time, only YouTube, RuTube and other 'tubes' [*truby*] will be left. And televisions will be connected to the net: you take a remote control, you go to a browser, you choose a video, you watch" ("Iurii Degtiarev" 2010).

The video clip "Putin Paws Female Voters" is My Duck's Vision's most famous and popular clip, having clocked up more than 14.2 million views (Minaev n.d.).[21] It reveals the way Degtiarev engineers viral videos: the base material is humorous, seedy, or provocative. Second, this material is juxtaposed with some pertinent context, in this case Putin. Third, the scandalous implications are spelled out and circulated through press releases. Nashi enabled this combination, by positioning the video-bloggers at Seliger and at the meeting with Medvedev, and through the close ties with the pro-Kremlin press and blogosphere. Thus, My Duck's Vision's contribution is much more than slick production – it is an integrated service that aims to achieve wide dissemination by exploiting informal links, as well as social networks.

The sophisticated leveraging of informal ties to manufacture genuine scandals and interest stands in stark contrast to the typically labor-intensive promotional work funded by Nashi. Take the concern with search engine results for videos about Putin, which peaks on symbolic dates such as the lead-up to Putin's birthday, in October. At this time, Nashi commissars submit reports classifying the top rating videos into positive, negative, and neutral. One report says that the fact that a negative clip made it into the top 10 was not a problem since "in this context it seems organically essential" (Iarosh 2011b) – in other words, glitches of this kind help to make the manufactured results more plausible. The correspondence shows that they use methods aimed at boosting these statistics through automation. Potupchik writes to Iakemenko in October 2011, "We've learned how to make it so that clips about Putin come up on the main page of youtube in the search engine results, we've hired a person who is supposed to handle this [*kotoryi dolzhen ikh krutit'*]" (in Iakemenko 2011a).

Another message shows how this mechanism works:

> Measures taken: we are carefully clicking "minus" for Kamikadze, and "plus" for our clips – this is a controversial subject, but there's no other option, if we stop adding the "pluses" the clip might stop coming up in a high position for Putin searches. (Potupchik 2011c)

This method leads to confusion at times. For example, in October 2011 Potupchik e-mailed her subordinates after noticing a pro-Putin clip in the YouTube chart: "Were we responsible for getting this video up into the Youtube charts?" (Potupchik 2011b).[22] Implicit in her question is the assumption that the only way a pro-Putin video could get into the charts is using these artificial methods. Other desperate measures used apparently include simply adding "Putin" tags to videos that contain no Putin content but are likely to attract a large number of hits.[23]

The highest profile content created by My Duck's Vision to occupy the informational space around Putin was a "terrible truth" series of spoof videos attacking major Western corporations such as McDonald's, Apple, BP, Facebook, and others.[24] From the correspondence, it is clear that the series was not intended as a serious attack on the companies, but rather to occupy the informational space surrounding the keyword "Putin." The narratives offered are utterly improbable, and the videos are executed in a mock-paranoid style that both echoes and undermines the conspirological TV documentaries produced with the aim of stigmatizing Russia's "enemies."

Even though these videos were widely shared and attracted millions of viewers, Nashi employees do seem to realize that they are fighting a losing battle. As one staff member reports, "The top twenty is constantly changing, the changes are dynamic, it's impossible to fix it, we can only attack constantly with new clips" (Iarosh 2011b). This, in turn, requires the constant production of new clips about Putin. At certain points Potupchik echoes this, "we need more clips about Putin, and lots of them" (in Iakemenko 2011b). The main aim is to generate and upload vast numbers of pro-Putin videos that have some kind of hook encouraging people to click on them and thus boost their ratings; what happens next is less important.

"Here there is almost complete freedom of thought:" post-ideological propaganda?

His extensive comments on the subject of "information warfare" notwithstanding, Degtiarev frequently downplays the political element in his work. He claims to enjoy absolute freedom in carrying out his government commissions, and describes the process as follows:

> Normally nobody suggests a scenario. We really took off when we started to do precisely political commissions, because unlike commercial ones, here there is almost complete freedom of thought. If you do a good job – well done, here's another. If you do a bad job – all the best, don't come back. On the whole the clips appeared spontaneously, only a couple of works were linked to a particular date, for example 9 May. We're not very nice types for negotiations: in 99% of cases we first propose our own version and we don't agree to work unless our creative participation ratio is at least 70 to 30. (Sdobnov 2016)

Even those clips that were specifically requested, for example, for Victory Day, as Degtiarev mentions here, display the extraordinary degree of ideological fluidity that characterizes Degtiarev's output. The Victory Day clips illuminate less well-studied aspects of contemporary Russian memory of the war and the ways in which it is being repackaged for younger audiences. Studies of official Russian memory politics often tend to emphasize the ways in which the victory has been constructed as an untouchable sacred object (e.g. Wood 2011), but Degtiarev's war-themed clips remind us that even the state-sponsored victory cult is far from monolithic.

Degtiarev has produced at least three World War II-themed clips: "Aryan Moscow" (March 2010, produced to mark the 65th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany in May 2010);[25] "Nazi Must Die" (November 2010);[26] and "Great-grandfather's Ashes" (May 2016). All three rely heavily on Nazisploitation imagery and themes. "Aryan

Moscow," for example, attempts to hook the viewers via animated images of crematoriums and death camps, silly German accents, and heavily racialized and sexualized images of female slaves from the former Soviet republics. Clearly, this is an attempt to use shock value in order to boost viewing statistics. At the same time, however, this clip is also explicitly linked to the official victory cult. A link at the end of the clip, under the text "Thanks to our veterans' feat, we now have a completely different history," leads to a "serious" (though as of September 2016 defunct) state propaganda campaign site.[27] A later clip, "Nazi Must Die," likewise contained a link to the "Nasha pobeda" Internet project, organized by Rosmolodezh'; the Ministry for Sport, Tourism and Youth Policy; the Ministry for Education and Science; and other state bodies ("My Duck's Vision" 2010). So we have a kind of two-level interlocking system here, where the "postmodern entertainment" is designed to lure school children to visit official state web sites promoting the more traditional victory cult.

In the latest of Degtiarev's war videos, "Great-grandfather's Ashes" (May 2016), a little girl empties an urn containing the ashes of her war veteran great-grandfather and uses them to paint a series of pictures, including a swastika. The release of this clip was part of an elaborate prank. At one point, Degtiarev claimed that it was really the start of a viral advertising campaign for a Russian horror film based on a screenplay by Nikita Mikhalkov – a claim that duly provoked Mikhalkov into angrily denying this and condemning the clip and its profanation. The "scandal" surrounding the clip seems to have been more or less entirely manufactured by Degtiarev. It was Degtiarev himself, for example, who removed the clip from YouTube in order to boost interest in the story (Sdobnov 2016) – a twist reminiscent of the ways that Soviet cultural products instantly gained in popularity upon being banned. Some commentators have speculated that Degtiarev has crossed a line in his provocative handling of the victory, and that this may ultimately be his undoing.[28] His comments about Hitler and the Holocaust did at one point lead to panicked e-mails being exchanged within Nashi (Iarosh 2011a). But so far, there is no sign of any official displeasure being expressed.

Degtiarev's vision for twenty-first-century propaganda

Degtiarev's programmatic statements on the power of online video as a medium are in some respects curiously reminiscent of early twentieth-century discourses, recalling Lenin's famous quotes on the power of cinema, or Italian and Soviet Futurist manifestoes with their preoccupation with virility, physical beauty, and vitality; their military imagery; and their preference for "action" over words. Consider, for example, Degtiarev's pronouncement on video as a propaganda medium:

> Video is a weapon much weightier than text … The difference between text and video is roughly the same as between a swear word and a direct punch in the jaw. Text – whether it's in a blog, Twitter, or a newspaper – is an idea set forth in a beautiful way, when it's unclear who wrote it, with what aim, and with what kind of physiognomy. But video is action. ("Interv'iu s redaktorom … " 2009)

This affinity linking propaganda theorists across a century of dramatic technological development is less surprising when we consider the shared underlying ideological aims here. At the most fundamental level, like Lenin, and like the Italian Futurists and the fascism that they helped to inspire and promote, Degtiarev and others toiling in the services of the Russian state are engaged in discrediting – and developing and legitimizing an authoritarian alternative to – liberal democracy.

Degtiarev's aggressive style and frequent use of military metaphors can also be linked to the current political climate in Russia and to the state's increasingly violent assaults on the public sphere. Degtiarev effectively uses bullying tactics aimed at intimidating and also at

breaking down the boundaries between the public and private spheres and reducing online anonymity. Take, for example, his comments on the text-based blogosphere, which he caricatures as the realm of the cowardly and the physically unprepossessing. He comments that:

> bloggers, these are most often people who cannot answer for their own words. I mean text bloggers, because most often these are, in the overwhelming majority, some kind of physically inadequate people, who pour out all their complexes …
>
> Video-bloggers are another matter, these are people who show themselves, they are prepared to show their face, saying that someone is a fool or not a fool. They are prepared to defend themselves. They are not afraid … You know, the majority of current text bloggers, if you force them to film a video, a video-blog, believe me, the rating of these people in people's eyes … will drop immediately, because half of them can't put two words together. Although it seems like they write beautifully in blogs. ("Istoriia uspekha Iuriia … " 2010)[29]

The note of menace here is also present in many of his videos, perhaps most strikingly in the 2011 clip "Degenerates on VKontake" [*Vyrodki VKontakte*], a clip lambasting Russian liberals that was produced in the midst of the Bolotnaia protest movement.[30] This clip has an ultra-violent feel to it throughout. Its main thrust is aimed at setting up a strong visual link between Nazism and liberalism. At the same time, as in the "Aryan Moscow" and "Nazi Must Die" clips, the supposed anti-fascist message clashes with the titillating images. This clip also depicts liberal opponents of the regime as sexually "perverted," in contrast to the purity of a young Russian girl, "Natal'ia from Murmansk," who was subjected to online abuse and ridicule after posting a birthday greeting to President Medvedev. At the end of the clip, the narrator demands that liberals stop hiding behind online anonymity; he warns that "defenders" of Natal'ia have now appeared, and stylized images of young male figures dressed in suits appear, as the dramatic music builds. The clip ends: "You're silent? That's what we thought."

This chilling, heavily gendered clip represents a kind of online equivalent of Nashi's offline attempts to take over public space through intimidation and threats of violence, and indeed of the real-life physical attacks on journalists and civil society activists. The images of thugs in suits at the conclusion of the clip are an ominous reminder of the respectability and impunity of the agents of the Russian state security apparatus and its affiliates.

Degtiarev has been an energetic proponent of the superior power of video as a propaganda medium, claiming for example that its visuality and immediacy give it enhanced persuasive power and make it less open to alternative interpretation. He has quipped that "you can't look between pixels," as you might read between the lines, for example ("Istoriia uspekha Iuriia … " 2010). Potupchik too has noted that trust in video-blog content was substantially higher than for text-based blogs and microblogs such as Twitter. Thus, one of the strategies employed on this front has been to attempt to exploit the power of the image, and especially the moving image, to signal authenticity, inspire trust, and increase impact.

Degtiarev's claims about the importance of the challenges posed by information warfare in the Internet age, and his unique ability to meet those challenges, appear to have found a receptive audience among those in charge of managing the Russian state's reputation online and handling the problem of anti-Putin videos in particular.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago, travelers to the Soviet Union would have their luggage searched for contraband literature. Today, the Internet allows information to flow freely across national borders. This, one might think, should make life hard for authoritarian rulers, who preserve their hold on power by limiting their citizens' access to information, and their ability to

coordinate. But it does not. We might expect authoritarian regimes to attempt to restrict access and to censor, but modern authoritarian regimes tend to adopt creative approaches to information management. They embrace the opportunities offered by the web. The authorities engage in reshaping, gaming, and rejigging the incentives for participation.

The Russian state is proving quite flexible in its ability to adapt to the changing digital media landscape. Yet, there is a sense in which Degtiarev's creations can be seen as a marker of the seriousness of the situation in which the regime's image-makers currently find themselves. Today the Putin government resorts to gimmicks, sex, and violence to promote its brand. These seem to be taking ever more outlandish and convoluted forms. Degtiarev recently claimed authorship of the cartoon series "An Audience with Putin," in which Putin uses a variety of methods to murder corrupt officials and other individuals with whom he is displeased.[31] This series, with its focus on over-the-top sadistic cartoon violence, seems again to be aimed squarely at children. We now have a situation, then, in which the state – or in this case, the All-Russia People's Front (ONF) – is commissioning propaganda in which Putin's image is linked primarily with the subject of political assassination. However ironic the intention here, this is surely an extraordinary turn of events, perhaps marking the logical end point of the leadership cult of Putin as chekist, taken to its surreal extreme.

Degtiarev's clips, with their references to both Western pop culture and anti-Putin oppositional online culture – seem to say that the regime does not fear and can withstand mentioning such things. It seeks to neutralize this criticism by appropriating it and bringing it into the mainstream, at least in online space (if not yet on TV), catering to the higher expectations of online as opposed to TV audiences. Degtiarev's videos also illustrate how divergent the methods employed by the state are in an environment where the state cannot control production, where most activity flows through foreign-controlled social networks. Here the state is no longer in control, but reduced to the status of any (very well-funded) organization or business seeking to dominate conversations about their product, the Putin brand. This brand is that of a postmodern authoritarian leadership cult which can laugh at itself. In this respect, the commissioning of video content suggests a new flexibility and adaptability on the part of the regime, or at least the state's willingness to listen to media gurus like Degtiarev who says this kind of thing needs to be done in a new way: subtle, modern, cool; shocking and provocative, but in a sophisticated way. At least this is how Degtiarev pitches it to the bureaucrats, and they appear to buy the line.

Overall, our study of Degtiarev's *oeuvre* confirms the very high degree of ideological fluidity characteristic of the online visual materials currently being produced by the Russian state and its agents. In this respect, we concur with Pomerantsev's (2014) general view on the contemporary Russian ideological media landscape. But where Pomerantsev sees chaos and confusion as a conscious strategy aimed at inducing apathy and paralysis in the population, we argue that the sometimes contradictory messages attributable to Kremlin campaigns can be viewed as a secondary effect of multidirectional efforts aimed at displacing and marginalizing unsanctioned content. The overall aspect that emerges from Degtiarev's clips and from the state's strategy in general is a will to dominate the agenda; ultimately, that domination is more important than the specific content.

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Notes

1. The clip can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fxrdf6GBB7M.
2. Medvedev also notes the following details: that the Russian Embassy to Finland posted the video on its website; and that the clip was released on the new state holiday, "Special Operations Forces Day" (27 February), which is also the date on which Boris Nemtsov was assassinated.
3. "Propaganda" is, of course, a loaded term and all too often is used to signal, as the historian of propaganda Taylor puts it, "something which is done by others we differ from who are selling a cause which we repudiate" (2003, 5). For want of a better term, however, we use the term in this article, and follow Taylor's neutral, descriptive definition of propaganda as "the deliberate attempt to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way" (6).
4. Properly understood, virality is a phenomenon whereby material spreads very quickly through a network, a bit like a virus through a population. As such it is not a genre. However, in the Russian youth movements, "viral video" refers to a particular slick mash-up production style, in which Degtiarev specializes.
5. We follow Vladimir Gel'man in using the term "authoritarian" as a loose synonym for "nondemocratic," that is, to refer to systems where power is not transferred through electoral contestation; Gel'man (2015, 5–6).
6. Minaev (n.d.) used the phrase "fathers of Russian video-blogging" in reference to Degtiarev and Ruslan Usachev.
7. As Surkov's quote makes clear, the government sought to maintain a reputation as a defender of Internet freedom in keeping with its drive to project the image of a modern and open democratic state. However, since 2011, and especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, a more conservative set of operatives now running digital campaigns appear less committed to this aspect of Surkov's project.
8. In the latest development on this front, Facebook and Twitter, the latter through integration with Periscope, are both heavily investing in live video feeds. In the future, we may well see choreographed pro- and anti-Kremlin broadcast live.
9. For statistics on the relative importance of different social media in Russia, see http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/russian-social-media-stats-yandex-vkontakte/. YouTube acts as a hub for content which is either directly embedded or copied to other platforms, in particular, Vkontakte, the most popular social network in Russia; see http://www.russiansearchtips.com/2015/01/top-social-networks-russia-latest-numbers-trends//.
10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzGo4c6U8os. This particular clip would appear to have been produced outside Russia.
11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLdHEu0M2Vk.
12. The original has been taken down, but see for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p55_6gaTPmY.
13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de1nFZKZXRg#t=2m22s.
14. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RupZW2Zcfwg.
15. https://vk.com/cheeseandrice?w=wall1823520_62696.
16. This clip is currently not available via the My Duck's Vision YouTube channel.
17. This experience of the 2008 war as a revelation of the realities of global information war against Russia is one that is reported by a striking number of figures involved in patriotic media production in Russia; see further Fedor (2015, 6).
18. On the importance of the negative principle in post-Soviet Russian identity projects, see Gudkov's (2004) concept of "negative identity."
19. The clip can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTBPiMMziWE.
20. For intriguing details, see Tomilin (2011b), and for another equally compelling idea from the same agency, see Tomilin (2011a).

21. The clip can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNa7tNFB7c4.
22. The clip in question, "Spasibo Vova," is a rather dire example of the genre in which vox pop interviews on the reasons to be thankful to Putin are set against a rap soundtrack. This clip can also be read as a response to anti-Putin criticism, as the title references the famous "Spasibo Vova" incident in which a talk show audience member went off script and talked back to Putin, causing him obvious embarrassment.
23. See, for example, a document detailing the progress made in disseminating pro-Putin content, which notes that Degtiarev's group had three projects on the go: *Ebashilovo dlia Putina:* 100,000 views, *Uroki grafiki:* 30,000 views, and two viral videos in development (Fedorenchik 2011). The graphic design tutorials had nothing to do with Putin whatsoever; they merely juxtaposed attractive content with the Putin keyword. The talk of two viral videos, though, reveals that Nashi saw "viral" as a genre, rather than as an emergent property of networks (Nahon and Hemsley 2013). See also the proposal that "Speaking about Art-activities I mean that something linked to Putin should take place at various off-line scenes linked with mod art. And then this needs to be uploaded to the internet. Fashion shows, hip hop, muz-tv, clothing with Putin and puppy and bla-bla" (in Pribylovskii 2012).
24. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7mvIrPMctY.
25. https://vk.com/video-60770211_166320876.
26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4QYXqnmW_Q.
27. See archived version at http://bit.ly/2cO2XSK.
28. See Kirillov (2016) for examples of the negative response to the war-themed clips among the participants of a young journalists' forum in 2016.
29. Degtiarev's view that video-blogging is a somehow more honorable and a braver venture than text-based blogging is ironic, given how video remains more transient than text. Whereas he sometimes removes his video creations, attempts to edit the record of a written blog are undermined by caches maintained by Google, Web Archive, and others.
30. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYmhEFdz8Cw.
31. A selection of these is available in "ONF snial mul'tfil'my … " (2016). Degtiarev's statement, a mock refutation of media reports on the series, exemplifies his "playful" attitude of detachment from politics. He writes, "The cartoon character resembling Putin doesn't kill anybody! The cartoon heroes resembling corrupt officials interact with completely different characters: UFOs, stray dogs, cement slabs, dendroids, circular saws and giant plastic tulips … One needs to be especially precise when it comes to the cartoon reality that I currently represent! I would ask the esteemed journalist gentlemen to take this into account in future accounts of events in the cartoon universe." See Iurii Degtiarev Facebook post from 1 February 2016, https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006634397055&fref=ts.

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