

Branding Internet sovereignty: Digital media and the Chinese–Russian cyberalliance

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Stanislav Budnitsky**

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Abstract

In the 2000s, China and Russia emerged as outspoken actors with global ambitions. To communicate their status aspirations, both countries introduced a range of nation-branding institutions and initiatives. Global Internet governance – the design and administration of Internet technology and related policymaking – is among the domains where China and Russia have asserted their national brands. The Chinese and Russian governments co-advance the brand narrative of ‘Internet sovereignty’ in opposition to perceived technological and governance hegemony of the United States. Given the power that private online intermediaries wield in the political economy of the Internet, national digital media champions, China’s Baidu and Russia’s Yandex, have been integral to their countries’ Internet branding efforts. The article examines how China and Russia have forged a public–private relationship with respective digital media champions in the context of building and branding an Internet sovereignty agenda.

Keywords

Baidu, China, digital media, Internet governance, nation branding, Russia, sovereignty, Yandex

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Introduction

In the 2000s, China and Russia emerged as outspoken geopolitical actors with global ambitions. To assert their status, both countries introduced a range of nation-branding institutions and initiatives, including international broadcasting of China Central Television (CCTV) and RT (formerly, Russia Today), cultural diplomacy of the Confucius Institutes and the Russian World centers and mega sporting events, such as the Olympic games in Beijing in 2008 and Sochi in 2014.

Global Internet governance – the design and administration of Internet technology and related policymaking – is among the domains where China and Russia have promoted their national brands of resurgent great powers. One of the central pillars of China's and Russia's digital brands is the challenge to the perceived technological hegemony of the United States with homegrown products and services. This geopolitical ambition has made leading private digital media companies, such as China's Baidu and Russia's Yandex, integral to their countries' nation branding. An ever closer cyber-alliance between China and Russia, branded as Internet sovereignty, relies on domestic digital champions for its material foundation: the two countries are among the few national markets in the world where domestic services dominate online search and social media niches.

To illuminate the place of media in nation branding, we examine how China and Russia bring their national digital champions into the ambit of respective nation-branding strategies for the Internet. First, the article conceptualizes global Internet governance as a venue for nation branding. Second, we focus on the history and on the core discursive pillars of the Internet sovereignty brand narrative promoted increasingly in unison by China and Russia. Finally, we examine the public–private dynamic between the Chinese and Russian governments, on one hand, and their respective digital media leaders, Baidu and Yandex, on the other.

In addition to theorizing the integral role that digital media occupy in a country's nation branding, this investigation contributes to the nascent East–East comparative media studies. Much comparative media scholarship to date has juxtaposed West–West and West–East contexts, but few have compared media models and practices of two Eastern states – specifically, China and Russia (Meng and Rantanen, 2015). The persistent role of national media systems in the context of globalization (Flew and Waisbord, 2015) requires that such work pays close attention to the historical trajectories of their national political and media systems as well as international standing. Thus, research on the role of digital enterprises in the Internet governance debate (West, 2014) in the cases of China and Russia needs to be mindful of both domestic media policy and questions raised about the Internet and media policy of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries (Nordenstreng and Thussu, 2015; Polatin-Reuben and Wright, 2014).

For empirical evidence, the study relies on policy documents, official media discourse emanating from Beijing and Moscow and on publicly available information on Baidu and Yandex. This approach rests on the methodological premise that the 'central story about an actor could very well be written in the most public statements available' (Ringmar, 1996: 88) and that policy in particular serves as 'a location where rhetorical and political shifts in national priorities may be observed' (Schulte, 2013: 11).

Internet governance: a new domain of nation branding

Strategic communication has become a core pillar of early 21st century statecraft, inspiring new critical and instrumentalist theories at the crossroads of global politics and global communication (e.g. Hayden, 2011; Miskimmon et al., 2013; Nye, 2004; Pamment, 2012; Price, 2014). National governments think of their international reputation as a crucial geopolitical asset to be managed proactively; if left unattended, contemporary governance logic proceeds, the country's image could be overshadowed by immediate competition or, worse, intentionally undermined by adversaries. Nation branding, the lens this study privileges, shares this premise. Additionally, nation branding is particularly attuned to talking about the relationship between the national and the commercial.

Nation branding is the development and strategic communication of national identity with tools, techniques and expertise derived from corporate brand management (Aronczyk, 2013: 15; see also Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Kaneva, 2011). Nation branding reconstitutes nationhood as a brand, 'the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings, and sense of authenticity conjured by the product' (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 4). The national brand communicates what it alleges to be the nation's essential and indigen-ous themes, morals and values in order to conjure the sense of the nation's authenticity in the eyes of domestic and global audiences.

Governments have come to self-consciously define the national community through the methods, rhetoric and logic of a branded commodity (Bolin and Ståhlberg, 2010). On a pragmatic level, nation branding aims to turn the nation's cultural wealth into material gains (Bandelj and Wherry, 2011). Nation-branding campaigns persuade a variety of target audiences – investors, tourists, skilled workers and consumers – to choose their nation-state as a place to invest, relax, work, study and consume. On a symbolic level, nation branding serves to discursively delineate the boundaries of belonging to the nation and to communicate domestically and internationally the nation's aspirations, ideologies and values.

The widespread legitimacy that nation branding has attained as a commonsensical instrument of statecraft and a way of conceiving of the nation reveals the extent to which the branding logic has penetrated the social imaginary and global economy (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004). Volcic and Andrejevic (2016) conceptualize such unprecedented symbiosis between the nation, the market and the media as *commercial nationalism*, whereby nationalism is used to sell commercial products and services, while the public sector uses commercial strategies to foster national interests. Yet, despite the immense role of media in this triad, an explicit analytical focus on media as technologies and organizations within nation-branding scholarship has remained a largely vacant niche in need of greater scrutiny (Bolin and Ståhlberg, 2015; see also Kaneva, 2016).

This article draws attention specifically to digital media as a realm currently outside the purview of critical nation-branding studies. We begin to untangle the interlinkages between nation branding and digital media technologies and organizations in the practices of global Internet governance. This approach considers current debates and contestations in global Internet governance as a subdomain of a nation's branding efforts in the digital age.

Internet governance is ‘the design and administration of the technologies necessary to keep the Internet operational and the enactment of substantive policy around these technologies’ (DeNardis, 2014: 6). Given the Internet’s increasing centrality to the entire spectrum of domestic and foreign affairs, Internet policymaking has moved from obscure technical bodies to the fore of international relations (Choucri, 2012). Mueller’s (2010) characterization of global Internet governance as ‘the ongoing set of disputes and deliberations over how the Internet is coordinated, managed and shaped to reflect policies’ (p. 9) alludes to the discursive dimension of this increasingly contentious competition surrounding rulemaking for cyberspace. Two principal normative claims underlie the debates over Internet governance. One is about ‘Internet freedom’, asserting that governments should not interrupt information flows crisscrossing national borders. The other is about ‘Internet sovereignty’, which argues that governments can legitimately limit digital information flows to protect domestic culture and economy.

The United States are leading the Internet freedom camp, which consists primarily of Western liberal democracies and their allies in the developing world. The rhetoric of Internet freedom draws on the century-old ‘free flow of information’ doctrine and metaphors of an open, global, borderless Internet. Internet freedom promotes the narrative that information should travel across national borders without restrictions in order to spread knowledge, democracy and stability. Proponents of Internet freedom advance the system of multistakeholder governance, in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses and other interested parties participate in intergovernmental policy deliberations alongside governments (Mueller, 2010: 82).

The Internet sovereignty camp, in contrast, stresses the primacy of national borders and state autonomy in regulating the Internet domestically and globally. The overarching claim of Internet sovereignty is that the Internet is not different from other types of communication technologies and, as with radio or television, the ultimate authority to govern the online domain lies with the nation-state. Multilateralism – traditional intergovernmental structures and forums, such as the United Nations International Telecommunication Union – is a model that countries of the Internet sovereignty camp lobby for in opposition to multistakeholderism. China and Russia, often supported by Central Asian and Middle Eastern autocracies, have emerged as Internet sovereignty’s most vocal proponents on the international stage.

Brand narratives of Internet freedom and Internet sovereignty discursively emphasize some of their underlying characteristics and obscure others. The narrative of Internet freedom links the notion of the global Internet to the widely accepted, benevolent tropes of the rule of law, human rights and freedom of expression. In the meantime, the economic and geopolitical interests of the United States and other major technological powers, which benefit from maintaining the political–technological status quo, are made less obvious (Carr, 2016; McCarthy, 2015; Powers and Jablonski, 2015). In turn, the Internet sovereignty narrative speaks of legitimate concerns over protection of national cultural and political differences, but fails to acknowledge the restrictive and oppressive behaviors that its proponents often engage in. In practice, no government adheres to either of these absolutist positions, but rather pursues a pragmatic mix of openness and protectionism. Both Internet freedom and Internet sovereignty should be critically approached as often self-contradicting discursive ideological constructs and not as objective absolutes.

As digital media are central to the political economy of the Internet, governments behind both Internet policy agendas work closely with their national digital enterprises to communicate their respective Internet governance narratives. The Internet's technological arrangement lends significant powers over information flows to online intermediaries – third-party services, such as social media platforms and search engines, that mediate between digital content and users who interact with it (DeNardis, 2014: Chapter. 7; Goldsmith and Wu, 2006: Chapter. 5; Musiani et al., 2016). Private intermediaries have come to enact 'transnational governance in spaces that previously were resolved by the state' (DeNardis, 2014: 172). Online intermediaries not only provide access to the Internet, but also construct user experience in interacting with each other, in publishing and distributing web content, and in participating in online communities – with longstanding implications for the norms of online expression and social interaction. In other words, private digital media have become powerful regulators of the online public sphere that is the Internet.

Our use of media in this article falls within three registers – with corresponding target audiences. First, most broadly, we conceive of global governance of the Internet, the ultimate convergent medium, as a field where nations align themselves with Internet freedom and Internet sovereignty brands. At this level, the audience is the international community. Leaders of the Internet freedom and Internet sovereignty camps communicate their visions to other governments in order to build coalitions and gain greater geopolitical leverage. These alliances are often mobilized at decisive moments, such as voting for policy proposals at major communication governance events.

The second register, and the explicit object of our investigation, are the private digital media companies. Specifically, we focus on how China and Russia discursively construct their relationship with the national digital champions Baidu and Yandex, respectively, in the context of promoting the Internet sovereignty brand. Digital media companies are part of the audience of key non-governmental stakeholders of the global Internet governance debate. Other members in this category include academia and analysts, business and civil society. While these communities have varying agendas, histories and resources, their common denominator is the expert authority and power to shape discourses and norms surrounding Internet policymaking domestically and internationally. The state often delegates some of its Internet governance functions to the non-state community in order to make governmental involvement less overt while still achieving national goals (Drezner, 2007: Chapter. 4).

Third, more implicitly and more traditionally for nation-branding studies, we think of media as broadcasters of Internet governance brand narratives. Since news media have come to regularly cover global Internet governance, the narratives now directly reach lay audiences and shape public opinion over how the Internet should be governed and by whom. Mainstream Western media, whether corporate (e.g. *The New York Times*) or part of the state-branding apparatus (e.g. Deutsche Welle), overwhelmingly perpetuate the Internet freedom narrative. In turn, as can be expected, China's and Russia's state-funded international media (see, for example, Rawnsley, 2015) broadcast their governments' Internet sovereignty narratives.

The next section follows the emergence and development of the Internet sovereignty brand and the integral role that private digital media companies have come to play in its promotion.

Constructing a Sino-Russian Internet sovereignty brand

Political–economic regimes in China and Russia blend statism, oligarchy and neoliberalism (see, for example, Harvey, 2005: Chapter 5; Rutland, 2013). Domestic economic liberalization, albeit with a heavy involvement of the state, and integration into the global capitalist economy coexist with political authoritarianism. In the 2000s, economic resurgence in concert with cultural nationalism encouraged China and Russia to challenge the US-led unipolar world order and rebrand themselves as great regional powers in a multipolar world (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010). Both governments have allocated substantial resources into communicating their new brand identities through an array of media platforms, mega events and public diplomacy initiatives.

China's and Russia's nation-branding discourse and practice abound with similarities (Wilson, 2015). Both countries deploy the notion of state sovereignty as the centerpiece of the resurgent great-power identity and increasingly emphasize civilizational values that differentiate them from the West. China and Russia perceive Western nation branding as subversive, while framing their own efforts as a legitimate attempt to establish a more balanced informational world order. Finally, in both countries, nation branding is fundamentally a state project, orchestrated and directed by the government. China and Russia have applied this framework to the promotion of their brands as Internet sovereigns.

The Internet sovereignty brand was born in 1998 when Russia proposed to the United Nations a draft resolution on the 'Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security' (United Nations, General Assembly, 1999). The document introduces the overarching discursive claim of the Internet sovereignty brand, from which all others derive: the central role of the state and interstate organizations in governing the Internet. Throughout the following decade, China and Russia advanced this notion via multiple emerging Internet governance bodies and processes, including the World Summit on the Information Society, the Internet Governance Forum, the World Congress on Information Technology, and the Netmundial. In the 2010s, as Internet governance became a hotly contested geopolitical issue, the 'digital bromance' (Gabuev, 2015) between China and Russia has grown ever closer and their efforts to promote the Internet sovereignty narrative ever more synchronized.

In 2011, together with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, China and Russia submitted to the General Assembly of the United Nations a proposal of an 'International Code of Conduct for Information Security' (United Nations, General Assembly, 2011). Countering the globalist rhetoric of the Internet freedom narrative, the Code emphasizes the 'sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of all States' and 'respect for the diversity of history, culture and social systems of all countries.' The Code stresses the rights of states to protect their information space, 'spiritual and cultural environment', and the need for 'the establishment of a multilateral, transparent and democratic international Internet management system' at the governmental level. In 2015, a slightly updated version of the Code was resubmitted to the United Nations on behalf of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (member states are China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) – a sign of the institutionalization of Internet governance politics.

The most direct and widely covered clash of the two principal Internet governance narratives to date took place in 2012 at the World Conference on International Telecommunications under the auspices of the UN International Telecommunication Union (ITU). National representatives gathered for a seemingly mundane review of existing telecommunications regulations. Last updated in 1988, in the pre-Web era, the regulations did not contain explicit provisions for the Internet. A proposal by China, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Sudan and Egypt suggested amendments to the ITU regulations, which would classify the Internet as telecommunications. This would have been a step in the direction of a greater role of the nation-state in governing the online domain within the state's physical borders. The amendments faced vigorous opposition from the Internet freedom camp and were withdrawn by their proponents.

China and Russia formalized their cyberalliance in 2015 with a bilateral Agreement on International Information Security Cooperation. The agreement reaffirms that state sovereignty and international norms and principles apply to state conduct in the information and communication domain, and that national jurisdiction takes precedence over information infrastructure located within the state's geographical borders (Government of Russia, 2015).

Increasingly, China's and Russia's Internet sovereignty narrative has addressed the political economy of Internet governance and critiqued the perceived global hegemony of American technological firms. At the first meeting of the BRICS communication ministers in 2015, Russia's Minister of Communications and Mass Media Nikolay Nikiforov pointed out that a key issue on the agenda was a consideration of 'what joint efforts should be taken ... so that national IT companies of the BRICS countries could take their rightful place on the market of the BRICS countries and, ideally, on the global market' (Russia's Presidency in BRICS, 2015b). To this end, the meeting hosted an IT Forum, where national digital champions of the BRICS showcased their latest developments. The joint communique following the meeting pledged to diversify the global IT market and reaffirmed the sovereign right of states 'to establish and implement policies for information and communication networks in their territories in accordance with their respective history, culture, religion and social factors' (Russia's Presidency in BRICS, 2015a).

The latest in a series of major China–Russia Internet governance events was held in April 2016. In partnership with several Russian governmental bodies, Moscow hosted the 7th International Safe Internet Forum, which featured the 1st Russia-China ICT Development & Security Forum. A sizeable Chinese delegation included Lu Wei, the country's cyberezar at the time, and Fang Binxing, the chief engineer of the Golden Shield, a filtering and blocking technology for Internet censorship within China. Digital sovereignty and the necessity to counterbalance American Internet policy and companies were the all-permeating tropes of the event. Igor Schegolev, Aide to the President of Russia and former Minister of Telecommunications, noted that governments cannot promote their national online interests through 'transnational' digital companies that have monopolized the global market (Safe Internet Forum, 2016). Fang echoed the sentiment of his Russian colleague: 'Sovereignty in general, and digital sovereignty in particular, is the inherent right of every nation and its citizens. For example, the United States of

America is actively developing its sovereignty, despite the outward rhetoric supposedly rejecting the idea' (Safe Internet Forum, 2016).

China's and Russia's growing opposition to what they see as an inequitable US-dominated political economy of the Internet has meant a greater role for domestic digital media champions in building the Internet sovereignty brand. Leading national enterprises are not solely brought up rhetorically, but are brought to participate in the interstate events under the banner of the Internet sovereignty brand. Baidu and Yandex have played a particularly prominent part in this emerging trend.

Founded in 2000 by Li Yanhong, Baidu is the dominant player in the Chinese search engine market. In 2005, it was among the first Chinese companies to go public on Nasdaq. It has reached a near-monopoly status with over 75 percent market share in the nation. Baidu has diversified its business over the years, for instance, by investing significantly in the online video streaming market. Baidu's largest shareholder is its founder and CEO, Li Yanhong, who holds 32 percent of the shares (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2016a). Baidu is well connected to networks of media, finance and politics through Li's positions as chair of the China Federation of Industry and Commerce and the Internet Society of China, the industry's self-regulatory body.

Yandex was also incorporated in 2000 and runs Russia's most popular search engine of the same name (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2016b). In addition, the company offers a host of online services, from e-commerce to taxi apps. It listed on Nasdaq in 2011. Yandex is valued at around 5 billion US dollars, with an annual revenue of over 820 million US dollars, and with a staff of over 5600 employees. Arkady Volozh, the principal founder and CEO, owns over 10 percent of Class B shares, which translate into over 47 percent voting power. Yandex's share of the Russian search market is over 55 percent, compared to Google's nearly 30 percent. Outside Russia, Yandex operates search engines tailored to domestic audiences in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Ukraine. It has also run an international English language search website, Yandex.com, since 2010. The company has a research and development office, Yandex Labs, in Silicon Valley and several representative offices across Russia and Europe. It derives approximately 9 percent of its revenues from advertisers outside Russia.

There are numerous historic and structural parallels between Baidu and Yandex. At the same time, the specific nature of the public-private relationship between the media and the state depends on each state's national political and information system. The following two sections examine how the Chinese and Russian leadership construct the state media relations with their digital champions as part of the effort to build their national digital brands.

Baidu: 'a means to broadcast Chinese culture'

Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has allocated much energy to bolstering its international image (Wang, 2011). After nearly half a century of ideological confrontation between communist China and the capitalist West, the country's strategic communication has largely moved away from emphasis on ideological differences to a cultural and educational angle that downplays political antagonisms (Zhao, 2013: 13).

In the 1990s and 2000s, China's nation branding focused on the promotion of its economic growth, with contrarian political rhetoric mostly absent, through an array of public relations initiatives and channels. This strategy was 'consistent with the logic of neo-liberalised global media production and the consumption of the spectacle, [which] relies on slick productions, technological innovations, private-public partnerships, as well as the mobilization of domestic and transnational advertising and public relation machines' (Zhao, 2013: 21). This approach can be exemplified by the Times Square billboard that was displayed during former President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States in 2011 or by the over 200 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms set up worldwide to promote Chinese culture (Hartig, 2015).

To communicate the brand of an economically resurgent and politically non-threatening China, the government has relied on an array of media channels (Sun, 2010; Zhang, 2008). Since 2004, China has invested heavily in state media outlets, such as the Central China Television, Xinhua News Agency, the Party's newspaper *People's Daily* and its overseas version, *Global Times*, and China Radio International. These efforts are coordinated by the Central Foreign Propaganda Office, established in 1980 and revived in 1993, and the Information Office of the State Council. With the fast dissemination of the Internet across China and the rise of Chinese online enterprises, the country's leadership has increasingly viewed Internet policy as part of its nation-branding framework, and a sphere to project its power.

Chinese Internet policy has had distinct characteristics throughout its development. As Shen Hong (2016: 308–311) argues, from 1987 to 2001, the Chinese state was mainly concerned about developing Internet infrastructure and the country was largely silent on matters of global Internet governance. From 2002 to 2009, there was selective participation in global Internet governance, including by private companies like ZTE and Huawei. However, from 2010 on, both the state and private corporations became active in shaping global Internet governance through its key discussion and policymaking platforms (Hong, 2016).

After Xi Jinping's ascendance to presidency in 2012, Chinese Internet politics have seen a return to ideology that bears strains of re-mixed Maoism and 'an increasingly visible ideological thread vying to give coherence to an expanding system of internet control' (Yang, 2014: 109). This governing ideology, carried out by the Cyberspace Administration of China, is based around the notions of sovereignty and national harmony. The state explicitly embraced 'Internet diplomacy' when in 2014 *People's Daily* framed Internet diplomacy as a new means of serving national interests, including 'hosting internet related international conferences and forums to showcase national image and competency' (66wz.com, 2014)

Enacting the newly adopted strategy, China hosted its first World Internet Conference in November 2014. The main message of the event was to challenge the US Internet hegemony. As *People's Daily* (2014) puts it,

... the US hegemony of Internet governance in the past 10 years is against the spirit of the Internet. The US is trying to monopolize rule-making power and governance rights with its technological strength. Worse, the US intends to sacrifice other countries' security in order to ensure its own. To some extent, the US' abuse of its dominant power of the Internet has already become one of the biggest problems for global Internet governance. (Author's translation)

At the end of the conference, China asked participating nations to sign the Wuzhen Declaration. This document laid out nine points, calling for a collectively governed Internet characterized by enhanced connectivity, improved technology and booming online economy. Furthermore, it called for respect for the Internet sovereignty of all countries and for joining efforts in enhancing cybersecurity, combating cyberterrorism and child pornography and spreading 'positive energy'. The Declaration did not pass, and Western media regarded China's efforts to lobby the document as ironic, given the country's track record of online control and censorship (Bloomberg News, 2014).

This focus on sovereignty of China's Internet policy is consistent with the country's broader foreign policy discourse. At a press conference during the National People's Congress, Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated that China's diplomacy is focusing on forging partnerships, not alliances (Government of the People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015a). The focus on partnership encompasses three basic features: equality, peace and inclusiveness. In particular, according to Yi's opening remarks at the Symposium on International Development and China's Diplomacy, equality implies that 'countries, regardless of their sizes or levels of development, should respect each other's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity as well as each other's choice of development path and values' (Xinhua News Agency, 2014).

Since the early 2000s, the Go Global policy has informed China's Internet diplomacy. One of the five directives of this policy prescribes the government to '[s]upport the brand recognition of Chinese companies in foreign markets', while others relate to foreign direct investment, product diversification, risk control and other financial measures (Government of the People's Republic of China, State Council, 2006). Go Global marries the economic potential of digital industries with their cultural influence and forges a partnership between private business and government: when private companies go overseas, the government also utilizes such opportunities as a means to conduct diplomacy.

China's political leadership has fostered ties with its digital media champions in advancing the Internet sovereignty brand. During President Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea in July 2014, he was accompanied by a group of business delegates, which included Internet and ICT business leaders, such as Baidu's CEO Li Yanhong, Alibaba's Ma Yun, and Huawei's Ren Zhengfei. During a speech at George Washington University, Lu Wei, the former head of China's Cyberspace Administration, invited US college graduates to visit China's national 'internet champions' (GWToday, 2014; China.com, 2014). The speech highlighted the business and economic aspects of Internet development in China, while downplaying ideological and political differences with the West over government control of the Internet. During the 2015 12th National People's Congress in Beijing, Premier Li Keqiang reinforced the government's support for private Internet companies' overseas expansion through the Internet Plus Action Plan: 'we will develop the 'Internet Plus' Action Plan ...to encourage healthy development of e-commerce, industrial networks, and internet banking, and to get internet-based companies to increase their presence in the international market' (Xinhua News Agency, 2015).

The state encourages global expansion of Chinese media and Internet companies, seeing this process as inherently aligned with the country's national interests (Lee, 2003; Zhao, 2013). The goal of deploying an increasing number of non-state commercial actors

goes beyond financial success and extends into strengthening the national brand. One of the government's closest allies in this strategy is Baidu.

Baidu accelerated its globalization plan in 2007 with the launch of its first international service in Japan, followed by Vietnam in 2011, and Thailand, Egypt and Brazil in 2014. Speaking about Baidu's Chinese language search service in 2009, in an interview with *People's Daily*, Li Yanhong stated: 'To offer a worldwide Chinese search service is also a means to broadcast and disseminate Chinese culture' (*People's Daily*, 2009). It is clear that Baidu is well-aware of the cultural implications of the company going global. However, the much-hyped expansion into the Japanese market was not successful, and the company closed most of the services offered there. Baidu's operation in Vietnam was recently shut down due to failure to register domain names and for censoring search content regarding territories in the South China Sea (Logan, 2015). Overall, Baidu's overseas expansion has had minimal commercial success, constituting less than 1 percent of the company's total revenue.

Even with limited operations in the foreign markets, Baidu's recent expansion and the accompanying rhetoric shows a more active involvement of private Internet enterprises in China's construction of its Internet sovereignty brand. In November 2014, Baidu launched its Portuguese language search engine Busca in Brazil, in the presence of President Xi Jinping and Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff. In addition, Baidu bought control of Brazilian online-discount company Peixe Urbano for an undisclosed sum (Reuters, 2014). Together with Huawei, Baidu also signed a contract in July 2014 with the Brazilian government to establish a center for research and development in the country, budgeted at US\$54.4 million (Ozores, 2014). Notably, Baidu's expedition into Brazil took place under the auspices of the state.

The following section turns to the analysis of the analogous state-digital media relations in the Russian context.

Yandex: 'new Russia: full of innovation and entrepreneurial spirit'

The media system in contemporary Russia has been described as 'a disturbing echo of the Soviet model' (Oates, 2013: 13; see also Koltsova, 2006; Richter, 2011; Vartanova, 2012). The post-Soviet economic and political liberalization abandoned the Soviet-era near-total state control over the media, but it never led to the adoption of the liberal Western model. While numerous critical and investigative media outlets emerged, Russian media have failed en masse to embrace the public service function of the Fourth Estate. In the 1990s, the mainstream media market was divided among several oligarchic groups, whose conflicting political agendas provided the audiences with a degree of informational pluralism. Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 1999–2000 marked the end of the oligarchic media system and the return to the explicitly statist media model.

Two documents adopted in 2000 – the Doctrine of Information Security and the Foreign Policy Concept – set the framework that has guided Russian information policy since then. Domestically, the Doctrine links media and communication production to the ontological and physical security of the nation and unequivocally frames the state as the

primary producer and protector of national identity (Carman, 2002). Internationally, the Foreign Policy Concept's section on Informational Support of Foreign Policy Activities for the first time prescribed to 'shape a positive perception of Russia abroad and a friendly attitude towards it' and emphasized 'a pressing need for Russia rapidly to develop its own effective means of influencing public opinion abroad' (Melville and Shakleina, 2005: 97; on Russia's soft power strategy, see Feklyunina, 2008; Sergunin and Karabeshkin, 2015). The Internet has gradually come to play a prominent role in both domestic cyberpolitics and in the construction of Russia's international brand of a digital power.

The Russian government has acknowledged the strategic potential of networked communications since the 1990s (Rohozinski, 2000). Until the early to mid-2000s, however, the Internet's relatively low penetration – which rose from under 2 percent in 2000 to around 27 percent in 2008 (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), n.d.) – constrained the technology's economic and political prowess. One of the rare instances when the state publicly turned its attention to major Internet companies took place in 2001. Vladimir Putin welcomed to the Kremlin the executives of some of the nation's leading digital media and services, including Yandex CEO Arkady Volozh (President of Russia, 2001). Putin lamented that Russia's innovative economy was significantly lagging behind Western countries and assured the businesses that the government would lend them diplomatic assistance in their international endeavors. The promise never materialized into meaningful tangible steps to support foreign activities of domestic digital media. Instead, during Putin's first two presidential terms, domestic information policy focused largely on harnessing mainstream television, radio and print media (Lipman, 2015).

Dmitry Medvedev succeeded Vladimir Putin as President in 2008. 'Modernization' and 'innovation' were the overarching tropes of Medvedev's technophile presidential term (Black, 2013). In a widely propagated ambition to move Russia from the decade-long dependency on natural resources to the information economy, the government, *inter alia*, set up the Skolkovo Innovation Center in a Moscow suburb, envisioned as Russia's Silicon Valley, and formed a Commission for Modernization and Technological Development (see Graham, 2013, Part III). An update to the Foreign Policy Concept under Medvedev pledged to 'create favorable external conditions for the modernization of Russia' (President of Russia, 2008). Yandex, as Russia's largest digital company, became integral to the government-led modernization drive, balancing between the roles of a partner and an agentless subject in its relations with the state.

In 2009, in 'a move assuring the government that control over the strategic asset won't be gained by someone who shouldn't have it', Yandex gave Russia's largest government-affiliated bank, Sberbank, the right to veto the sale of over 25 percent of Yandex's shares (Golitsyna and Glikin, 2009). The following year, as part of his official trip to the United States, Medvedev visited Yandex's Silicon Valley office and praised the company's success at a joint press conference with the US President Barack Obama. In 2011, Yandex became the first Russian technological company to list at the Nasdaq stock exchange in New York. Both the company and the government used this event as a platform to link the commercial to the national. In his speech at Nasdaq, Arkady Volozh said,

Yandex represents new Russia: full of innovation and entrepreneurial spirit. ... We are not the only technology company in Russia; there are plenty of them. ... We believe there is a place in our world for a global technology company born in Russia. (Yandex, 2011)

At the G8 meeting, Medvedev celebrated Yandex's IPO as a 'good indicator' for the country and its economy (President of Russia, 2011). Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, also seized this nation-branding opportunity. In a letter to *The New York Times*, responding to earlier criticism of Russia's business climate, Peskov (2011) wrote,

[A] pertinent representative of today's Russia is Yandex, which recently enjoyed a wildly successful initial public offering. Yandex is but one example of the sort of home-grown Russian innovation that is beginning to thrive here. ... These companies are flourishing here because they recognize the remarkable and positive changes in Russia over the last 20 years.

The increasingly close relationship between the state and the Internet sector during Medvedev's four-year term prompted some analysts at the time to suggest that it is 'imperative to take an interest in public-private relations' between Russian authorities and digital media:

Russian Internet players, supported by the Kremlin, are leading a strategic offensive on the world's new technology market. The development of this trend will certainly enable the emerging *Russia brand* to be polished up and to define the credibility of Russia as a *digital power*. (Nocetti, 2011: 23, Original emphasis)

The brand narrative of a positive collaborative public-private partnership between Yandex and the state ended with Medvedev's presidential term. Vladimir Putin returned to presidency in 2012 amid the largest oppositional rallies in Russia's post-Soviet history. Popular and media discourse framed the protests as a revolt of the networked online public (Oates, 2013, Chapter. 7). The Kremlin responded to unrest with an expedient turn to social and political conservatism (Gel'man, 2015, Chapter 5). The tropes of traditional values, religious roots and opposition to the Western liberal-democratic order supplanted Medvedev's discourse of modernization and innovation. The state began to narrate the Internet as a Western subversive technology, a source of social and political vices, and ultimately a threat to Russian society that needs to be controlled and curtailed (Asmolov, 2015). Since 2012, the government has passed an unprecedented number of restrictive Internet-related laws (Tselikov, 2014), while intensifying efforts to build an international coalition of Internet sovereigns (Nocetti, 2015).

Russia's official discourse abandoned the pacifying rhetoric of overcoming Cold War prejudices and instead began to stress ideological and civilizational difference between Russia and the West. With the unfolding of the Ukrainian crisis in early 2014, Russia-West relations further deteriorated. Tellingly, in March 2015, the Kremlin ended the contract with the Ketchum PR, a US-based public relations firm that for nearly a decade had handled Russia's media relations in the West. Explaining the decision, Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for president redux Vladimir Putin, said: 'an information war against Russia does not facilitate the activation of image-building efforts'

(Nechepurenko, 2015). The new sociopolitical trend also shaped the public–private dynamic between the state and the digital media.

At the Forum of Independent Local and Regional Media in 2014, Putin labeled the Internet ‘a special CIA project’, adding that the United States wanted to retain their monopoly over it (President of Russia, 2014b). He went on to say that in Yandex’s early years, the company was ‘forced to have a certain number of Americans and Europeans on their management team’. The remarks were widely publicized by domestic and global media and caused Yandex’s shares to plummet the following day. The president’s demonstrative carelessness about the financial damage to the leading national digital media signals the priority of political subordination of the private to the public over commercial goals.

A confirmation that this episode was not isolated came only a few months later, at the forum for Internet Entrepreneurship. An exchange between Arkady Volozh and Vladimir Putin captured the Kremlin’s reinvigorated stress on sovereignty in the digital domain. Volozh celebrated the success of Russian technological companies in conquering foreign markets as both a ‘mission’ to diversify the global search engine market and a source of financial gains for the country’s economy. In response, Putin stressed the importance for the ‘missionaries [to have] pure sovereignty’ and not be part of a ‘monopoly’ – an implicit reference to American influence over Internet governance and business. The government’s mission, in Putin’s words, lies in helping Russia’s ‘national [Internet] segment to become independent’ from foreign influences: ‘Whenever [business development] happens on a national basis, this always benefits the state’. In this case, Putin assured, the government would help the Internet champions ‘make progress at home and win over new markets’ (President of Russia, 2014a).

Conclusion

Digital media and the state – between collaboration and subordination

As an early effort to bridge critical nation branding and digital media studies, the broad task of this article was to conceptualize the relationship between these two fields of practice and analysis, and to allude to areas for future research. We conceived of global Internet governance – an emergent arena of political contestation over technological policymaking – as a domain of nation branding. The two constitutive brands of the Internet governance debate are Internet freedom, promoted by the United States and its allies, and Internet sovereignty, advanced foremost by China and Russia.

The article outlined the history and foundational discursive pillars of the Internet sovereignty brand, built around the normative notion of state sovereignty and international multilateral forums as central to Internet governance. Curiously, while the Internet sovereignty brand relies on culturally protectionist tropes, it adopts the opposite stance economically. Its stated aim is not to isolate domestic markets, but rather to establish global technological equity through lowering the share of American IT products and services. This observation complicates the neat binary of democratic and authoritarian approaches to Internet governance.

The specific concern of the investigation was with the public–private dynamic between the state (China and Russia) and the media (Baidu and Yandex) in the context of constructing and communicating the Internet sovereignty brand. Baidu and Yandex play an integral part in these state efforts, blurring the line between national and corporate identities and interests. Chinese and Russian governments discursively link successful commercial endeavors of their digital media, such as Nasdaq listings or the opening of a branch, to their national brands of rising digital powers. Increasingly, both countries involve their digital champions in overtly political initiatives and events devoted to countering American IT hegemony. Baidu and Yandex, in turn, recognize their own strategic importance to their respective countries' Internet diplomacy and see themselves, in part, as national brand ambassadors. While the broad contours of the China-Baidu and Russia-Yandex relations in this context are similar, the article also noted certain differences.

The relationship between Internet companies and the Chinese government can be described as symbiotic. On the one hand, as the Chinese government integrates Internet diplomacy into its nation-branding framework, it uses digital media's globalization efforts to promote national culture through privately operated and disseminated information goods and services. On the other hand, the government relies on Baidu and other digital media champions to form the material backbone of its Internet sovereignty brand, and further to upgrade its export-oriented economy by bringing out more innovative technologies (Hong, 2013). Baidu capitalizes on its relationship with the state to establish global credibility and secure commercially beneficial international contracts.

Russia's relationship with its digital media champions has been less consistent and policy-based than China's. Despite promises early in Vladimir Putin's presidency to support the country's Internet leaders in their international endeavors, Russia never developed a coherent strategy akin to China's Go Global initiative. The Kremlin had no significant engagement with Russian digital media until the late 2000s, when Yandex undertook a number of globalizing steps. Dmitry Medvedev's presidency of 2008–2012, with its proclaimed modernization push and a thaw in the Russia–US relations, saw a rapprochement between the state and digital media that was framed as collaborative. However, after the worsening of relations between Russia and the West since 2014, the Russian state made it blatantly clear that corporate digital interests were to become subordinate to state interests.

We are certain of the continuously growing importance of global Internet governance on the foreign policy agendas of all states – and the increasing role for domestic digital media champions in the implementation of these visions. It is our hope that future communication research will engage with the many intersections between nation branding and digital media mapped out in this article.

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