Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

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Internet Promotes Civil Society

The role of the internet for media freedom was the subject of an interview with Christian Spahr, head of the Media Program South East Europe of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. The interview was conducted by Irina Kharuk from Russia in the context of her master's dissertation project at the University of Bamberg, Germany. Mrs. Kharuk was an intern at the Media Program South East Europe in 2013.

Irina Kharuk: Russia has a bad standing in the country rankings of "Reporters Without Borders" and "Freedom House" on press freedom. Despite critiques of the rankings' methodologies, do the results reflect the media situation in Russia adequately?

Christian Spahr: In the 2013 study of Reporters Without Borders Russia, indeed, scored poorly – rank 148 of 179 countries. Of course, one has to keep in mind the methodologies of those country rankings: They not only reflect whether journalists are faced with direct pressure from the state, but also other factors, such as the legal status of journalists, the working conditions in media outlets and the structure of the media system. As a consequence a number of countries in South East Europe, where journalists are under moderate direct political pressure, received mediocre results. Russia is considered to be a country with deficiencies in regard to press freedom. There are critical and independent media, but they are under more pressure and are not available everywhere in the country.

How free is the internet?

In countries where the range of views voiced in the traditional media is relatively narrow, the internet plays a pivotal role for diversity of opinion. In Russia there are just as many journalists, who try to spread information and critical opinions via the internet, as in Western and Central Europe. In two respects, however, the situation differs: On the one hand, with regard to the general conditions for critical journalism and, on the other hand, with respect to the percentage of the population that has access to the internet. Due to the vast size of the country, a significant part of the population, especially in the rural areas, still lacks internet access.

Can the internet really challenge the traditional media as a source of information?

In Western Europe the internet is already the primary source of information for many people. It involves people's private and professional lives, but also information about politics. This tendency can also increasingly be observed in non-Western countries. Of course, the internet-oriented lifestyle is more prominent in the cities than in rural regions.

Are social networks and blogs important for political communication in Russia?

Precisely because the Russian political system is so Kremlin-centric, the new media are very attractive for alternative political actors and NGOs. The younger generation especially prefers blogs and the social networks, also because they are easily accessible. At the same time, oppositional activists leave virtual traces and have to think carefully about what they post – the internet does not forget.

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How does the internet affect the development of civil society?

The internet makes civic commitment and related communication much easier. That is why it is fair to say that the internet encourages the development of civil society. That basically also counts for Western countries, but in Russia the internet makes more of a difference that way.

Has the internet changed journalism as such?

The impact of the internet on traditional journalism is strong, as it has an important advantage vis-à-vis conventional media, especially newspapers – namely speed. The latter have to redefine their role by offering more background coverage and in-depth analysis, and less daily news journalism.

Does citizen journalism threaten quality journalism?

There is an argument about quality. Bloggers and citizens obviously fulfil an important journalistic function by reporting news and spreading information. At the same time, not all of them work according to the agreed-upon standards, for instance with regard to checking of sources and portraying of dissenting opinions. Some of them only write about their very emotions. There are, however, surprisingly many, who enable serious debate and present hard facts. That is why one can say that the line between blogging and journalism is blurring. There are both biased journalists and objective bloggers. We should thus recognise the distinction, without fostering prejudices.

On 1st November 2012 the [Russian] law about prohibited websites came into force. Can such a measure be considered censorship?

The blocking of certain websites has also been discussed in Germany, with regard to some of the most serious forms of crimes, as child pornography. The problem is: one has to be able to guarantee that such legal and technical instruments will not be misused to silence critical voices. That is especially important in countries where governments are faced with few checks from the opposition and the courts. In Germany there has been a lot of resistance to this form of internet regulation, despite it being one of the freest countries in Europe.

What is the role of NGOs for media and internet freedom in Russia?

NGOs play an important role because they offer platforms for the exchange of opinions which would otherwise be overheard. It is vital that the debate does not only take place between actors with similar interests, though. Representatives of the state should also be included into dialogue in order to make change possible. Professional public relations also matter, although it is clear that many of these organisations have limited funds.

How do you assess the prospects of online media in Russia and the "Runet"?

Russia is a country with good IT specialists, many active journalists and creative people in general. That is why there is much potential for Russian online media. The so-called Runet is a respectable basis for developing a large variety of home-grown online media in Russia. In every country people have a particular view on their history, culture and interests – and that can very well be reflected by the range of online media. In the interest of diversity, it would not be beneficial if all the major online platforms came from one country only. Ideally, the Runet will thus contribute to this global variety, without isolating itself.

(shortened version)