

**BLOGGING IN THE (COUNTER) PUBLIC SPHERE:  
THE CASE OF RUSSIAN LGBT BLOGGING COMMUNITY**

**A Dissertation**

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## **LITERATURE**

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Problem statement

The present study arises from the premise that the media plays a crucial role in sustaining democratic societies by acting as vehicles for public discourses and representations of individual and collective identities. In Russia, which has been in a state of transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, mass media did not develop into institutions of representation for civil society. Instead, since President Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, the country has been experiencing an authoritarian turn (Lonkila, 2008: 1130), which has strengthened the instrumentalization of mass media for political gain at the hand of the government. Within this situation, many social groups that fall outside of mainstream society have remained largely invisible in public discourse.

When achieving social visibility through mainstream media becomes a challenge for minorities, ordinary people can try to take control of communication streams by producing their own media (Rodriguez, 2001). In this context, the internet and surrounding technologies have been seen as holding democratizing potential and giving ordinary people multiple instruments to produce and disseminate information through the use of alternative media channels (Best & Wade, 2009; Breindl, 2010; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2000; Groshek, 2009; Witschge, 2002). Some studies specifically address the question of whether the internet can contribute to the strengthening of the public sphere and political representation, as well as the formation of the so-called networked or virtual public sphere (Bruns, 2008a; Dahlgren, 2003, 2005; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Papacharissi, 2003; Trenz, 2009).

Research on the blogosphere, and particularly its political and activist segments, became one of the central perspectives of academic efforts, both

theoretically and empirically, from which to re-address the concept of public sphere as a new inclusive space for democratic deliberation (Habermas, 1989; Reese et al., 2007; Wright, 2009). The relationship that blogs devoted to public matters have with traditional mass media outlets, and the media ecosystem, which was formed as a result of this symbiosis, became another pivotal research subject (Bruns, 2008a; De Zúñiga et al., 2011; Mitchell & Steele, 2005; Singer, 2005; Wall, 2005). Blogging, as only one aspect of online communication, has received profound attention for the possibilities it opens up to citizens in order to engage directly in the process of media production and in public debate and to avoid the long-established channels of news dissemination and gate-keeping (Bruns, 2008b).

Much of the attention of researchers has been paid to the influence the blogosphere wields upon mass media and politics in Western democracies and beyond (Adamic & Glance, 2004; Bruns, 2006; Alexanyan & Koltsova, 2009; De Vries, 2009; El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2011; Ibrahim, 2009; Siapera, 2009; Woo-young & Park, 2012; Yu, 2011). For example, the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University conducted extensive research, which centered on the impact the internet has on Russian politics, media, and society. The study indicates the significant potential of the Russian blogosphere, a space mostly free from the governmental control, to create an alternative political public sphere in a country where the freedom of the mass media system has been perpetually decreasing over the last decade. Russian bloggers appeared to cover a broad spectrum of political and social agendas and attitudes, while also supporting more cross-linking debate, and creating less self-referential “echo-chambers” than their US American counterparts (Etling et al., 2010: 17).

In this context, the present work is set to consider the Russian LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community, which remains one of the least represented communities in mainstream media. The issues related to the position and rights of LGBT people are still among the most obscure subject matters in the Russian public debate. With a longstanding tradition of discrimination, and despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993, sexual minorities in Russia continue

to face prejudice and hatred, as well as human rights violations and physical violence. The most recent development, which has had a detrimental effect on Russian LGBT community, has been the passage of the nationwide ban on “homosexual propaganda” in the summer of 2013. It explicitly prohibits the distribution of gay rights materials and public equating of straight and homosexual relationships (Elder, 2013: para. 3). In effect, LGBT discourses have been further silenced in the public sphere with the mainstream media growing ever more reluctant to provide any positive coverage of LGBT affairs under threat of administrative and legal penalties, which have already been applied to the editors (Greenslade, 2014: para. 1).

Thus, in the focus of this study lies a specific LiveJournal-based blogging community called *AntiDogma*, which is devoted to the advocacy of LGBT equality and the support of LGBT rights. A grassroots formation, *AntiDogma* is a vehicle for citizen bloggers to initiate public debate on the subjects, which are being suppressed within the official public sphere. This research conceives of it as an alternative news outlet, an issue-centered counterpublic space for deliberation, and an arena of activism. This study will analyze this community through the close examination of selected blog entries and commentaries, in order to understand different aspects of civic engagement by means of the blogosphere.

## **1.2. Blogs: the new public sphere?**

### **1.2.1. Public sphere and its critique: Habermas and beyond**

#### ***Bourgeois public sphere: its rise and decline***

The idea of public sphere is the central theoretical foundation of this research. It has been widely recognized by democratic theorists as an imperative component of strong democracy (e.g. Benhabib, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 2000). The concept was developed by Habermas (1989) in his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he outlined in great detail the historical formation of the



bourgeois public sphere. According to Habermas, it was “a category [...] typical of an epoch” (1989: xvii), for it came into being as a result of political, economic, and social changes that started to occur in the countries of Western Europe around the sixteenth century. The development of capitalist markets, which came in the stead of feudal systems, and the transformation of political institutions accompanied by disintegration of absolutist states, generated a new kind of publicity centered on autonomous individuals.

In most general terms, public sphere is defined as a communicative space where members of civil society come together in order to deliberate the issues of common concern with the purpose of forming public opinion by means of critical reasoning. In practice, it materialized in England, France, and Germany in a variety of public venues, such as coffee houses, salons, and *Tischgesellschaften*, where people would gather to debate public matters. Habermas underlined three main conditions for the existence of the public sphere. First was a disregard for the status of its members, meaning that everyone was to appear as an equal in the debate, regardless of differences in their social, economic, or political status. In the bourgeois public sphere, thus, the individuals took part in a critical public debate as “common human beings” and “in principle, without regard to all preexisting social and political rank and in accord with universal rules” (Habermas, 1989: 54). The second condition was that the topics debated in the public sphere had to belong to the domain of public concern. The participants discussed the issues of general interest, as opposed to the private concerns of elite groups. Lastly, public sphere had to be inclusive and open to different social groups and opinions without imposing any qualifications on access to the debate. As Habermas (1989: 37) put it:

However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who – insofar as they were propertied and educated – as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion.

Therefore, the bourgeois public sphere was a novel, historically unprecedented formation. The conditions that emphasized the equality of the interlocutors, and facilitated the public use of reason were auspicious for problematization of areas “that until then had not been questioned” (Habermas, 1989: 36). Whereas formerly it was church or state authority who had a monopoly on the selection and interpretation of facts, now the citizens could decide among themselves about the subjects of debate, “inasmuch as the public defined its discourse as focusing on all matters of common concern” (Calhoun, 1992: 13). Involved in the public sphere, citizens could offer implicit and explicit critiques of the state, and regulate the civil society using a unique medium of public reasoning (Thompson, 1995: 70). In other words, the public sphere appeared as a constitutive realm of civil society, which challenged the authority of the state.

The emergence of the public sphere signaled a “shift from the principle of representativity to the principle of discursivity as the central mode of legitimating political order” (Trenz, 2009: 35). The individual autonomy of people standing in a reciprocal relationship toward each other simultaneously became an organizing principle of the new representative order, which “guaranteed the protection of the individual” (Gillwald, 1993: 65) and “needed to be defended by providing good arguments and justifications that were equally considered by all” (Trenz, 2009: 35). At the same time, the formation of the public sphere brought to the forefront periodical press. It stimulated the growth in circulation of newspapers and critical journals, which became a medium of public discourse. As censorship decreased, the press increasingly gained political significance by scrutinizing and holding accountable the institutions of political authority.

Habermas continued with an argument that, despite its great importance to the inception of Western democracies, the bourgeois public sphere did not endure. He described a series of structural changes, which led to its subsequent decline. The disintegration of the public sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appeared in the contemporary era, and was linked to several social and political tendencies, among which were the development of state capitalism, culture industries,

and the increasingly powerful position of economic corporations in the public life (Kellner, 2000: 262). The initial distinction between the state and civil society, which guaranteed the possibility for rational critique of the former by the latter, began to disappear with the emergence of the welfare state. Citizens were losing their autonomy as they grew more dependent on the state for the services it provided (Roberts & Crossley, 2004: 5).

The venues of public sphere had disappeared and the press transformed into commercially-oriented large-scale media institutions. As Thompson (1995: 74) summarized, “what was once an exemplary forum of rational-critical debate [became] just another domain of cultural consumption ... [and] a sham world of image creation and opinion management.” Consequently, politics turned into a mediated spectacle sustained by means of professionalized political communication. Mass mediated political debates, according to Habermas, shifted further from the actual issues toward the tricks and strategies used to attract more votes (Roberts & Crossley, 2004: 5). A particularly remarkable development, it brought back the type of representative publicity associated with the symbols of power, costumes, protocols, and formalities (Peters, 1993: 562).

Also detrimental to the bourgeois public sphere was the changing nature of public opinion. It was losing its critical dimension as it became more closely associated with the mechanically aggregated results of political surveys (Roberts & Crossley, 2004: 6). Following Habermas, public opinion generated in the critical debate is inherently superior to the one coming from opinion polls. The latter, being based on the purposefully developed techniques, is not shaped by the public itself but is rather predetermined by the sets of questions and selfish ends of manipulative politicians. Opinion polls do not seek public engagement and, on the contrary, breed a passive citizenry dealing with a stock of engineered judgments.

Lastly, the destructive effect on the Habermasian public sphere had the supposed “dumbing down” of media content related to commercialization of media institutions. Habermas aimed this critique at the inclination of mass media to

prioritize entertainment and persuasion over education and fostering of rational-critical public debate. Market-driven, advertisement-based mass media systems became interested in reaching a solid and relatively homogeneous audience. As a result, not only they began leaning toward the simplification and primitivization of programming, but also became less inclusive and sensitive to social diversity. Combined with the professionalization of political communication, it gave rise to the mass mediated public sphere, which, instead of facilitating critical-rational debates, was limiting it to the set of topics and opinions agreed upon by the political and media elite.

### ***Critique of the Habermasian public sphere***

In the words of Calhoun (1992:4, italics in the original), “[t]he *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was born in controversy and is likely to continue to spark controversy.” Central to the analysis of democracy, it comes as a little surprise that the normative idea of the public sphere evoked considerable criticism. The following paragraphs will illuminate some notable strands in the critique of the Habermasian concept.

Important limitations of the Habermasian public sphere were elicited by the scholars of democracy, stemming from one of its fundamental principles, namely that of rationality. Habermas accentuated the constitutive role of reason, politeness, impartiality, and universality in a public debate. Following these principles, however, could easily marginalize social groups whose communicative styles are perceived as non-rational, private, emotional, and so forth (Dahlgren, 2005: 148). In other words, the bourgeois public sphere pictured by Habermas gave immediate advantage to the educated participants of the debate, who, at that time, were almost exclusively upper class males. By privileging rationality of mind as opposed to the body, desire, and the variety of unconscious experiences, normative formulation of public argumentation left out significant aspects of political debate, such as passion, emotion, gesture, and other non-rational verbal and non-verbal expressions indispensable in public debate. The limits set by the normative bias deny a considerable potential of the “democracy

of the emotions” (Giddens, 2006: 123) emerging in everyday life within the private realm.

Likewise, Habermas’ notion of the public sphere was debunked for failing to provide a means of representation for women, for it was conceived as an inherently masculine domain. This deficiency was denounced by feminist scholars who believed that by coupling public debate with the logics of universality and reason – traditionally seen as male disciplines – Habermas had not insured a place for women (Landes, 1988; Baker, 1992). The bourgeois public sphere was, on the one hand, the result of and, on the other hand, engraved in the philosophy of Enlightenment. So with its onset the ideas of rationality, universality, transparency, and common good became intrinsically masculine. The feminine realm was allocated a private space guided by emotions, passions, and other non-rational affective communicative forms. Thus, having no business in public affairs, a woman, together with her needs and interests, was erased from the bourgeois public sphere completely. Yet, the exclusion of women can be considered a historical feature of the analyzed period, rather than a conceptual flaw of the theory (Benhabib, 1992: 111).

The Habermasian model of public debate indicated clear orientation toward consensus-seeking. This aspect has been problematized, insofar as it would lead to the explicit exclusion of, in this case, all other opinions, which would fail to conform to the achieved agreement. In other words, reaching a final opinion on the subject would lead to disqualification of an entire array of positions. The pluralistic nature of political discourse would be disciplined not by censorship but by the norm of consensus. Furthermore, the agreement valued in Habermas’ normative model becomes illusory within practical political discourse. McCarthy (1992: 66-68) argued in this respect that the existing irreducible value differences, in linguistic terms, among individuals would deem it impossible to reach a rationally motivated consensus without some kind of compromise. Irreconcilable differences between various social groups on what constitutes the common good, and what to consider a general moral view as opposed to a practical matter, would force further disputes.

Some theorists, most notably Fraser (1992, 1995), proposed to abandon the idea of a single, uniform public sphere in favor of an array of alternative public spheres or *subaltern publics*. This pluralist view, she argued, appeared as a better conceptual framework to encompass “a postmodern multiplicity of mutually contestatory publics” (Fraser, 1995: 295). In this sense, the idea of subaltern publics allowed for the overcoming of the deficiencies of the normative model, in which bracketing of individuals’ statuses simply “*informally* [concealed] real inequalities” (Roberts & Crossley, 2004: 15, italics in the original).

### ***Enduring significance of the concept of public sphere***

Despite the validity of critical claims made about the Habermasian conception of public sphere, its theoretical and critical value cannot be disregarded. It is important to move beyond the narrowly-conceived and historically-bound interpretation of the idea, instead considering it as one of the most fundamental social phenomena, without which a functioning democracy is not viable.

In his effort to do precisely this, Habermas (1996: 360) wrote of the public sphere “as a network for communicating information and points of view” which emerges in communicative action. It cannot be determined exclusively as an institution or organization, neither is it bound by strict membership and regulation. In this sense, the public sphere as a social phenomenon is an open space with penetrable and ever-shifting boundaries. Never static, it should be understood as a *process* of circulation of political and social concerns, being debated by the members of the public. The dynamic circular character of the public sphere means that no issue is ever resolved, and no consensus is irrevocable. The permanence of this process allows agendas to reemerge and be renegotiated during the new cycle of public debate.

Similarly, Emirbayer & Sheller (1998: 738), rather than viewing it as a concrete space for political debate fashioned as salons or coffee houses, proposed to conceive of the public sphere as an emergent network consisting of “open-ended flows of

communication that enable socially distant interlocutors to bridge social-network positions, formulate collective orientations, and generate psychological ‘working alliances’, in pursuit of influence over issues of common concern.” In this interpretation, the public sphere appears as a nexus of political discourses which facilitate “the articulation of symbolic codes, values and representations which help to formulate individual and political orientations” (Roberts & Crossley, 2004: 17).

For Habermas, the capacity to communicate determines the quality of society (Boeder, 2005). Touching upon this subject, Dahlgren (2002: 2) concluded that the production of the public through communication “is both morally and functionally vital for democracy.” In this sense, the notion of the public sphere remains central in both political and media theory due to its function as the critical paradigm. Essentially embedded in the critical theory, it therefore seeks “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982: 244).

The public sphere is all the more important for societies in transition – with post-Soviet Russia being but one example – struggling to establish functioning democratic institutions. In these societies, citizens are often alienated from politics and lack the opportunities necessary to participate in meaningful political debate in order to articulate and negotiate their positions. In this context, the concept of public sphere can serve as a starting point for a critique of political and social processes, as well as actuating the flow of political discourses based on reciprocity and mutual recognition. In other words, it constitutes what Couldry et al. (2007: 5) called the “public connections.” Not limited to the practices of electoral politics, they more broadly refer to communicative foundations of the civil society. The public sphere is therefore a cohesive matter, which is essential for civil engagement.

### **1.2.2. The rise of the blogosphere**

Despite, and maybe because of, persistent disputes that surround the normative concept of the public sphere, the idea has gained new actuality with the proliferation

of online communication, especially due to blogs. The phenomenon of blogging emerged in the mid-90s, and since then, the number of blogs on the internet has grown extensively. An argument has been revolving around the question of whether the blogosphere – the networked aggregation of blogs – could enhance the democratic representation of citizens and deepen their engagement in political discourse (Papacharissi, 2009). In other words, the concern is about the potential of blogs, along with other online tools, to produce a new public sphere embedded in digital communication networks (Castells, 2008).

Jorn Barger is said to have been the first to come up with the word “blog” in 1997, with which he described a log of links that recorded visits to different web pages (Blood, 2000: para.1). The features which set blogs apart from other types of websites are dynamism, reverse chronological order, and pronounced use of first person (Tremayne, 2007: vii). Initially, it was a small group of internet users who started frequently updating their personal web pages and so established a web writing format which closely resembled that of a blog (Marlow, 2004: 1). Blogging platforms, such as LiveJournal and WordPress, which emerged soon thereafter, provided extremely straightforward online publishing tools and eliminated the need for HTML coding, triggering the growth of blogging community.

Usually, blogs are interactive and non-synchronous web pages with the focus on particular topics which are regularly updated by their authors (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009: 555). They can be written in a form of personal diary whose contents are shared with a selected few, or maintained as a public outlet, targeting broader audiences. By the same token, blogs can vary thematically from more mundane matters such as traveling, hobbies, or shopping, to presenting political commentary or specialist knowledge to the readers. In the context of the present study, of particular interest are political and activist blogs, when ordinary citizens take to blogging activity to communicate messages of political and social relevance.

Although blogging emerged as a grassroots phenomenon closely linked to alternative journalism and social movements, it has been gradually adopted in a



variety of ways, beyond the realm of citizen media (Siles, 2011). As Garden (2011: 484) put it, blogs “have hit the mainstream.” The convenient format of blogs, which allows easy publishing and seamless communication with the audience, quickly grew in popularity and now appears in a variety of incarnations. Apart from grassroots blogs written by ordinary people, there are organizational blogs – or sometimes called corporate blogs – which serve as communication channels between companies and people and blogs by politicians, who wish to represent themselves to their public and potential voters (Sirfy, 2004; Coleman, 2005; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Many blogs which started as grassroots news initiatives acquired organizational features by adopting policies, employing staff, and pursuing revenue (Lowrey et al, 2011). The traditional media outlets, such as *The New York Times* and *The Economist* to name a few, feature blog directories on their websites and so, further blur the boundary between professional and citizen media.

The predominant question asked by researchers is whether political blogs can reinvigorate democracy by engaging more citizens in political conversation and provide more direct links between political actors and ordinary people (Siapera, 2008: 97). There are few ways in which blogs can manifest themselves as political agents. First, they can assume the function of news media, and promote the alternative political agendas which are downplayed by the mainstream media institutions. When achieving considerable popularity, blogs can even compete with the mass media in agenda setting by directing public attention to different issues (Woodly, 2008). Even when acting as multipliers for the content of traditional media through reposting, bloggers offer multiple perspectives on unfolding events to which they provide commentary and analysis (Bruns, 2006: 18). They navigate their readers through the information flow and create a unique context for the news of the mainstream media (Boklage, 2010: 202). Altogether, they can also create buzz around certain topics or particular aspects leading to changes in social perception (Cornfield et al, 2005).

Sometimes bloggers perform the role of political watchdogs. They can conduct their own investigations to expose political wrongdoings (Siapera, 2008).

Furthermore, they can engage with seemingly mundane issues which, in reality, matter to people and affect their day to day lives. As Bode & Makarychew (2013: 58) discovered, Russian bloggers had less interest in debating abstract ideological matters, and instead focused their attention “on citizens’ real [...] problems: corruption, bad streets, pollution, or legal violations.” In this sense, citizen blog writers differ significantly from professional reporters and commentators, for they conduct their media work as activists rather than professionals. Not being paid for their activities underlines their sincere concern for public affairs for which they are willing to volunteer their time and skills, even if their political stance is partisan.

The blogosphere forms an important venue for public deliberation. Practically, it allows people to participate in political conversations both as blog writers and as readers through comments. Yet, they facilitate conversations, and circulate knowledge more generally, across space and time and make them “massively distributed but completely connected” (Marlow, 2004: 1). With very little information filtering in the grassroots blogosphere, nearly anything can be posted online without considerable constraints. As Weinberger (2007: 146) put it, “[t]he links from each blog, and the commenters who respond to each blog, capture a global dialog of people with different backgrounds and assumptions but a shared interest.” The blogosphere also requires a motivated and concerned reader, prepared to search for knowledge, as valuable information can be hidden behind massive amounts of web content.

Finally, blogs can function as activist platforms and, along with the dissemination of news and political information, they can aim at getting ordinary citizens involved in political action. Together with other online media, blogs and blogging communities can be useful tools for mobilization and coordination of citizen action, such as rallies and protests (Bennett, 2003; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). They can be employed as a convenient means of communication by the existing social movements and their organizations, but also act as prompt to action for people without formal ties to activist institutions.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LGBT COMMUNITY IN RUSSIA: AN OVERVIEW

#### 2.1. Homosexuality in Soviet Russia

##### 2.1.1. From sodomy to *muzhelozhstvo*

It can be argued that homosexuality remained relatively invisible in Russia for the most of its history. Orthodox religion has traditionally condemned homosexuality as a subversion of traditional gender roles, especially of masculinity, and has considered it a sin (Kon, 1993: 89). The first time same-sex intercourse was legally addressed was in the reforms of Peter the Great, who criminalized homosexual practices in the military in 1715 (Kondakov, 2013a: 405). Emperor Nicholas I implemented the new Legal Code in 1832, which extended penalization to the general population (Healey, 1993: 28). In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first debates arose about the need to decriminalize homosexuality. This position was famously advocated by Vladimir Nabokov, who was a strong proponent of the individual rights including right to privacy (Engelstein, 1995: 159; Baer, 2000: 183). Even though same-sex intercourse remained punishable for the duration of tsarist Russia, it “never served as a vehicle for symbolic politics” (Engelstein, 1992: 58).

Change came at the dawn of Soviet Russia when, for a short period of time after the October Revolution in 1917, the country’s population nominally enjoyed a wide range of civil liberties (Healey, 1993: 28). Eager to do away with the legal heritage of the Russian Empire, the Bolsheviks abolished the previously existing criminal code including the statute prohibiting sodomy. In 1922, after a few years of no formally organized legislation, the Soviet state received its new criminal code which omitted sodomy from the list of sexual crimes (Engelstein, 1995: 159). It was an extremely progressive step in sexual politics that decriminalized homosexual intercourse between consenting men (Healey, 1993: 28). There are also accounts that Soviet

medical doctors as well as lawyers were proud of the progressiveness of their attitudes at the Copenhagen Congress of Sexual Reform which took place in 1928 (Kon, 1998: 75) The position of the Soviet delegation presented by Dr. Nikolai Pasche-Oserski was as follows: regardless of whether it was a disease or an innate inclination, homosexuality should not be dealt with by means of legal punishment (Healey, 1993: 35; Quigley, 2007: 127). In accordance with this view, the Big Soviet Encyclopedia from the year 1930 featured an article about homosexuality that stated: “our law, proceeding from the principle of the defense of society, requires only punishment in those cases where very young persons or minors are the object of sexual interest on the part of homosexuals” (quoted in de Jong, 1982: 343). At the same time, it criticized the backwardness of European societies saying that “in the advanced capitalist countries, the struggle for the abolition of these hypocritical laws is at present far from over” (quoted in Quigley, 2007: 127).

As might be expected, the formal decriminalization of homosexuality did not mean that society was ready or willing to embrace the sexual “other”. Some researchers point out that the article of the Big Soviet Encyclopedia presented an idealistic view of the issue, which was not a truthful reflection of Soviet reality. For instance, one of the very few researchers of queerness in Russia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Simon Karlinsky, claimed that the positive outlook of official documents from that era should not lead to the naive underestimation of the existing atmosphere of repression and widespread homophobia (Baer, 2002: 500). Likewise, Healey (1993: 34) pointed out that the persecution of homosexuals did not stop with the abolition of criminal law, as Soviet authorities found ways to crush down on sexual minorities, for example, by apprehending men for disorderly conduct.

The dramatic turn took place with the rise to power of Joseph Stalin who re-criminalized homosexuality after a period of sixteen years. It is difficult to establish the exact causes for such relapse, but it is most likely related to the change in the judicial climate in general (Engelstein, 1995: 169). A totalitarian leader, Stalin

pursued the course of radical politicization of social life (Lewin, 1976). Many intimate matters became subjected to new, repressive laws.

Everything became political, and even the quotidian and its manifestations started being judged in the context of the dichotomy between Soviet and anti-Soviet. In 1933, the anti-sodomy article 154-a (later changed into Article 121-1 with the same content) was introduced into the Soviet criminal code. It stipulated legal punishment for what it called *muzhelozhstvo*, or “man laying with man”, that is consensual sexual acts between males.

It was around that time that the government also launched a political defamation campaign in the press which linked homosexuality to the notion of decadence of the capitalist West. This position was most clearly expressed in an essay titled *Proletarian Humanism* by Maxim Gorky (1953), who also introduced the novice article 154 to the public. In this essay, written in overemotional tone, Gorky claimed that “the world is ill” (Gorky, 1953: para. 1) and has “gone mad” (Gorky, 1953: para. 2). He argued that fascism appeared as a logical outcome of an unavoidable moral decay of a bourgeois society, with homosexuality being one of its most distinct manifestations. Gorky put the message bluntly: “Eliminate homosexuality, and you will make fascism disappear” (Gorky, 1953: para. 16).

The re-criminalization of homosexuality in the USSR indicated a larger change within society. Sexual life in general became political and politicized. Homosexuality was seen as a perversion, and a pervert could not be a patriot (Essig, 1999: 5). In other words, same-sex relations between men were not only immoral; they were also *anti-Soviet* and *counterrevolutionary*. This notion was articulated by Nikolai Krylenko, who served at the time as People’s Commissar for Justice (Soviet equivalent of Minister of Justice). Appealing to the political anxieties of his audience, he stated that homosexuality was a direct product of the decay of the confused “exploiting classes” who “don’t know which way to turn. [...] So they turn to ... pederasty” (Healey, 2001:196). He continued that they were “in little filthy dens and hiding places and that is the work of counterrevolution” (de Jong, 1982: 324). In

other words, being homosexual became incompatible with the Soviet master plan of building a prosperous Communist society led by the working class. In Soviet Russia, gays could not be workers, diligent and decent people who pursued their happiness, which was equated to and inseparable from the happiness of the Soviet nation as a whole.

Throughout the duration of the Soviet Union the official propaganda coupled homosexuality in public consciousness with bourgeois mentality and a lifestyle “analogous to the exploitation of workers” (Essig, 1999: 6). Even though there was a brief discussion in the 60s and 70s among Leningrad lawyers considering the need to abolish anti-sodomy law, male homosexuality remained a criminal offense punishable with a prison sentence of up to five years (Chalidze, 1977: 228). Once the mindset was established that homosexuality was “both shameful and criminal”, it was virtually erased from the public discourse, as it became “‘the unmentionable sin’ in the literal sense of the word” (Kon, 1993: 93). Meanwhile, female homosexuality was never prosecuted by law, but most women who dared to reveal their sexual otherness were subjected to psychiatric and medical intervention, under the Soviet rule (Essig, 1999: 28). Women who desired other women were pathologized and, although not criminalized, lesbianism was viewed as no less deviant and anti-Soviet than male homosexuality.

### **2.1.2. Homosexuality in Socialist press**

Socialist press, occupied with the propaganda of a healthy lifestyle, motivational pieces on the achievements of the Soviet working class, and condemnation of injustices experienced by the exploited classes in the capitalist world, was numb to sexuality as a subject of public debate. It was surrounded by the discursive silence and not to be evoked (Bernstein, 2007). This taboo affected any topic, be it homosexuality, pornography or sexual liberty more generally, and was even stronger than the ban on the political critique of the Soviet system (Hough, 1977: ch. 9). Although not legally formalized, the ban on all things homosexual was implemented in mass media, film, and literature, with even dissident writers

addressing the subject reservedly (Baer, 2009: 1). Academic publications were also pressured to avoid any discussions about homosexuality. By way of illustration, Kon (1993: 93) wrote that translations of the ancient texts were altered in order to conceal the descriptions of same-sex love and passion. One way or another, homosexuality was effectively obliterated from the Soviet public discourse. This also meant that gays and lesbians in Russia were unable to build a community to help people understand who they really were and articulate their sexual identities. There was no way for sexual minorities to be meaningfully included in society at large, unless it was as an inmate or a psychiatric patient, though always a deviant whose behavior had to be corrected.

The comeback of homosexuality in the discourse of Soviet Russia was caused by the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. The official position propagated in the mass media was that AIDS was essentially a social problem related to certain lifestyles (Medvedev, 1986: 494). In 1986, the Deputy Minister of Healthcare, Nikolai Burgasov directly linked the illness to homosexuality saying that it did not pose a threat to the Soviet population “so far as homosexuality was a criminal offense” (Kon, 1993: 95). After it became clear that the infection was indeed present in the country, the negative discourse surrounding men having sex with men was only further reinforced. They were now depicted as a menace not only to the morals, but also to the physical well-being of healthy, “normal” people.

With the beginning of *perestroika*, however, the “discursive void” around the subject had been broken (Baer, 2009: 44). Around 1987, mass media, in particular printed press that targeted the younger segment of the population, started bringing up the issue of homosexuality and the ways of dealing with it. As Kon (1998: 359) wrote about the period:

From the journalist essays and published letters from homosexuals, lesbians, and their parents, ordinary Soviet people, for the first time, started learning about the ruined lives, police brutality, judicial repression, sexual violence in prisons, camps, the army, and about tragic, inescapable loneliness of people

doomed to live in constant fear and unable to meet their own kind. Each such publication caused a flood of conflicting responses.

It was at this time that the country's climate began to change toward a greater openness and understanding. The books blocked by the censorship machine in the previous decades started being published. Western films and music were circulated more freely, while the Soviet production was becoming more emancipated in its depictions of sexuality.

## **2.2. LGBT in post-Soviet Russia**

### **2.2.1. Decriminalization and early LGBT activism**

In 1993, two years after the fall of the Soviet Union, consensual sex between men was decriminalized. The decision to annul the anti-sodomy law was not a deliberate step toward greater democratization and liberalization of the society. It was not accompanied by a public discussion of the matter. Instead, it was done discretely, in order for Russia to meet the minimum requirements for membership in the Council of Europe (Kon, 2009: 45). Thus, the change was neither widely debated, nor covered in the mass media. Subsequently, it took another six years to remove homosexuality and lesbianism from the list of mental illnesses in 1999.

After decriminalization, the homosexual underground started “to develop into gay and lesbian subculture, with its own organizations, publications, and centers” (Lenskyj, 2014: ch.2, sec.5, para.1). This, however, does not mean that social conditions had changed dramatically for gay men and lesbian women in Russia. Even though they were relieved from a threat of being prosecuted and imprisoned, discrimination, stigmatization, and abuse continued. Baraban (2001: 85) grasped the essence of this change, by denoting that the state-sanctioned oppression of gays (and, to a lesser extent, lesbians) was substituted for “everyday homophobia”.



Around that time, the first activist organizations focusing on the promotion of equal rights for LGBT people appeared in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and other metropolitan centers. Essig (1999) chronicled in her study the work of the first gay and lesbian organizations, which constituted the first wave of LGBT activism in Russia. Taking advantage of the politics of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the first queer activists became visible in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, much of Western media offered celebratory accounts of the incipient gay and lesbian subculture in the former USSR (Baer, 2002: 503). At the same time, along with the expression of support for the formation of a queer community, and an array of civil organizations to support it, many media reports, when “read closely and objectively”, demonstrated “a very mixed record of results” (Schluter, 2002: 160).

On the one hand, Russian sexual minorities lacked the organizational experience to sustain their cause, and the financial and cultural capital “important for maintaining the social patterns of a gay subculture” (Schluter, 2002: 160). On the other hand, it did not take long until the signs of inner chasms emerged, which hindered the development of a more or less organized LGBT movement. As Essig (1999: 55-82) found, queer activists were divided along ideological and class lines. For example, some of them were more restrained in their political position and attitude toward the government. These “compromise-oriented activists” (Essig, 1999: 63) wanted to avoid further alienation from the mainstream society, and believed that the situation of LGBT people could be improved by working with the system, rather than against it. There were also individuals with higher social and economic status, who had established themselves professionally, and could therefore risk their positions by aggressively attacking the system. Another group of activists, whom Essig called radicals, were younger, closer to the circles of political dissent, and completely unwilling to conform to heteronormative order of the mainstream society. They saw the consensus-seeking leaders “as being *morally* compromised by their positions of relative privilege” (Essig, 1999: 64, italics in the original).

Another axis of internal division was gender and the related antagonism of interests. Being deeply embedded in the criminalization of male homosexuality and

the issues surrounding the spread of HIV/AIDS, the Russian queer movement became dominated by men (Essig, 1999: 66). In such circumstances, lesbians could hardly identify with the activist scene and did not feel the movement visage of those days could adequately represent them, as well as their interests and challenges they faced. It has to be noticed, however, that this conflict is not unique to the Russian LGBT community, and has been impeding the LGBT movement on a global scale. The main reason being that the very notion of the LGBT community as a monolithic group is highly constructed. In reality, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people are all unique groups, with uniquely experienced sexual identities and stemming from them social and personal challenges.

Along with the numerous political, social, cultural, class, and gender-related disagreements within the early LBGT movement in Russia, its failure was also due to the overwhelming reliance on its Western, especially American, partners for resources and uncritical copying of their practices (Kon, 1998: 368). Russian sexual minorities had very little activist experience on their own, and lacked the support within a wider Russian society in which many people were facing poverty, and thus felt unmotivated to join civil initiatives. Even LGBT individuals themselves were reluctant to become involved publicly with the cause, due to the social costs of open homosexual, bisexual or transgender life remaining enormous (Essig, 1999: 67).

With a general climate of political apathy in the country, much of the LGBT activism of the nineties focused on community building, social gatherings, discos, dating services, and setting up of telephone hotlines, rather than on articulating political messages about the rights of sexual minorities (Kon, 1998: 370). Healey (2008: 173-74) summarized this period:

The first generation of post-Soviet lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists burnt out during Yeltsin's second term, unable to establish stable non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and publications. They encountered a society basically unwilling to register or tolerate their voices.

During the time that the Russian LGBT community struggled to form its identity and make itself a visible segment of the society, the general population continued to maintain high levels of homophobia. Kon (2009: 49) cited survey data which found that in 2007, nearly 41 percent of respondents answered affirmatively to the question of whether consensual same-sex relationships should be prosecuted by the law; 40 percent answered negatively. It should be noted, however, that the attitudes toward homosexuality have been changing in post- Communist Russia. For instance, in the same paper, Kon emphasized that the young urban population was showing much greater levels of tolerance toward sexual “others”.

### **2.2.2. LGBT in Vladimir Putin’s Russia**

In the year 2000, the political landscape in Russia changed profusely with the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. The new conservative developments have influenced the LGBT community, as well as anyone wishing to have an open discussion about homosexuality, for the worse (Healey, 2008: 175). More importantly, there has been a visible qualitative change in the “new politics of homophobia”, which became more deliberate in its attempts to restrain sexual minorities from entering the realm of public debate. As homophobia and discrimination have been intensifying (Poushter, 2014), it must be noticed that the Russian Constitution does not guarantee equality of rights to LGBT citizens. In its text, protection is granted to all citizens regardless of “sex, race, nationality, language, origin, property or employment status, residence, attitude to religion, convictions, membership of public associations or any other circumstance” (Art. 19, § 2). While the principle of nondiscrimination covers “any other circumstances”, it does not explicitly extend to those discriminated on the basis of sexual orientation (Kochetkov & Kirichenko, 2009: 30).

The legal protection of sexual minorities against discrimination appears to be essential, in an atmosphere of growing hostility, albeit it is still trivialized by political elite as a superfluous measure. The context in which homosexuality

achieved its relative visibility in Russian society – the collapse of the Soviet empire, the following economic crises, and the rupture of the social fabric – resulted in its becoming a symbol for the “crisis of masculinity” (Baer, 2009: 10). Thus, it came as no surprise that when Putin initiated consolidation of power to regain the country’s critical position on the world stage, the new ideology could not embrace anything emasculate.

The new political era has seen a rapid turnaround from the liberal course of Yeltsin’s presidency. The activation of a nationalist movement, and the strengthening influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), have been effectively redirecting public opinion toward what they see as traditional values, in particular those of a traditional family, clearly referring to the union between one man and one woman. The country’s demographic crisis has been exploited by both the government and the church to advance the conservative agenda. In this light, it seems inevitable that sexual minorities turned out to become the usual suspects responsible for the low birth rates. Gays and lesbians started being portrayed in public discourse as a dangerous minority of invaders aggressively trying to “LGBT-ize” heterosexual majority (Lenskyj, 2014: ch.2, sec.2, para. 2). One study found that in the rhetoric of the ROC, homosexuality is instrumental “to construct an *imagined* religious, moral, and national collectivity which must defend itself, as a matter of life and death, against ‘others’ who threaten this collective body” where the collective body signifies traditional, moral, and healthy Russia, while the “other” is liberal, secularized, and degenerated West (Zorgdrager, 2013: 229).

The friction between LGBT rights and the intolerance of traditionally- minded public and politicians became imminent when the first Moscow Pride was proposed in 2005. The city mayor, backed by the ROC, had branded it a “satanic” event, and it has been consistently banned ever since (Healey, 2008: 175). Often, when LGBT activists endeavored to march in a gay pride celebration, they were violently opposed by nationalist and religious groups or arrested by police. The last time the unsanctioned rally took place in Moscow in 2013, at least thirty activists were detained (Winning, 2013: para. 1). It appears that the community is faced with a

dilemma: the more they try to become a visible part of the society and be accepted by it, the more aggression and resentment it invokes in the general public (Horne et al, 2009).

Russian political elite has been trying to keep LGBT citizens within the confines of zones of internet and commerce (Healey, 2008: 175). In the 2000s, the Russian LGBT community attempted a “reinvention” of gayness, and stronger institutionalization with the focus on human rights (Kondakov, 2013a: 410). New LGBT organizations have been founded not only in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but also in Arkhangelsk, Tyumen, and Perm. The inter-regional non- governmental organization *Russian LGBT Network* was launched in 2006 as an effort for the first time to represent a nationwide LGBT movement.

The internet appeared to be a notable force in this process. Relatively unrestricted, it became a privileged space for Russia’s lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgender people. On the one hand, commercial and lifestyle trends continued, as numerous websites emerged as venues of meeting and consumption for LGBT people. On the other hand, activist organizations – Kondakov (2013a: 410-413) identifies fifteen organizations which set political goals of advancing human rights for sexual and gender minorities – also take advantage of the medium, and launch websites and blogs to mobilize, promote events, and share information. In addition to their own web pages, organizations also utilize other online platforms, such as LiveJournal and VK (Russian analogue of Facebook), to share materials that “provide a variety of information on the organizations including strategies, events, accounts, views, and places” (Kondakov, 2013a: 411).

### **2.2.3. Ban on “homosexual propaganda”**

In 2002, less than ten years after homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia, the deputy of the State Duma Gennady Raikov proposed to re-criminalize it. The initiative did not succeed, as some voices suggested Russia had to fulfill its

commitments in the Council of Europe. Next year, however, the idea was reinforced by sexologist and psychiatrist, as well as popular author and media personality, Dilia Enikeeva. Enikeeva published a 400-pages work titled *Gays and Lesbians* which “arguably supplied a blueprint for the new rhetoric” (Healey, 2008: 175). The book set an ambitious goal of offering a clear concept of healthy, “normal” sexuality which was defined exclusively as heterosexual.

Homosexuality, either male or female, was characterized as pathological. Enikeeva described gays and lesbians as childish, egoistic minorities who seem to be too concerned about their homosexuality. Most importantly, the opus claimed that the threat came from the new phenomenon, which it described as the “propaganda of homosexuality”. The argument went that young people’s minds were malleable and that they could easily be “recruited” to the same-sex pleasures. Thus, Enikeeva concluded that “propaganda of non-traditional sex” on TV and in other media had to be banned by a special law (Healey, 2008: 187).

Despite the dubiety of assumptions about the possibility of spreading sexual orientation by means of media, the notion was implanted in the Russian public discourse. In addition, the idea concurred with the conservative sentiment that saw Russian society falling victim to liberal Western values perceived as licentious. In 2006, Ryazan Oblast became the first federal subject to legally secure a ban on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations”. The regions which followed suit in subsequent years were Arkhangelsk Oblast (2011), Saint Petersburg (2012), Kostroma Oblast (2012), Magadan Oblast (2012), Novosibirsk Oblast (2012), Krasnodar Krai (2012), Samara Oblast (2012), Bashkortostan (2012), and Kaliningrad Oblast (February 2013). It was the passing of law in St. Petersburg which prohibited “propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality and transgenerence among minors” that drew considerable international attention and reinvigorated debate on the state of LGBT rights in Russia (Amnesty International 2013: 219).

The initiative culminated in the summer of 2013, when the nationwide ban was passed. It was introduced in the form of an amendment to the already existing Federal

Law on Protecting Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development (President of Russia, 2012). The move was allegedly motivated by an inclination to protect minors from perceiving the wrong picture of what constitutes a “normal” romantic relationship. Article 6.21 defines propaganda as the act of “distribution of information that is aimed at the formation among minors of non-traditional sexual attitudes, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations, misconceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations, or enforcing information about non-traditional sexual relations that evokes interest to such relations” (Russian LGBT Network, 2012: 4). The sanctions for the perpetrators presume significant monetary fines and administrative penalties.

The statute marked a serious turn for the LGBT people in Russia, in it being a declaration of unwillingness on the part of the state to accept them. It sends a clear message that any non-normative sexuality is considered morbid and must be prevented. In other words, since 1993, it became the first big step from the “everyday homophobia” of stereotyping and slurs toward official politics of homophobia which pathologizes and partially criminalizes sexual minorities. In practice, the legislation, which outlaws any public expression of homosexuality, proscribes public association and assembly for sexual minorities (Johnson, 2011). This, in effect, stalls the activist efforts to improve the situation for the discriminated social group that is LGBT community.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Analytical framework of the study and research questions**

Social functions of mass media are multifold. A few, which can be named but are by no means exhaustive, include the functions of information and interpretation, education, entertainment, persuasion, surveillance, group linkage, and socialization. In this work, the consideration of mass media's functionality will begin with the classification provided by McQuail (2010: 98-99), which is built on the functionalist theory of society, and evaluates various social practices and institutions in terms of social and individual needs. The functionalist approach to the system of mass media postulates that it carries a number of social functions, which cater to the needs of other social systems, various institutions, social groups, and individuals. In line with the idea that the system of mass media has to respond to particular social demands, McQuail proposed the following functions, which media perform to satisfy different social and individual needs: information, correlation, continuity, entertainment, and mobilization. Each of these functions are addressed in greater detail below, for they all have a long tradition in media research that deals with the understanding and interpretation of the social role of mass media and communication at large.

The function of information brought about by mass media is probably the most central of all. Media institutions work to satisfy the public need for information about current events, with the news media playing a particularly active role as information providers. Most individuals have very limited access to first-hand information about the work of political and economic systems, and have to use the news media as the main source of news about current affairs. The foundation of mass media's information function can be traced to some of the most fundamental political documents, such as Resolution 59(I) which was adopted by the UN General



Assembly in 1946, and stated that freedom of information is “the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated” (UNESCO, 1978). In a similar vein, Article 19 of the UN’s Universal Declaration of the Human Rights couples free access to information and ideas through media with freedom of opinion and expression, and stipulates it as one of the fundamental human rights (UN, 1948). Provision of information by mass media is therefore central to the sustaining of informed citizens and the functioning of democracy.

Despite the centrality of the information function of mass media to society, media institutions cannot and should not be conceived of as mere transmitters of information that offer a copy or a precise reflection of the social world. Namely, the mass media – represented by organizations as well as individual journalists – do not enjoy a privileged epistemological position in relation to reality nor observe it objectively from a distance. Instead of copying, or reproduction, they conduct the construction of reality based on already existing information following certain rules and patterns (Beck, 2013: 95-106). The organizational logic of the mass media, which is integral to any professional media outlet, and their structural position within the social system at large are central to what information they select for publication and in which form it reaches the audience.

The function of correlation is closely related to the information function of the mass media and derivates from it. Correlation is how the mass media allows citizens to make sense of the information they provide. It refers to “explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events and information” (McQuail, 2010: 99). Through correlation, people can comprehend complex processes in different social spheres of politics, the economy, and science and technology, and make informed political decisions based on these interpretations. As Luhmann (2000) noticed in his analysis, it is predominantly in the mediated form that people are able to perceive most of the world away from their immediate surroundings. In a similar manner, the complexity of events and subjects often limits the ability of the general public to comprehend their meaning and importance in the larger social context. The mass

media, therefore, provides crucial help by packaging the news information and building links between events and social processes by correlating them.

The next function, continuity, provides what can be called social glue in the form of shared norms and values, which allows the formation of shared identities and the sense of community and belonging. Mass media supports social continuity by expressing the dominant culture as well as recognizing subcultures and new cultural trends. The continuity facilitated by the mass media becomes a vital foundation for the process of identity building which is of particular importance to this research. As Körber & Schaffar (2002: 80) observed, with the decline of traditional institutions of family, church, and school, the mass media increasingly emerges in the middle point of the process of identity formation: “in the area of conflict between media effects and media uses an active subject is produced, who uses, interprets, and integrates the messages based on their own life situation”. Cultivated by the media, the sense of shared identity is what allows people to establish themselves as individuals in the complex system of relationships to the world and other individuals. It is also what allows them to be included in the world through membership to various, sometimes overlapping and sometimes distinctly different, social groups. In the words of Gamson (2009: 284), identity “refers to the process of defining [the] we, typically but not necessarily in opposition to some they who have different interests and values.”

The outcome of the function of continuity is the creation of so-called media representation. Usually, it is the mainstream society which is represented most prominently by the mainstream media due to their need to resonate with, and appeal to, the larger audience. In democratic societies, the mass media are expected to serve as a channel of representation to a variety of social groups – national, ethnic or cultural minorities, as well as other self-identified social groups. On the one hand, the value of continuity to those groups is in the possibility of within-group identification among its members. On the other hand, the function of continuity secures the representational inscription of this group into a larger community.

Another function of the mass media is entertainment, which they fulfill by providing amusement, diversion, and a means of relaxation (McQuail 2010: 99). Although of less relevance to this particular research, the importance of entertainment functions of mass media must be recognized due to the reduction of social tension, which it attains.

Finally, McQuail (2010: 99) conceives of the mobilization function, which encompasses campaigning for societal objectives in various spheres. With the knowledge people acquire from mass media, they stay informed not only about the most current political and social events, but most importantly become signaled about the timely political and social problems. Realization of the existing issues which require solutions in the eyes of society can motivate people to pursue different kinds of political participation. To support this theorization, existing research shows that mass media in the established democracies can encourage people to participate politically through elections (Müller, 2014: 202). They can also encourage people to act and express themselves politically outside of institutionalized politics in the grassroots activist realm (Walgrave & Manssens, 2000: 217).

The rise of the internet has led to considerable diversification of the media field. Easy-to-use tools of information gathering, production, and dissemination has resulted in the emergence of new players outside institutional media, often labeled in research literature as alternative, grassroots or citizen media (Atton, 2002; Bailey et al., 2007). As they enter the field, many of them take on the functions traditionally carried out by professional media organizations. Even though it is preposterous to speak about alternative media as replacing traditional media institutions, they certainly become a supplementary element in the global media system.

The selection of the media functions to be included in the analytical framework of this study is motivated by the contextual peculiarities of the present research, such as the characteristics of the Russian public sphere, and the political and social tension which exists in Russian society surrounding the matters of the LGBT community. Thus, the analytical framework of this study is built around three functions:

information and correlation, continuity and identity building, and mobilization. As was addressed before, the function of correlation is aggregated with the function of information. Here, correlation is understood as interpretation and sense-making, and is inevitably an inherent part of the process of information perception, for the meaning of information will always depend on a specific context in which it comes, and on how it is processed by the recipient. For this reason, this work conceives of the information and correlation functions as one, to which it refers to as the information and news production function. The function of continuity and identity building is conflated into the function of deliberative community building, due to the empirical focus of this research on discursive practices of the media users, which allow them to sustain the sense of shared identity, community, and belonging among them. The mobilization function is referred to in this paper as the mobilization and coordination function, and encompasses stimulation and the encouragement of activist participation and its practical support.

The key reason why these three functions were selected for analysis lays in the fact that the Russian public sphere emerges as being particularly inept in fulfilling them. As Chapter 4 will explicate, Russian mass media pursues the goal of trivialization and banalization of political debate, and the exclusion of minority groups while trying to homogenize its audiences and overwhelm them with entertainment material. Therefore, it appears reasonable to presume that the alternative media platforms will inevitably set out to contribute to the social functions which the professional media fail to serve.

*1. Information and news producing function:*

Being a fundamental task of the media, the selection of this function in the analytical framework of the present research is motivated by the fact that Russian mass media, which follows the path of particularism and secrecy rather than universalism in access to information, on the whole fails to fulfill it adequately (Voltmer, 2006: 43). Not only do the mainstream media in Russia fail to provide adequate information on the current events, they also obstruct any meaningful critical political debate by trivializing it. Chapter 4 looks in greater detail at the

characteristics of the contemporary Russian media and the complex system of regulations and restrictions faced by media organizations and individual journalists which impede on their work as providers of balanced information to the general population. Because of this, many alternative media outlets in Russia inevitably find themselves in the position where they must compensate for the deficient performance of the traditional media as producers and distributors of news information.

This conceptualization is further built on the linkage that exists between the phenomena of grassroots blogging and citizen journalism (Rutigliano, 2007: 225). It assumes that many blogs operate as alternative information and news sources. This function may be less pronounced in the case of blogs being used as personal diaries, but the content of many public interest blogs focuses on the coverage of news and current affairs (Papacharissi, 2004; Katz & Lai, 2009). It means that they perform the function traditionally carried out by the professional journalists, and increasingly become important news sources besides the mainstream media.

In this connection, *AntiDogma* community is an open media outlet – everyone with a *LiveJournal* account can post entries on the web page – with orientation toward dissemination of LGBT related information. The purpose of this study is to examine to what extent authors use the blog as a news outlet to report about current political and social events and what reporting practices, routines, and discourses they employ.

### *2. Function of deliberative community building:*

Largely founded on the continuity function of the mass media, it is proposed to analyze the function of deliberative community building through the cultivation of shared identity, which appears crucial in the context of systematic oppression experienced by the Russian LGBT community. It is theorized here that *AntiDogma* serves as a counter-public communicative space as well as a space of representation, where members of the community can participate in the public debate and community building practices which they are denied by the country's mainstream media.

Traditional mass media usually perform this function through unidirectional dissemination of information to large groups of people, which eventually leads to the formation and adoption of shared values. Online media, particularly social media platforms, work in a decentralized manner. Users appear to be in charge of content production and dissemination, and have a spectrum of instruments for engaging in direct communication with each other. This has considerable consequences for the process of identity formation and community building. Social media often works as signaling channels, and lets people know that there are like-minded others out there who share similar values and experiences. It facilitates public communication through an easy exchange of content, be this articles, photo and video materials, or personal messages and comments, and makes collective identity formation possible by means of communication exchange. This function entails not only passive transmission of ideas, but also the facilitation of active debate among the members of the media audience, preferably in a polite, critical, and reflected manner, therefore following the principles of deliberative conversation. Since the onset of the internet technologies, mainstream media have been taking advantage of their affordances to facilitate communication and exchange among the users, and commentary sections have become a standard.

In the case of the Russian LGBT community, the identity formation and community building through communication is of particular importance. As Chapter 2 illuminates, sexual minorities in Russia still lack social representation as well as established spaces, which would offer safe venues for the articulation of collective LGBT identity(-ies) and community building. With the proliferation of the internet in the country, this online sphere increasingly becomes a privileged space where LGBT people meet for conversation and the exchange of opinion, ideas, and experiences. In the context of this work, deliberative debate, defined as a reflected discussion in a group of people, is considered instrumental to the process. It refers to the individual and collective LGBT identity(-ies) that blog participants produce through reflected group communication. Deliberative qualities of this communication are reflected in that the users are expected to adhere to the norms of rationality, critical judgement, civility, and politeness.

This study also follows the tradition in internet research, which examines in theory and practice the potential of internet communication to boost public conversation and deliberation (Witschge, 2007). The new wave of attention, and optimism, came with the onset of networked, user-centered social media which encourages the exchange of information between citizens (Loader & Mercea, 2011: 758).

The affordances of the blogosphere, one of the earliest social media platforms, offer a number of possibilities for people to engage in the deliberative practices and dialogue with each other. One of the aims of this study is to investigate the discourses which take place within the *AntiDogma* community. In particular, the research interest lies in the sphere of discursive activism defined as texts contesting the existing dominant discourse, revealing the underlying power relations, and denaturalizing what appears natural (Fine, 1992: 221). This study hypothesizes that *AntiDogma* will use the discursive affordances of the blogosphere to challenge the existing negative image of the LGBT community fostered by the Russian mainstream media, and offer alternative meanings to define LGBT people.

### *3. Mobilization and coordination function:*

Finally, this work turns to mobilization function, for it allows the critical assessment of the activist efforts of LGBT citizens in confronting ongoing discrimination. The function of mobilization and coordination is relevant in the context of this study, and was included in the analytical framework due to the lack of support for the LGBT community within institutionalized politics in Russia and civil society at large. In the climate of widespread homophobia and outright hostility, activism from within the LGBT community becomes the central, if not the only, way to challenge discrimination in an organized and semi-organized manner.

Successful mobilization and coordination are usually among the key challenges to social movements, and must be achieved in the material (practical and logistical) and immaterial (symbolic) spheres. Internet communication, with its low costs,

ubiquity, and instantaneity, holds a great promise to simplify the process of sustaining existing networks, mobilization, recruitment of new members, and the coordination of collective action online and offline, as well as the dissemination of symbols and meanings to support activist movements. It is therefore hypothesized that *AntiDogma* will be a venue of identity, working to construct and sustain the collective identity of the Russian LGBT community through symbolic exchange, and will also be used for the purposes of mobilization and coordination of offline activities, such as rallies, protests, flash mobs, etc. This study will analyze how the blog is used for mobilization and practical organization. It will look into the repertoire of real-life collective actions which community members address online.

Based on this analytical framework, the main research question of this study is: How are the three different functionalities implemented by the *AntiDogma* blogging community?

a) How does the *AntiDogma* blogging community operate as a news medium alternative to the mainstream Russian media? How does it try to close the gap on the coverage of the LGBT community in the mainstream media? How does it contest the negative representations of the LGBT community provided by the mainstream media? What are the news-making practices pursued by community bloggers?

b) How does the *AntiDogma* blog employ deliberative communication and exchanges to function as an arena of identity and community building? What are the features of the community which qualify it as a counter-public?

c) How does the *AntiDogma* blogging community function as an instrument for mobilization and coordination of collective action? How does it support LGBT activism on a symbolic level? How does it support LGBT activism on a practical level?



## 3.2. On methodology

### 3.2.1. Sample

This study has employed a non-probabilistic purposeful sampling technique, which is the method of choice for most qualitative research since it does not seek a generalization of findings (Merriam, 2009: 77). Purposeful sampling is the method of data collection based on the premise that the researcher can select material which will best serve the purpose of the study. The investigator has the freedom to conduct selection of “*information-rich cases* for study in depth” (Patton, 2002: 230, italics original). Such information-rich cases allow for the most advantageous approach to the subject matter, and to reach an in-depth understanding of the analyzed phenomena.

The sample selection for this study started with an overview of the *AntiDogma* blog and its contents. The data analysis was conducted in early 2014 when the blogging community was active for nearly seven years, and contained 7,322 journal entries which received 180,261 user comments. From this number, a smaller primary sample of 212 blog entries, together with their comments (2,203), was selected for a closer qualitative analysis on the level of individual blog entries and reader commentaries. These were all the posts which appeared in four 15-day periods. Two of these periods were chosen intentionally: February 29 – March 14, 2012 were approximately two weeks surrounding the passing of the “homosexual propaganda” law in Saint Petersburg; June 23 – July 7, 2013 were the days near the time President Putin signed the nationwide ban. Two further periods, January 8 – January 22, 2013 and August 20 – September 3, 2013 and were picked randomly. In addition, the study examined materials linked to by-bloggers, when considered necessary. For instance, links to Facebook or VK groups, mainstream media, other blog posts, and so forth, were considered. The meta-data about the community was collected from the archive page, profile, and organizational documents, which appeared as blog entries at various moments during the community’s life-span.

### 3.2.2. Data analysis

The methodology of the study can be described along the lines of social constructivism and content analysis. In the most general terms, the essence of the social constructivist paradigm can be expressed in the words of Kuhn (1962: 113) in that “what a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see.” In other words, how people perceive and interpret the world around them and their position in it will always be embedded in their experiences, knowledge, and values. Just as mass media never simply reflects the world “as it is” without transmitting value-laden messages representative of dominant social discourses, similarly, the people outside media institutions are active players in the interpretation of symbols circulated in the public discourse. Furthermore, under certain circumstances they can acquire an opportunity to challenge the symbolic power of media organizations by becoming creators and co-creators of their own discourses.

It appears that language plays a crucial role in how people and groups of people construct their social world and simultaneously make sense of their experiences in it. By supporting people’s performance of social activities while at the same time assuring “human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions”, language is never just a means to communicate information but a “language-in-use” which “is everywhere and always political” (Gee, 1999: 1). Thus, language is used to construct events, representations, identities, individuals, and social subjects, and it is important how they are constructed, what becomes a part of the construction, and what is left out of the picture.

#### *Quantitative and qualitative content analysis*

This study employed the combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The method of content analysis has been described as a research technique

which allows for replicable and valid inferences from the text to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). For this research it means that content analysis of material from a Russian LGBT blog will allow to theorize about the context of its use, namely about the position of LGBT citizen media in contemporary Russian society, which is characterized by a severely restricted mediascape on the one hand and widespread hostility towards sexual minorities, including legal persecution, on the other hand.

Content analysis can be applied to a text with the intention to analyze both its manifest and latent content (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009: 439). Manifest content refers to the visible, apparent features of the text. To look at manifest content is to answer the question about what exactly is being said in the text. Latent content, in its turn, encompasses the hidden meanings of the text. It draws attention to the concepts behind the text and focuses not just on what is being said, but most importantly on why it is being said and how it can be interpreted in a broader sense. Graneheim & Lundman (2004: 106) articulate the difference between manifest and latent content in terms of various levels of depth and abstraction necessary for interpretation for the former and the latter.

*Quantitative content analysis*, which is concerned with quantification and measurement of the data, is a well suited instrument for the examination of manifest content. Riff et al. (2014: 3) define it as “the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods.” Inceptive quantification of the material through coding, tabulation, and summarization allows for a general overview of the data in terms of its characteristics and their frequencies, and can be an end in itself, or serve as a starting point of investigation. When applied alone, quantitative content analysis often stops at the quantitative summarization of data without a more comprehensive consideration of the context (Tesch, 1990: 1).

*Qualitative content analysis* is a research method which deals with the text in a qualitative manner, with lesser focus on its manifest content. Instead, this approach

focuses on latent content with the aim of in-depth exploration of its context. While the obvious components of the manifest content reveal what the text says, its latent content indicates what it talks about (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992: 315). The method of qualitative content analysis often proceeds in an inductive manner when data is studied through the technique of close reading (Morgan, 1993: 116). Instead of applying a fixed set of coding categories, qualitative examination of the content seeks to infer the patterns from the data as they emerge in the process of reading. In other words, the examination of the content is itself the source of a coding scheme.

Qualitative content analysis is one of the approaches of the so-called textual analysis, a research method that allows description and interpretation of the characteristics of the messages, their content, structure, and functions (Frey et al, 1999: 255-7). This method facilitates the study of the creation of meaning by means of the text, and grasps “the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (McKee, 2003: 1). The reading of the primary texts, in this case of original blog entries and their comments, allows for the interpretation of those texts and uncovering of the underlying social meanings.

The need to address the data in terms of its manifest and latent content often invites the incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Such approach allows a broader interpretation of the texts and the context in which it appears. The choice of words, discernible intonations, instances of interpersonal exchange, and thematic embeddedness of blog entries and commentaries can best be examined with the use of qualitative content analysis.

### ***Coding scheme and unit of analysis***

The central constituents of any quantitative inquiry are the unit of analysis and the coding scheme that must be established in advance. The coding scheme refers to the set of analytical constructs or rules of inference which the researcher applies to the text with the purpose of answering the research question (White & Marsh, 2006:

27). The unit of analysis is a basic entity which that particular study is analyzing, and to which the coding scheme is applied. The unit of analysis at the quantitative stage in the present study was one blog entry with the commentary section.

In line with the requirements of the quantitative content analysis, the present study has analyzed all collected data using a predetermined set of categories which were devised as dichotomous variables. Three categories were modeled, each corresponding to one of the three media functions established and operationalized in advance. Every blog post was coded as fulfilling or not fulfilling the given media function.

Operationalization of categories means that “actual, concrete measurement techniques” are developed which allow the quantification of data (Babbie, 1995: 5). The present study has operationalized three media functions into binary variables. It established the set of criteria for each variable, against which every blog entry was checked and coded accordingly as applying or not applying (Table 1).

*Information and news producing function:* The main criterium for the attribution of information and news producing function was developed following the definition of news as new information about issues and events shared with others in a public way (Zelizer & Allan, 2010: 80). Therefore, to be assigned an information and news production function, a blogpost had to comply with two criteria: 1) it must be a *coverage of a recent event or a series of events* and 2) the covered events must be of *wider social relevance*. Personal stories and essays of general interest (i.e. on the history of homosexuality in Ancient world, queer photography etc.) on this basis were not considered news stories. For a unit to be considered as information and news producing, the fulfillment of both criteria was mandatory.

Since the information function was conceptualized broadly as the production and dissemination of information as well as interpretation, blogposts included in this category were both news reports and commentaries of the recent events. An important aspect of citizen journalism, which is the ambivalent position of citizen journalists

both as objective reporters and as partisan commentators, is discussed in greater detail in chapter 5 of this study.

In order to perceive the interplay between the two reporting approaches in the *AntiDogma* community, all posts which fell within the information and news production function were further classified depending on the type of the news reporting. This category discriminated between two mutually exclusive types of news reporting: 1) *strictly news* (coded as “news”) and 2) *news with commentary* (coded as “news/commentary”). The distinction between strictly news and commentary was made based on the style of narration. *Strictly news* had to provide factual information and be written in neutral language, thus abiding by the principle of objectivity followed by the professional journalists. The posts coded as *news with commentary* usually contained expression of opinion and the author’s interpretation and explanation of the events. Examples of the titles of news posts included “Battery of LGBT activists in Ukraine” (20.05.2012), “Libertarian movement ‘Free Radicals’ makes statement in respect to the illegal ban of Moscow 2012 gay pride” (22.05.2012), and “15 people came to the march in support of homosexuality propaganda ban” (29.04.2012).

*Function of deliberative community building:* In order to be classified as serving the function of deliberative community building, a blogpost had to contain an *explicit or implicit invitation or call* for a discussion in the commentary section. Explicit invitations were easily detectable, since they usually appeared in a form of direct request to the readers to use the commentary section to engage in a conversation with the author and other readers, such as “what are your thoughts on the matter?”, “please leave your opinion in the comments”, “please, take part in a survey” or “comments are welcome”. The criterion was straightforward, and the posts that met it could be coded without difficulty.

Some blog entries were less straightforward, because they did not contain direct request to participate in a discussion. However, they did contain an *implicit invitation* to express support for or disagreement with the author’s position by agreeing or

offering a counter positions and explanations. Such posts were assigned the function of deliberative community building in case they met two criteria: a) the author's address of the audience could be detected and b) it generated a measurable exchange in the commentary section.

One example of such implicit appeal to the readers to partake in a conversation was found in an entry where the author mused about hearing the rumors that his hometown had a plan to introduce a vice squad. The blogger appeared to be simultaneously appalled and perplexed, yet he did not openly ask the readers to comment on the story. However, the text included the following statement: "I understand that it sounds implausible [...] but don't throw bones in my direction or yell that it is a newspaper hoax", which was taken for an invitation for a discussion by many readers and generated a vivid debate. In a similar vein, blog entries that ended with alternative or rhetorical questions were usually seen by the readers as debate-provoking.

*Mobilization and coordination function:* The main, and mandatory, classification criterium for mobilization and coordination function was the direct relation of the blog post to 1) *a real-life activist event* or 2) *an online based protest action*, such as the signing of a petition, which made it an uncomplicated and straightforward coding category. Whenever it was established from the content that a blog entry encouraged people to participate in an event, such as protest or rally, it was coded as mobilization and coordination. Furthermore, the posts were assigned this function if they were devoted to the discussion of tactics for online and real-life activism or provided supplementary information (e.g. contact information of legal support, information about access to activist kits and so forth).

### ***Quantitative inquiry***

This section will outline the details of the initial quantitative coding of the data, during which each post was assigned the media functions it fulfilled. The first round of reading of the texts from the sample allowed the gaining of an overall impression

about the content created by *AntiDogma* bloggers and its main themes. The second round applied the close reading technique defined as “the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings” (Brummett, 2010: 3) and was conducted on the paper copies of the texts. During the second round of reading, the technical data was gathered and tabulated, the specific tags, key words, and passages were marked in different colors to facilitate the assigning of specific functions based on their operational definitions. The main purpose of this stage of analysis was the assignment of the functions to the selected blog entries. Each function was defined in a binary manner and coded as either being or not being fulfilled. Figure 1 describes the exact coding procedure for each function.

The first was an information and news production function, and the blog post was to be coded in a binary manner as fulfilling or not fulfilling this function. After the reading of the contents of the blog entry, two questions were asked: is the recent event covered in the post and is the event socially relevant? Only when both questions were answered positively and the blog post satisfied both conditions was it coded as fulfilling the information and news production function.

The second function to be coded was that of deliberative community building. Altogether there were three criteria established for this function. The first criterium was an explicit invitation for the readers to comment or participate in a conversation in the text of the post. If the text contained such explicit invitation the entry was coded as fulfilling the function and analysis moved to the mobilization and coordination function. In case the first criterium was not satisfied, the analysis moved to the second criterium which was an implicit endorsement, usually manifested through expression of an opinion position or rhetorical questions, to concur or disagree with the author’s opinion. If the blog post did not satisfy the second criterium, the analysis continued to the third function of mobilization and coordination. Should the second criterium be satisfied, it was checked whether the entry generated 10 or more comments to produce a discussion (the third criterium). Only when the second (implicit endorsement) and third (10 or more comments) criteria were met jointly was the blog post coded as fulfilling the function of



deliberative community building. Whenever the third criterium did not coincide with the second one, the function was coded as “no” and analysis continued to the last function.

The third function was that of mobilization and coordination. For a blog entry to be coded as fulfilling the mobilization function, at least one of the two conditions had to be satisfied. The first condition required for a blog text to encourage the real life activist action such as a rally, flash mob, protest or any other form of activist gathering. Encouragement in this coding scheme implied either an invitation to participate, or included the provision of supportive information which would facilitate people’s participation. If the first condition was met, the entry was coded as fulfilling the mobilization function and the coding was ended. Whenever the first question was answered negatively, the analysis proceeded to the second criterium, which was encouragement to participate in various forms of online activism, such as signing of online petitions, taking part in crowd funding campaigns and so on. If the second criterium was met, the blog post was likewise coded positively for the mobilization function followed by the end of coding. Whenever none of the two criteria were satisfied, the unit was coded negatively and the coding ended.

As the last step of the quantitative analysis, all blog entries that were coded positively for Function 1 were additionally categorized in two mutually exclusive groups. The first group contained all posts that were categorized as strictly news. To be included in this group, the news piece had to be written in a neutral language and not incorporate any commentary in the form of partial or opinionated statements or moral and other value-based judgements. The second group included the blog entries that were classified as news with commentary, and encompassed the news pieces which were clearly opinionated.

After the application of this coding scheme, all blog posts were sorted into four different groups, three of which were entries that carried exclusively one out of four functions, and the fourth group comprised those with multiple functions. After completion of the classification procedure, the analysis moved to the qualitative stage

at which blog posts from each category were examined qualitatively with close attention being paid to the recurring themes, rhetorical structures, and communicative dynamics.

### ***Qualitative inquiry***

Once the quantitative analysis of the data was completed, the research proceeded to the qualitative exploration of the texts. Analyzing the text in a qualitative manner does not require a predefined set of categories on which basis the data is to be analyzed. Instead, the researcher can proceed to discover the themes inductively within the studied body of texts.

In case of the LGBT blogging community, posts authored by *AntiDogma* bloggers can be analyzed to understand the ways in which they relate to the mass media, the political sphere, and the mainstream society with its images of LGBT people. Qualitative analysis of the blogging activity also provides rich opportunities to interpret the inner dynamics of the community.

The first phase of this study, which preceded the compilation of the data sample, was a general inspection of the *AntiDogma* website. During this phase, some descriptive statistics about the community were collected and the structure of the blog was examined. The dynamics of blog postings were traced and tabulated using *AntiDogma*'s archive. I have gathered numerical data about the blog entries since the community's launch in 2006. The tags used by *AntiDogma* bloggers were studied, which provided an overview of the thematic diversity of the blog content.

The profile page appeared to be a critical data source at the early research stages, as it granted valuable insights into the community's organization and self-representation. It provided some basic information about the blog's orientation and ideology as well as a complete list of its members and the list of community moderators. Following hyperlinks, I have consulted the personal *LiveJournal* pages of

community moderators, in order to gather information about their geographical location.

The initial exploration also included a reading of the documents which were not part of the main sample, but were nonetheless important for the understanding of the community's ethos. These documents included *AntiDogma*'s mission statement as well as a number of regulatory texts, such as community rules and rules of commentary.

Rather than focusing on the formal criteria qualitative approach to the text, a closer examination was aimed at of how exactly the three outlined functions are performed as demonstrated by both the blog's manifest and latent content. The preparatory quantitative classification of the studied material allowed the classification of the posts according to their performed functions. For instance, the units which were classified as carrying the information and news producing function were inspected for the recognizable journalistic practices, such as the use of objective language, citation of sources, and adherence to the ethical norms. Close attention was paid to the particular topics that bloggers were interested in covering, and how the selection of topics could be interpreted in the context of the social and political challenges faced by the LGBT community in today's Russia.

In similar manner, the analysis of the thematic spectrum of blog entries with the function of deliberative community building was conducted. The purpose of it was to determine which topics the participants of *AntiDogma* wish to talk about. Close attention was paid to the discussions of LGBT identity and its characteristics. In other words, the main question here was what kind of meanings do *AntiDogma* users attach to being an LGBT person and a part of the LGBT community? Also, at this stage, the analysis looked at the kind of stories the users were sharing and at the emotional charge of the language they used. As pointed out in Section 6.1.1 of this work, personal testimonies can play a crucial role in deliberative processes, particularly under restrictive political and social conditions which do not allow for the gathering of reliable objective information on the subject. Thus, considering the lack of both

information and support for LGBT people, the online platform becomes a realm of identity construction, community building and an arena of deliberation. Group discussion becomes a tool of negotiation and articulation of individual opinions as well as communal attitudes, including political and ideological positions.

Lastly, a closer qualitative examination of blog entries with the function of mobilization and coordination looked at the interplay of material and symbolic activist realms. Namely, it focused on how the blog is being used as a supporting tool for concrete activist initiatives, but also symbolically, to cultivate activist consciousness and readiness to participate in civil action.

**Table 1. Coding scheme of media functions**

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|--|
| <p><b><u>Function 1: Information and news production</u></b></p> <p><i>Criterion 1.1: is a recent event covered in the post?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes &gt;&gt; continue to Criterion 1.2</li> <li>• No &gt;&gt; continue to Function 2</li> </ul> <p><i>Criterion 1.2: is the event socially relevant?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes &gt;&gt; Function 1 coded as “yes”, continue to Function 2</li> <li>• No &gt;&gt; Function 1 coded as “no”, continue to Function 2</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Function 2: Deliberative community building</u></b></p> <p><i>Criterion 2.1: does the post contain an explicit invitation to comment/participate in a conversation?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes &gt;&gt; Deliberative community building function coded as “yes”, continue to Function 3</li> <li>• No &gt;&gt; Continue to Criterion 2.2</li> </ul> <p><i>Criterion 2.2: does the post contain implicit endorsement of a discussion in form of phrasing such as alternative or rhetoric question?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes &gt;&gt; continue to Criterion 2.3</li> <li>• No &gt;&gt; Function 2 coded as “no”, continue to Function 3</li> </ul> <p><i>Criterion 2.3: did the post generate more than 10 comments?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes &gt;&gt; Function 2 coded as “yes”, continue to Function 3</li> <li>• No &gt;&gt; Function 2 coded as “no”, continue to Function 3</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Function 3: Mobilization and coordination</u></b></p> <p><i>Criterion 3.1: does the post contain encouragement and/or facilitation of real-life activist initiative?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes &gt;&gt; Function 3 coded as “yes”, end of coding</li> <li>• No &gt;&gt; continue to Criterion 3.2</li> </ul> <p><i>Criterion 3.2: does the post contain encouragement and/or facilitation of online activist initiative?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes &gt;&gt; Function 3 coded as “yes”, end of coding</li> <li>• No &gt;&gt; Function 3 coded as “no”, end of coding</li> </ul> |
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## CHAPTER FOUR

### BLOGOSPHERE IN THE RUSSIAN MASS MEDIA SYSTEM

#### 4.1. Media system in Russia: historical overview

In order to understand a particular mass media system, its properties and configurations, one has to consider the specifics of the political and historical context in which this system has developed (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The aspects which played particularly important roles in the formation of Russian media system are: the authoritative role of the state and the tendency toward instrumentalization of the press, delayed establishment of the capitalist market, and finally low income per capita and high illiteracy rate characteristic of Russian population before the October Revolution in 1917 (Arutunyan, 2009: 6).

In the countries of Western Europe, the development of printing was embedded in capitalist market relations (Thompson, 1995: 55). Although both state and church influenced the expansion of the printing presses and materials, most European newspapers were launched privately by city dwellers in need of up-to-date information about trade, politics, foreign affairs, and local events. In Russia, by contrast, the development of printed media was a top-down process. The first Russian newspaper called *Vedomosti* was founded in 1703 under the close supervision of Peter the Great (Brechka, 1982: 4). Thus, press became an extension of political authority, delivering public messages on its part. The state was always not just “a force that *dictates to and curtails* the media” but fundamentally “one that, a priori, *creates and sustains* the media, whether loyal or oppositionist” (Arutunyan, 2009: 3).

In Europe, secular authorities and the church engaged in regulation and censorship to control printed materials. Various laws on heresy and libel, as well as licenses and taxation, were issued to target authors and publishers of unsanctioned work (Ruud, 2009: 9). For a long time in Russia, there was little need for censorship

of printed materials due to the lack thereof. After printing technology first appeared in the country, and until the 1690s, the number of printed volumes was sparse, compared to that of its European neighbors. Rudimentary state of the market and long distances posed serious challenges to proliferation of equipment and materials needed for printing (Cracraft, 2004: 259).

Additionally, the expansion of printed materials was greatly inhibited by the high illiteracy rate in the country before 1917. The empire-wide census of 1897 revealed that the proportion of literate population accounted for just 21 percent of the general population before Bolsheviks rose to power (Waldron, 1997: 97). In effect, the basis for the formation of mass audience was virtually nonexistent.

Two brief periods when the media sector in Russia was beginning to approximate that of other European countries were the time of liberal reforms of Alexander II around 1865 and later the emancipation of the press of state control between the two Russian Revolutions around 1905 (Ruud, 2009: 98-101; Resis, 1977: 275). In these brief phases, despite some remaining restrictions imposed by the state, journalism in Russia flourished as never before: large number of newspapers with huge circulation covered the variety of interests and subjects and was diverse in ownership and readership. Historically, with the exception of these short time stretches, mass media in Russia has ceaselessly been subservient to the state (Simons, 2010: 27).

The instrumentalization of the mass media by the communists for state propaganda is well documented (Hopkins, 1970; Hollander, 1972). Vladimir Lenin had clearly identified the role of the press in the work of revolution: “Newspapers must become the organs of various party organizations, and their writers must by all means become members of these organizations. Publishing and distributing centers, bookshops and reading rooms, libraries and similar establishments – all must be under party control” (quoted in Arutunyan, 2009: 4). During almost seventy years of the Soviet rule, mass media remained a cog in the communism-building machine, set

to promote the ideas of greatness and virtuousness of the Party, the Soviet state, and its citizens while denouncing bourgeois societies outside the Soviet camp.

The first significant changes came about during the 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev, then the head of the Soviet state, initiated a series of political and social reforms known as *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* (Gibbs, 1999). The aim of *Glasnost* policy was to increase the transparency and openness of the political institutions, which would also imply more autonomous press. In 1991, the USSR fell, and the few years immediately after its collapse offered Russian journalists liberties previously unknown. During these “Golden Years” (1991-1993) for the country’s media industry, scores of novel publications appeared which were not direct successors of the Soviet journalistic tradition (Simons, 2012: 21). The old Soviet newspapers and magazines also tackled the task of transformation into more “westernized” media organizations.

Nevertheless, disappointment quickly superseded the hopefulness of the early 90s. The new reality defined by the market rules hit hard for all post-Soviet mass media. Stripped of the state subsidies – the decades of planned economy left the country in a devastated fiscal condition – they found it increasingly difficult to be reestablished as profitable commercial enterprises (Zassoursky, 2004: 15). In such circumstances, it was not long until more successful businesses began to finance various media outlets, especially television, turning them into conglomerates. In the middle of 1990s, the new word *oligarch* entered first Russian and later English speaking and western media vocabularies referring to Russian entrepreneurs who rapidly accumulated substantial personal wealth, mostly starting during *Perestroika* (Hoffman, 2011). One of the biggest problems of this change for the media industry was the mercantilistic character of the oligarchs’ financial support (Nordenstreng & Pietiläinen, 2010: 141). As owners, they reinstrumentalized media outlets, employing them to their own political and economic advantage. Finally, since the year 2000, the authoritarian turn of the state taking place in Russian society has once again toughened up media production (Lonkila, 2008: 1130).



## 4.2. Mass media in contemporary Russia

### 4.2.1. Structural characteristics of Russian mass media

Four sectors can be distinguished in the contemporary Russian media system: television, printed press, radio, and internet. There are clear tendencies for regionalization and ownership concentration with increasing state control, as the share of commercial capital in the media industry has been decreasing (Nordensteng & Pietiläinen, 2010: 141).

Today, television occupies the dominant position as a source of information and entertainment. The size of its audience is compared to that previously reached by the Soviet newspapers, but it also enjoys the status – in terms of respect and credit – held by the print media in the past (de Smaele, 2010: 49). Although their popularity has been slowly decreasing, state-controlled television channels *Channel One*, *Rossiya*, *Kultura*, and *RTR* (including its regional versions) remain the primary news outlets for 73 percent of the population (Orttung & Walker, 2013: 3). According to Vartanova and Smirnov (2010: 22), about 40 percent of the Russian population watch the central channels from Moscow, which are available free of charge, on the daily basis.

The next key player in the Russian media system is the newspaper market, which is split into national newspapers with 35 percent, regional newspapers with 33 percent, and local press with 32 percent (Vartanova & Smirnov, 2010: 22). Following the global trend, the last few years have seen a continuous decrease in newspaper circulation and a shift, due to hyperinflation, from the subscription based financial model toward retail sales (Nordensteng & Pietiläinen, 2010: 145). In terms of their content, Russian newspapers can be roughly divided into quality press and popular press. The first group is represented by such editions as *Izvestia*, *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* which focus on political and economic news as well as expert commentary. Popular newspapers tend to avoid complicated political and economic language, and concentrate on human interest stories. Since the collapse

of the Soviet state, human interest newspapers and tabloids have been the leaders in circulation (Nordensteng & Pietiläinen, 2010: 140).

Radio is another sector in the Russian media industry, and is important “given the large number of commuters stuck in the country’s numerous traffic jams” (Orttung & Walker, 2013: 4). Currently, the state is the biggest owner in the field of radio broadcasting, with control over main nationwide stations *Radio Rossiya*, *Mayak*, and *Vesti FM* (Bolotova, 2011: 328). The political significance of the radio consists in that in contrast with television, it constitutes the space for expression of dissent and debate of critical political topics. For instance, radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, owned by pro-Kremlin media holding Gazprom Media, extensively reported citizen protests without taking a pro-government stance, and provided a spectrum of political commentary emphasizing the need for a dialogue (Popkova, 2014: 102-103).

Finally, the internet is the single fastest growing branch of Russian media system (Volkov, 2012: 49). Compared to the countries of Western Europe and North America, the arrival of internet technology in Russia was time-lagged. In 2012, it was estimated that 66 percent of the Russian population are internet users, with 46 percent using medium every day (Nechaev et al, 2013: 1512). Russians go online for a variety of purposes, including entertainment and communication with friends (Volkov, 2012: 54). However, it has also been used for political communication (Popkova, 2014). With the growing popularity of the internet as a political medium, the Kremlin began paying closer attention to online communication (Orttung & Walker, 2013: 5).

#### **4.2.2. Characteristics of the Russian public sphere**

As was explicated in Chapter 1 of the present work, the public sphere is one of the central elements in contemporary liberal democracies. Yet, there are two tendencies, also described by Habermas (1989), which pose a considerable threat to the effective functioning of the public sphere. One of those threats is

commodification, namely, the subjugation of nature to the process of the production of goods or commodities, to which the thinkers within the Frankfurt School devoted a considerable effort (Kellner, 2002: 44). The way commodification of society influences the functioning of the public sphere is in that it leads to political disengagement of the population. In other words, in pursuit of material wealth, people lose interest in public affairs.

Similarly, trivialization of media content furthers their withdrawal from serious political debate (Marcuse, 1964; McQuail, 1969). Trivialization of media content is akin to commodification in the sense that it stops serving the purpose of sustaining politically and socially informed citizenry. Instead, the media produces content which aims to reach the widest possible audience and therefore generate advertising revenue. The focus shifts from the quality of mass media content towards its approachability and mass appeal. The result of such a process is that political discourse in the mass media loses its seriousness, and lacks nuanced and detailed analysis (Malykhina, 2014: 7).

Along with the commodification and trivialization of mass media discourse, another threat to the public sphere comes from it being colonized by political and socioeconomic elites who now “construct” their audiences (Habermas 1989: 193). Colonization of the public sphere by elites means that it becomes insensitive towards a multitude of social groups, particularly those finding themselves at the margins of society. The new purpose of the colonized mass media in this sense is to represent the elites and maintain the status quo by using what Habermas called (1997: 106) the “staged forms of publicity”, rather than provide bottom-up control of the state power.

In her thorough analysis of the structural problems of the public sphere in Russia, Chebankova (2011, 2013) points out that all these tendencies are found to impede on it. The Russian public sphere is handicapped by commodification and related to trivialization on the one hand, and by homogenizing the domination of closely connected political and economic elites on the other.

Trivialization and commodification of the public sphere is the result of the fact that private concerns of family, work, and consumption absorb most of citizens' energy, and as a result, the matters of public concern are marginalized (Chebankova, 2011: 320). The tendency of trivialization is clearly visible in the Russian media discourse. Looking at the content disseminated by the Russian mass media, Dubyn (2006: 40) talks about the country's media discourse becoming a "parody" since the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. Real political debate is substituted with the 'engineered' pluralism, in which lampoon reporting on the current political affairs only serves an ideological purpose of fortifying the officially sanctioned narratives of "modernization" and "stability".

At the same time, large proportions of airtime are allotted to easy-going entertainment such as primetime soap operas, reality television, and celebrity and "folk" talk shows devoted to gossip and human-interest topics. Etkind (2015: 278) notices that unmistakably Western practices of television production – ones he describes as "fully commodified, ultra-capitalist culture" – are oddly coupled with anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-liberalist messages.

All this happens while economic wealth is being promoted as a virtue and universal aspiration. The pursuit of financial success is heralded above all other interests, be they social or political. In this respect, Chebankova (2011: 322) particularly accentuates her attention to TV productions which portray opulent lifestyles with their attributes – houses, cars, and luxurious garments – that are beyond the reach for most people, even in the economically well-off Western societies. Thus, focusing the attention of the lower-middle class audiences on the possible financial success in the country's new economic reality, for instance through a lucrative marriage to an "oligarch", people are actively diverted from the politics and public activities.

Second to the problem of trivialization and banalization of media content is the one of political and economic domination. As discussed elsewhere in this work, mass mediated public domain in Russia finds itself under nearly total control of the

government. Television remains the main source of information for a considerable part of the Russian population, and its agenda and narrative are defined by the Kremlin. As Baker & Glasser (2005: 294) argue, regular meetings between government officials and television producers of the largest stations in order to discuss pro-government news topics and recommended approaches belong to business as usual. The state, being the sole agenda setter of the public discourse, reverses the very logic of the public sphere, its main purpose being to continuously subject political power to public scrutiny and critique.

Instead, Russian mass media devotes considerable effort and airtime to create and sustain the image of President Putin, as it must be broadcast to the mass audience (Etling, 2015: 280). The President cannot be subjected to critique on any state-run channel, and must rather be shown as a strong and forceful leader capable of protecting Russian national interests internationally, especially against the alleged schemes of the West. Vladimir Putin must be shown as a strong and serious politician against any of his opponents, who are in their turn diminished, ridiculed, and deprived of any seriousness and credibility as possible political opposition to the current power. In this sense, the officially sustained public sphere ceases to be the arena of equal political debate, where all opponents gain equal access to the audience and can use the power of the best argument. While it may appear as if there were a multitude of voices and political positions participating in the public sphere, in reality this plurality is manufactured and tempered with. The public domain remains practically monolithic.

Another dimension which dictates the access of the people to the public sphere in Russia is that of socioeconomic domination. Socioeconomic inequality among social groups translates to inequality in accessing the public sphere and its venues. Chebankova (2011: 331) points out that socioeconomically disadvantaged groups have particularly limited opportunities of internet access, and “are confined to the television domain”. This is particularly true for people living in remote and countryside regions, and creates a clear divide between the urban and rural population. At the same time, small towns are homes to some 67% of employed

proto-middle class and 75% of the employed poor, and are comprised of up to 60% of Russia's territory (Gorshkov, 2014: 10). The data from VTsIOM indicates that more educated, high-income large city dwellers are considerably more likely to have internet access than less educated, low-income citizens living in Russia's rural areas. Strongly dependent on television content, these socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are exposed to highly selected, filtered, and censored political information. They are, therefore, almost fully excluded from more independent critical political debate supported by liberal online media.

The problem of lacking engagement of the proto-middle class and the working poor in the political discourse results in the absence of these groups from the public sphere. It means that their reality, struggles and grievances, as well as needs, are not being articulated and acknowledged in public debate. Apparently, the lines of socioeconomic stratification become the most important, while cultural, ethnic, and other social indicators are less important when it comes to group exclusion from the public sphere (Gorshkov, 2014: 12). In other words, when members of various social or ethnocultural groups belong to the upper economic class, they invariably experience less discrimination and enjoy greater inclusion and recognition.

In the light of such tendencies, the Russian government seems to adopt, in the words of Chebankova (2011: 334), the policy of centralization. Rather than apply effort toward fragmentation of the public sphere, which would provide the necessary diversification, and create a space of representation and debate for various communities, the official politics is oriented toward fostering a homogeneous totalizing public sphere to serve as a space of validation for its ideology, and not a space of critique.

To summarize, the structure of the Russian public sphere can be considered as consisting of two realms. On the one hand, there is the official public sphere, sustained by the state and its controlled media organizations. On the other, there is a less institutionalized, more permissive public sphere of online domain, which incorporates some professional liberal-oriented media outlets and a large number of

grass-roots online communities. The persistent problem of the latter realm is its relative weakness and impotence in influencing the agenda setting of the mass media. The liberal online public sphere in Russia, albeit more inclusive, remains too scattered, and is effectively rejected by the mainstream media as an agent of interest representation.

The main characteristics of the official public sphere include its tendency towards trivialization and banalization of the political debate and homogeneous composition of its audience. Television remains the main communicative platform for the mainstream political discourse, and serves two key purposes: to communicate the official platform of the government and its political, social, and economic messages, and to discredit and trivialize any emerging oppositional trends which can be seen as undermining President Putin's doctrine.

#### **4.2.3. Freedom of press in Russia**

Freedom of press is vital to democracy for it enables citizens to participate in the political process, get informed about public matters, and form their own opinions (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2009: 11). Free media are indispensable in holding the governments accountable to the citizens and preventing the abuses of power and corruption (Brunetti & Weder, 2003). It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the state of affairs concerning this issue in contemporary Russia.

In many Western societies, freedom of the press and an independent media system are often taken for granted, as they are a deep-rooted part of collective consciousness (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2009). Although in Russian public discourse, the concept of free press became somewhat generally accepted, the historical conditions of the media development resulted in "lack of support for and understanding of a free and fair media" (Oates, 2006: 58). In 2014 Reporters Without Borders gave Russia place 148 out of 180 on their list of countries according to the

freedom of the press. Similarly, Freedom House named it a not free country in terms of its press status.

Authoritarian tendencies have intensified since the rise to power of Vladimir Putin (Salmenniemi, 2008: 2). This transition could be anticipated, because despite a degree of autonomy enjoyed by the media in post-Soviet Russia, it was “fragile because it is neither institutionalized nor supported by a strong, independent, and impartial judiciary” (Mickiewicz, 2000: 118). The effect of tightening restrictions on the mass media has been profound. Freedom of expression has been compromised by a variety of measures. To prevent criticism, the Kremlin will resort to anything “from energy-sapping charges of defamation and checks for ‘extremism’ to the newly reinstated article of the Criminal Code on defamation, which attracts astronomical fines of up to five million rubles (many years’ salary for an average journo)” (Arapova, 2012: para.3). There is also a complex system of informal media regulations in place which has a detrimental effect on the work of journalists (Arutunyan, 2009). Journalists and editors are subjected to recommendations and curatorship on the part of the public officials as to which topics need to be avoided and how to report those which are permitted (Mayr et al., 2012).

Yet, there is a degree of ambivalence about the freedom of the press and expression in Russia, as pointed out by former British Ambassador to Russia Sir Anthony Brenton. Unquestionably, there is an array of mechanisms the Russian authorities may use to quiet unwanted public voices: “guidance, proprietorial pressure, police and harassment, maybe more...” (Brenton, 2011: 38). However, journalists and public bloggers are not as obedient as usually painted in the West. There is “a certain obliquity of approach” to criticize the government, especially found in the newspapers, which represents a variety of views and commentaries, with many being scathing in tone. Likewise, online debate is “vigorous”, as more people turn to the medium in search of an alternative to state-praising and meaningful political conversation. And although online communication alone cannot be a panacea for existing political dilemmas, it can become a gateway for a long process of civil society building.



### **4.3. Russian blogosphere: networked and politicized**

#### **4.3.1. *Runet* and the political**

The number of internet users in Russia has been steadily growing over the years. While only about 8 percent of the population went online from time to time in 2003, ten years later this figure crossed the 60 percent threshold (Volkov, 2012: 50). The new technology has been transforming the country's media landscape as many people now go to search for information online, rather than rely on traditional media sources.

After it began developing in the 1990s, the Russian segment of the internet (also idiomatically called *Runet*) remained a relatively elitist phenomenon particularly due to its high cost (Rohozanski, 1999: v). Only a small group of people living in the Russian metropolis enjoyed the World Wide Web. Despite the high rate of internet penetration growth, the problem of uneven access – a phenomenon which Norris (2001) described as a digital divide – remains acute in Russian society. While it privileges people from big cities, especially Moscow and Saint Petersburg, for people living in the outer regions, the economic burden of online connection remains onerous (Bykov & Hall, 2011: 156).

Despite its inaccessibility for a significant proportion of the Russian population, some optimism was surrounding the new communication technology and its promise of democratization (Fossato et al, 2008; Ognyanova, 2012). Yet, as Vladimir Putin proceeded into his second term as a president in 2004, it became clear that the country was not on its way to democratization, but rather remained a relatively authoritarian society “in which political parties and grass- roots organizations have had little role to play” (Oates, 2013: 7). Initially, in order to undermine the internet's liberalization potential, the Russian government resorted to the forms of soft control over online communication as opposed to hard censorship (Morozov, 2012). The subtle measures may include engaging paid bloggers and other online activists to

disseminate pro-governmental propaganda, as well as extend its influence over leading ISPs and internet companies (Etling et al, 2010: 6; Morozov, 2012: 89). Since the re-election of President Putin in 2012, however, the efforts to censor materials and silence the dissent became more blatant (Freedom House, 2014). The government is now legally empowered to block content it deems illegal, e.g. child pornography or extremist materials (Kramer, 2013). The defamation in traditional and online media was recriminalized, which allows for the further legal harassment of critical voices (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The number of prosecutions of online activists grew as well.

Regardless of all these limitations, and with the country's mainstream media failing to offer any meaningful critique of the political power, the internet remains an important venue for public debate and political activism in Russian society (Lonkila, 2008: 1128). The mass media in Russia are generally perceived as a political player rather than a guardian set to critically examine the political institutions (Pasti, 2005: 90; Oates, 2006: 57). As a result, *Runet* becomes an imperfect surrogate for a dysfunctional mass media public sphere and is highly politicized in character (Volkov, 2012: 49). In this sense, the internet allows citizens to establish their own channels for political communication and criticism.

#### **4.3.2. Formation of Russian blogosphere**

Demonstrated in the report by Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, there is a dynamic blogosphere to be found on *Runet* (Etling et al, 2010). Russian-speaking people write and read some 65 million blogs (Koltsova & Koltcov, 2013: 208) on a variety of subjects that range from hobbies to literature, from sports to history, and from domestic and international politics to various social causes just to name a few. In a country where mass media discourse is determined by the political elite while internet remains relatively unrestricted – if we are to compare with sophisticated technological blocking and filtering tools used in China or Iran (Xu et al, 2011; Rhoads & Fassihi, 2011) – it is inevitable that the blogosphere be

utilized as a venue for debate and criticism focusing on the burning political and social issues.

The influence the blogosphere exerts over political life in Russia can be exemplified by the rise to prominence of Alexei Navalny, who used his blog to introduce himself to an online audience. Navalny has launched his anti-corruption blog to target and to report the financial abuses by state officials. He quickly gained a heavy online following, and became both a political pundit and a recognized oppositional figure, by successfully converting “his new media experience to political capital” (Bode & Makarychev, 2013: 54). Another instance when political blogs, along with social networking sites, turned into viable political agents were the public protests following parliamentary and presidential elections marred by violations and fraud in 2011-12 (Popkova, 2014). The blogosphere became the only available space for political self-expression where politically conscious citizens would come together to create a “self-generated public opinion” (Koltsova & Koltcov, 2013: 207). At the same time, it was observed that increased blogging activity – writing and sharing of political posts – has had its effects reaching outside the realm of online communication (Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2014).

Etling et al. (2010) argued that there are certain unique features particular to the Russian blogosphere. It is highly segmented, and divided among a variety of platforms. Fotasso et al. (2008: 14) found that 75 percent of Russian blogs were in fact distributed through five different platforms. It also has a hyperactive core of bloggers mostly within LiveJournal, or shortly LJ, which constitutes a central hub for online activism and political and social discussions (Alexanyan & Koltsova, 2009: 73; Etling et al, 2010: 17). At the same time, the bloggers within the core appear to be less isolated into “echo-chambers”, less ideologically clustered, and less polarized along the liberal-conservative axis, which is the case in the US blogosphere, as was found by Adamic & Glance (2005). Instead, Russian bloggers demonstrated an inclination toward “independent intellectual posture” and abstained from a distinct group affiliation (Etling et al, 2010: 19).

On a less optimistic note, an analysis by Rohozanski (1999) maintained that an adoption of new communication technologies would inevitably be guided by the existing social and cultural norms of a given society, rather than transform it unilaterally toward a more open and democratic political system. Similarly, Gorny (2009: 8) has written about the Russian blogosphere that it “reproduces the fundamental structural features of the Russian society, such as social atomization, negative attitudes to official institutions (and, more generally, to any ‘Other’) and a strong dependence on personal networks as a source of information, opinion and support.”

The study by Fotasso et al. (2008: 52-53) regarded it as an unlikely event that bloggers could be significant actors of social change. It too stood on the position opposed to the Western rhetoric of the web as an instrument of democratization, and claimed it was more likely to attune itself to the existing political norms. Although the study emphasized *Runet*'s role in the dissemination of political information, it was not found to be a mobilizing force for broad masses. Instead, those involved in online activism were “mainly closed clusters of like-minded users who only on rare occasions are able to and willing to cooperate with other groups” (Fotasso et al., 2008: 53). Similarly, Kyria (2013:12) claimed that in the Russian context, the system of entanglement between the online media, such as blogs and social networks, and the traditional media creates a situation of isolation, marginalization, and polarization of oppositional groups which prevents them from achieving meaningful political goals.

#### **4.3.3. From LiveJournal to *Zhivoi Zhurnal***

A few words need to be said about the LiveJournal which remains among the most popular blogging platforms in the country. It is known to Russian users as *Zhivoi Zhurnal*, and its history “is so intertwined with the evolution of the Internet in Russia that its initials (*ZheZhe*) are synonymous with blogging” (Alexanyan & Koltsova, 2009: 66). The service was launched in 1999 by Brad Fitzpatrick, a college student at the time, who intended it as a tool to keep in touch with friends and family.

That same year, the first LJ account in its Russian segment was registered by a user from Saint Petersburg, but the “full- fledged beginning of the Cyrillic ZheZhe (and Russian blogosphere in general)” is considered a post made by philologist Roman Leibov from Tartu, Estonia (Podshibyakin, 2010: 7). The first few years for the Russian segment of LJ were a “touching time” when no more than 40-50 people were blogging in what could be described as a “kitchen-like” atmosphere and had very little resemblance with today’s massively populated platform (Goralik, 2005: para.1). To make a comparison, in 2012 there were over 5,7 million LJ blogs and over 170,000 blogging communities using the Cyrillic alphabet (SUP Media quoted in Greenal, 2012).

In 2005, Fitzpatrick sold the platform to California-based SixApart, and in 2006, online media company SUP with headquarters in Moscow acquired the rights to develop LJ's Cyrillic services. In December 2007, it purchased the blogging platform completely. The deal left many users in fear as they considered it to be the Kremlin’s effort of spreading control over the blogosphere (Morozov, 2006: para. 9). This, however, did not happen and the website continued to be a parallel public sphere and an island of relative media freedom. As BBC wrote in the wake of the Russian presidential elections in 2012: “[...] Russians have made LiveJournal their own, turning what is in the West a relatively obscure and nowadays rather dated platform into a huge, seething mass of political anger, colourful prose and clever repartee” (Greenall, 2012: para. 6).

One of the reasons for the popularity of the platform among its Russian users is that it blended well with the existing mentality and culture of informal networks. It is “an intensely interactive environment”, which at the same time supplies users with the instruments to rigorously manage their networks of friends and acquaintances (Bowles, 2006: 31). Bloggers can decide whom to include in their friends circle, and who can read and comment on their posts. These features of electronic platform match the communal Russian mentality that traditionally places value on informal networking and mutual favors while passing over official channels (Bowles, 2006: 32; Gorny, 2006: 79).

Given an unprecedented freedom when compared to the mainstream media, the Russian sector of LiveJournal attracted numerous citizens, many of whom shared liberal views and were oppositional to the government (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013: 42). It quickly became a dynamic space where political discourse is generated. Even though political pundits and activists of the blogosphere may still remain relatively obscure in the context of larger online discourse, they have an important potential to transform the political agenda in “small ways at first” (Oates, 2013: 67). Furthermore, many conversations which could not be defined as political in the strict sense for they revolve around seemingly mundane matters, contribute to the larger debate on citizen rights and liberties. In that sense, LiveJournal exemplifies a new media-facilitated space for subactivism that brings together the private and the political (Bakardjieva, 2009).

It can be argued that the “golden era” of Russian LiveJournal as a political mobilization instrument with no competition is over, as the field of political online communication in Russia has diversified. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have grown in their importance for politically conscious Russians. In the past few years, Facebook developed into “the meeting point of critically minded intellectuals, mostly from Moscow and St Petersburg, playing a significant role in building the liberal-oriented public counter-sphere” overtaking this function from the blogging service (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013: 42). Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics of the LiveJournal platform – e.g. capacity to post long texts, simultaneous support for private and public networks, blogging communities – which maintain its status as one of the significant venues for political debate, civic engagement, and activism.

#### **4.4. *AntiDogma*: LiveJournal blogging community**

##### **4.4.1. Blogging communities on LiveJournal**

LiveJournal describes itself as an online community, a social network, and a place for self-expression. The first two attributes are particularly important, as they point to its distinctive technological composition which elsewhere is referred to as a Social Network System hybrid (Etling et al, 2010: 12). Namely, it combines the features of an open blogging platform with those of a closed social network. The first offers users convenient self-publishing tools, while the second allows the formation of networks of friends and acquaintances with easily controlled boundaries. Such hybrid functionality is what gives LiveJournal an advantage over its newer rivals Facebook and Twitter.

One of the key differences between the LiveJournal-based blog and an issue-group created on the page of VK or Facebook is that LiveJournal facilitates access to its pages even for non-members of the service. If a page is open to the public by the moderators, one does not need to be a subscriber and have their own LJ account to gain access to the postings and even to post comments. In the meantime, the very architecture of social networking sites such as Facebook imposes constraints on the public of the activists and social movements, since the group pages cannot be accessed by non-members (Gladarev & Lonkila, 2012: 1384). On the contrary, public accounts on LiveJournal are closer to the online versions of the mass media which seek exposure to large groups of people.

The main limitation of Twitter, although it is one of the most effective tools for nearly instant dissemination of information, is the space it allocates for the posts. Every tweet is limited to 140 symbols, which means that the service itself cannot carry large pieces of text. The platform is perfectly suited for sharing links to other sources, rather than to provide more in-depth commentary. A blog post, therefore, still

remains the medium to carry political commentary and in-depth analysis which can be further publicized through sharing on other social networks.

LiveJournal offers its users an opportunity to organize into blogging communities – the aggregations of LJ bloggers connected by a common interest. As the website states:

Users who are interested in a particular subject can find and create a community for this subject. For example, residents of a town or city can use a community to exchange local information and announce local events. After you find and join an interesting community, you can post comments or entries to the community.

The concept of community is specific to the platform which “can be used in many ways, as a private journal, a blog, a discussion forum or a social network” (Gaudeul & Giannetti, 2013: 318).

There are two ways to participate in a LJ community. The first option is *to join* it by either requesting entry from a community maintainer or by replying to an invitation. The ability of the users to post blog entries in a community blog will often require this type of membership. In addition, there is a community privacy setting which allows for the posting of *protected entries* that can only be read by the members. The second option is *to watch* a community. By clicking a *watch* button, a LJ user will add the community to her list of friends. Reciprocally, the user’s name will appear on community’s profile on “Watched by” list. To provide better control, there is a privacy option for individual bloggers which allows posting *Friends-only* entries on personal blogs which remain unavailable to the community members, moderators, maintainers or owners unless they are personally added to the blogger’s Friends list.



#### 4.4.2. *AntiDogma*: 2006 – nowadays

The *AntiDogma* page holds the following self-description: “*The largest in ZheZhe independent community of LGBT (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders [sic]) and their friends.*” This statement is significant, for it declares that the blog has no formal ties to any official organization and thus emphasizes its grassroots, bottom-up structure. The prominence of the community was reaffirmed in 2010, when it took the second place in the international competition The Best of Blogs (The Bobs) 2010. The Bobs is the project of Deutsche Welle, the publicly funded German international broadcaster, launched in 2004 (Raitt, 2009: 1-3). The award acknowledges the best practices in online citizen activism, in an effort “to contribute to promoting freedom of expression and the upholding of human rights on the Internet and around the world.”<sup>1</sup>

The profile page of *AntiDogma* provides a few key words in the section *Description*, which instantly give users an idea about the community’s main subject and social position: “*Citizen LGBT-activism, grassroots, achieving of equality regardless of sex. orientation.*” The profile page also offers a quick access to other instructive and introductory materials which help users to familiarize themselves with the community. There is a list of “*congenial communities*”. Those are 16 LJ groups focused on the subjects of LGBT (political as well as personal matters), “small deeds”, feminism and gender issues, anti-clericalism, reason and common sense, and human rights. What obviously links them is their antipathetic stance toward the state ideology which emphasizes conservative political, social, and cultural values and is actively promoted by pro-Kremlin media outlets. In accordance with the recent law to protect minors from harmful information (President of Russia, 2011), the community displays a badge with the age warning: “*Present resource may contain materials intended only for individuals over 18.*”

The *AntiDogma* community has one owner and six maintainers/moderators (including the owner). Closer inspection of the moderators’ personal LJ profiles

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the project see <https://thebobs.com/english/>

found them to be geographically scattered, which is consistent with the finding that considerable Russian diaspora actively participates in online discourses on Russian blogs (Schmidt & Teubener, 2006). Two indicate their location as Russia; one only names the country while the second also provides the name of the city – Ivanovo (administrative center approximately 250 km away from Moscow with the population close to 400,000). The rest, according to their profile information, are based in New York (USA), Hannover (Germany), Tel Aviv (Israel), and Istanbul (Turkey). There are no positive mechanisms within the platform which would allow the verification of user location, as they are free to write any location of their choosing. One way to do it is to skim through the diary for supporting content. For example, in case of moderators from Germany, Israel, and the USA the content of their personal LJ pages confirmed their location: there were numerous personal photographs and references to locales providing detailed descriptions of places and events. The user from Istanbul had only three blog posts listed on the profile. Of them, only one was public and visible to non- friends. Thus, it was impossible to confirm the location.

In February 2014, the *AntiDogma* community totaled 2,532 members (number of users eligible to post blog entries and see protected posts) and was watched by 3,178 LJ users. These are two overlapping groups, meaning the members are also listed as watchers. The first community blog entry – its mission statement – was posted in April 2006 by one of its maintainers/moderators. By the time the empirical part of this study was completed in early 2014, it had a total of 7,322 blog entries which altogether received 180,261 comments. In order to become a member, one has to have an LJ account and send a request to join along with a personal comment to a specially designated blog post. The blog posts are open for public to read with or without LJ account.

A few words need to be said about the community activity as represented in numbers. The archival function of LJ arranges the navigation of old blog posts in the form of a calendar. It appeared to be a convenient tool to trace the number of posts made each day since the community was launched in April 2006. The figures show a rapid growth in the quantity of posts in the first two years as community matured.

After 88 blog entries were posted in the nine months of 2006, the number quintupled in 2007 reaching 485 postings. And the year after, it nearly doubled to 871 entries. After the first two years, the speed has decelerated and the years of minor growth alternated with the years of slight decrease as the number of postings stabilized. There were 969 posts in 2009, but only 923 in subsequent year. In 2011, the numbers went up again and reached 1148 with 2012 being community's peak year so far with the total of 1384 entries. In 2013, there were 1152 postings. 2012 had the most posts and the record month (Figure 1). In April alone bloggers have posted 237 entries. The activation can be explained by the fact that in March 2012, the city of Saint Petersburg has passed law prohibiting the "propaganda of homosexuality" which created strong resonance in Russia and abroad. It triggered public discussion about the rights of sexual minorities in the country with many online media picking up the topic.

The profile page also offers a list of tags used by the bloggers to label their blog posts. Tagging is a practice of collective knowledge management actively used in social media (Passant & Laublet, 2008: para. 1). It is especially popular in the blogosphere for it "provides an easy way to search and index blog entries through annotating them with short textual words" (Kim et al, 2010: 408).

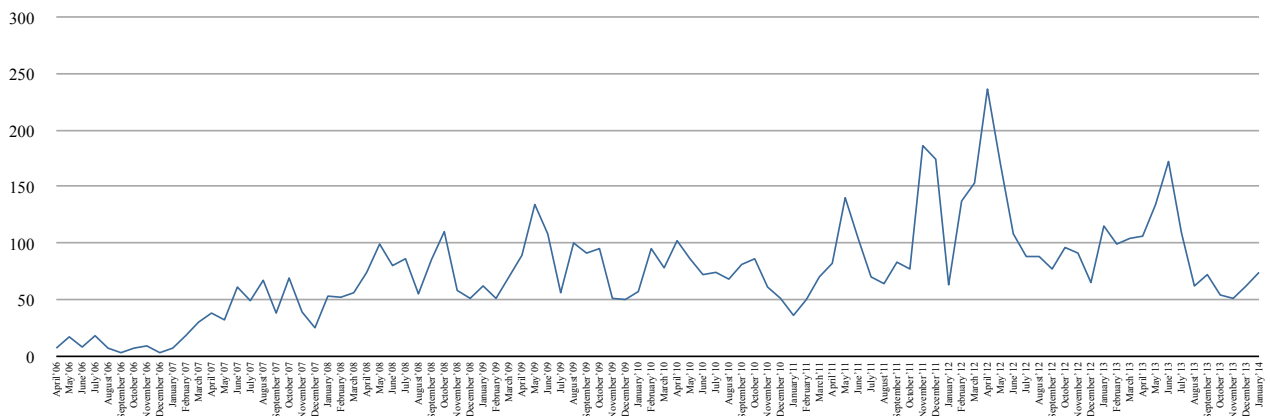
*AntiDogma* uses free-form tagging and bloggers are not limited to a predefined list of tags. They can choose from already existing tags, but can also add new ones to precisely encapsulate their subject and help the readers in search and interpretation of content. Although it is an extremely simple, instrumental form of linguistic action, tagging can also be understood in the context of collective and/or collaborative action as expression of opinion, performance, and activism (Zollers, 2007). There are a total of 109 tags – individual words/phrases – which have been used by *AntiDogma* authors to annotate their content. The least used tag "of moderators" appeared only once, while the most intensively applied is "homophobia" and was attached to blog entries 520 times. Other popular tags used over one hundred times were "propaganda' law" (292 times), "politics" (287 times), "actions" (247 times), "video" (237 times), "human rights defense" (237 times), "cinema" (221), "activism"

(218 times), “pride” (209), “lawmaking” (205), “announcement” (203), “propaganda of homophobia” (186), “religion” (185), “advocacy” (178), “discrimination” (134), “propaganda of tolerance” (133), “press” (127), “humor” (124), “#transgenders [sic]” (122), “parents” (120), “question” (113), “tv” (105), and “coming-out” (103).

**Table 2. Number of blog entries**

| Year | Number of blog entries |
|------|------------------------|
| 2006 | 88                     |
| 2007 | 485                    |
| 2008 | 871                    |
| 2009 | 969                    |
| 2010 | 923                    |
| 2011 | 1148                   |
| 2012 | 1384                   |
| 2013 | 1152                   |

**Figure 1. Number of blog entries per month**



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *ANTIDOGMA* AS NEWS PRODUCING COMMUNITY

#### 5.1. Media and the representation of reality

##### 5.1.1. Construction of news

Speaking about the nature of what people know, or indeed do not know, about reality, Luhmann (2000: 1) noticed that “[w]hat we know about the stratosphere is the same as what Plato knows about Atlantis: we’ve heard tell of it.” Likewise, in the world of events and news reports about these events, there is very little of what the audience knows about them before reading, watching or hearing a media report. Most events happen at distant locations and not within an immediate environment of individuals. Thus, the media will determine, to a large extent, what people know about reality.

Since the development of high circulation media and the growth of media industries, which began in Europe in the seventeenth century, mass media became the main source of information about public events (Thompson, 1995: 63-69). This information would subsequently form the basis for the political discussions that started taking place in salons and coffee houses throughout Europe, places that constituted the public sphere as described by Habermas (1989). Today, properly informed citizens constitute the foundation of functioning democracy.

This sheds light on the importance of the mass media as an institution vital to the sustaining of democratic society. In that sense, news media serves as the main link between the public events and the public sphere (Oliver & Meyer, 1999). Most citizens learn about the world around them through the media. For this reason, it is imperative that they transmit truthful and unbiased news, which citizens will use to

inform their political decisions, most commonly in the act voting but also in other non-institutional acts of political participation.

The idea of mass media being a co-creator of reality was considered by Lippmann (1922: 272), who claimed that the news is more than merely a mirror of a social condition and that “simple and obvious facts” are neither simple nor obvious but always “subject to choice and opinion.” Later on, many commentators and scholars in mass media echoed this position. For instance, Thompson (1995: 117) argued that:

the media are actively involved in constituting the social world. By making images and information available to individuals located in distant locales, the media shape and influence the course of events and, indeed, create events that would not have existed in their absence.

Vasterman (2005) similarly supported the idea that media does not just communicate information about the events, but also has the power to create them. More radically, these events would not have happened without media involvement as people construct news the way they construct products (Hall, 1982; Archetti, 2013). News as product exists within a value system which helps to facilitate, nurture, and perpetuate society (Sonwalkar, 2005: 262).

To construct representations of reality through which their audience could navigate more or less easily, mass media frequently employ the socio-cultural binary of “us” versus “them” (Elias & Scotson, 1994; Sreberny, 2002; Sonwalkar, 2005). Usually, the “us” is seen as a mainstream society, that is a dominant majority holding certain values deemed universal. This is a predominant segment of society that “the media believes exists in its target audience, which it also circularly cultivates among its readers/viewers” (Sonwalkar, 2005: 264). As “them”, which can also be referred as the “other”, the media represents various minority groups who are believed to deviate from the values and norms of the mainstream society and in that sense be different (“other”) to “us”.

One way the news media deals with minorities is by ignoring their existence (Steiner et al., 1993). In this case, the news media neglects their issues and fails to provide any coverage by creating a “sphere of invisibility” (Sonwalkar, 2005: 262). Another way is through the use of clichés in representation and stigmatizations. Regardless of whether it is a racial, ethnic, religious, sexual or class minority, all of them “share a common media fate of relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes” (Gross, 2001: 12). Poor people are routinely portrayed in the media as sexually reckless, lazy, and criminal (Parisi, 1998: 197). Immigrants and asylum seekers are represented in the news as a threat to the in-taking countries and their local populations (Saxton, 2003; Van Dijk, 2000). The portrayals of homosexuality have varied from being a disease to an immoral lifestyle (Steiner et al., 1993; Klesse, 2005; Baer, 2011).

The contemporary mass media organizations are institutions with their own working logic. They combine institutional and financial resources, which allow them to give issues they cover a higher level of so-called promotional publicity by reaching larger numbers of people (Malin, 2011: 190). In this way, by representing reality, and choosing certain aspects of it while excluding others, news media exercises their symbolic power (Thompson, 1995: 16-18). Gross (1994: 143) argued in this respect that those who are underrepresented in the media, remain powerless and marginalized, calling it “a form of symbolic annihilation.” Furthermore, as institutions with socially accepted roles and tasks, the power of the media is rarely questioned.

### **5.1.2. Mainstream news and hegemony**

The concept of hegemony is useful when we turn to the power of the mainstream media to construct social reality. Antonio Gramsci (1971) first put forward the idea of hegemony in his Prison Notebooks. Although, as Buttigieg (in Gramsci, 2010: 21) noticed, the concept was mentioned only once in his essay, the close association remains between hegemony understood as the domination of one group over others, and the work of Italian thinkers.

In Gramsci's writings, hegemony referred to the domination of the socially, economically, and politically privileged over the less privileged. This domination is achieved not by violent coercion and use of physical aggression, but by means of cultural and social manipulation and persuasion. It means that those subjected to hegemony willingly adopt the ideological positions communicated to them by the hegemonic authority, and accept them as conventions. In particular, there is an often-quoted description of hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (Gramsci, 1971: 12).

Therefore, the Gramscian hegemony is understood first and foremost as a cultural hegemony in which the ruling group maintains the power to define the system of values and norms for the entire population. Hegemony translates into symbolic power. It is achieved through the establishing of the "common sense" as the only correct view of the social order and its various components, such as values, traditions, and social norms and practices. It is therefore the task of a philosopher, in Gramsci's view, to "initially adopt a polemical stance, as superseding the existing mode of thinking. It must therefore present itself as a critique of 'common sense'" (Gramsci, 2011: 369 quoted in Liguori, 2015: 105).

The role the mass media plays in the dissemination of social and cultural values and norms is undeniable due to their established position as the main source of information for the general population. They provide 'the broadest common background of assumptions about what things are, how they work (or should work), and why' (Gross, 1994: 143). In relation to the concept of cultural hegemony, it has been hypothesized that the mainstream news media maintains the ideological status quo of the existing political and economic system (Lull, 2013: 34). Most importantly, and of particular relevance to this work, is one of the central effects of the mass media described by Elliott (1974: 262), which is their ability to persuade members of the



public about social roles and routine personal activities. By acting as efficient distributors of information with a professional standing, mass media transmits in subtle ways the idea of what is normal and ought to be when it comes to social values and the way in which society must be organized.

In Western countries, the media hegemony arguably perpetuates a particular idea of normalcy closely related to a homogenous middle-class culture, which “has grown up internationally around pop music, fast food, action movies, animated features, and other McDonaldized, Disneyfied, Hollywood fare” (Artz, 2015: 7). This has a direct impact on the LGBT community, for it is often not only left outside the picture of traditional family and its values, but also designated as adversary to the latter. Should mass media follow the logic of exclusion, they can easily convince their audiences that whoever does not consent to the generally accepted status quo of normality must be seen as an outsider, threatening the mainstream community.

The cultural hegemony, which promotes the values of the mainstream society, has often emphasized the position of heterosexual romantic unions and linked to them traditional family values as being the norm (Ingraham, 1999). The variety of media formats, from films and television series, to popular music and women’s magazines, have perpetuated this idea. For a long time, love stories between a man and a woman enjoyed a complete monopoly on what a romantic relationship should be as represented by the popular media. Sexual minorities, on the contrary, have been either erased from the mainstream media landscape or depicted in a demonized and stigmatized manner as a menace to the established social norms. In other words, they have remained at the bottom of the power hierarchy created by the cultural hegemony.

Given this situation, alternative media predictably became, if not the most successful, but possibly the most easily available solution to the problem of invisibility of the LGBT community at a time when mass media strived to cater to the conventions and habits of a homogeneous audience which coincided with mainstream society. As Hall (1986: 23) noticed, hegemony is never solid, nor permanent or secured, and social homogeneity will always be interrupted by dissenting groups

seeking wider recognition. The cracks in the dominant culture will always give way to the ideological counter-tendencies. LGBT communities in Western societies have long been using alternative spaces as sites of cultural production for expression and continuation of group identity, as well as a challenge to the mainstream cultural status quo. The past two decades have seen a considerable increase in the visibility and communication of the gay community with the recognition of its rights (Hicks, 2016: 124). Often, however, the mainstream media continues to dictate the rules of recognition and inclusion based on the widely accepted social norms and expectations, which means that alternative media spaces will remain an important sight of media production for LGBT groups.

### **5.1.3. Alternative media: a conceptualization**

While the dominance of the mainstream media in news production and dissemination is acknowledged, alternative media plays an increasingly prominent role in the global media system. As they become more ubiquitous and complex, researchers face understandable difficulties of conceptually defining the field of alternative news making.

The concept of alternative media seems to be elusive and hard to categorize (Downing, 2003). Attempts to define or classify them are hindered by the fact that the phenomenon is highly heterogeneous in terms of styles, contributions, and perspectives (Atton, 2002: 8). The word *alternative* can be used to designate media outlets which are organizationally different to the mainstream. In this case, the demarcation line is drawn on the level of organization and/or content (Bailey et al., 2008: 18). In this dichotomy, large-scale, state-run or commercial organizations with hierarchical structure which deliver dominant discourses to the homogeneous audience oppose small-scale, community-oriented, independent of state or market, non-hierarchical outlets which carry “non-dominant (possibly counter-hegemonic) discourses and representations, stressing the importance of self-representation” (Bailey et al., 2008: 18). Organizationally alternative media would

also attempt to engage volunteers as journalists and encourage more control and participation on the part of “ordinary people” (Lewis, 1993: 12).

Another approach in theorizing alternative media is using the ideological orientation of media outlets. In this case, an alternative outlet is critical toward the mainstream media and the dominant discourses they disseminate (Atton, 2002: 7). In effect, this approach draws attention to the notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony, when alternative media functions to provide counter-hegemonic representations. Fuchs (2010) pointed out that such oppositional media can be professional in their organization and yet critical toward existing social domination. Ideologically, alternative outlets can follow the same editorial practices which ensure quality control in journalism and substantiate its claim to professionalism in traditional media (Örnebring, 2013: 44). Some examples of such media are *Le Monde Diplomatique* and *Z Magazine*. Fuchs (2010: 179) described the critical form and content of alternative editions:

There is oppositional content that provides alternatives to dominant repressive heteronomous perspectives that reflect the rule of capital, patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, etc. Such content expresses oppositional standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy and domination. So there is counter-information and counter-hegemony that includes the voices of the excluded, the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, the estranged, the exploited, and the dominated.

The media can be culturally alternative when considered from a perspective of currently mainstream culture. Similar to the case of ideological orientation, culturally alternative media can also have professional editorial teams who work with professional reporters. Furthermore, they can even be commercially oriented and hierarchically structured media organizations. In this case, what secures their oppositional stance is the challenge they pose to the culturally prevailing representations in a given society. For instance, Sturmer (1993) analyzed how the coming of MTV – hardly ever associated with underground or anarchist media outlets – in Sweden in the 1980s confronted the cultural domination of public-service

television. Likewise, professional media institution Al Jazeera positions itself as a cultural and political alternative to the leading Western television channels in the way it represents global Muslim community (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007: 5). Therefore, such distinction between mainstream and alternative media is context-based and depends on the readers' perception of the sources (Rauch, 2007: 1007). In effect, it is not the egalitarian organization or the critical content, but the subjective interpretative strategies of the audience which can make a medium alternative in a given cultural context.

In the context of the present study, the constructive way to look at the alternative media is from the perspective of the concept of cultural hegemony. As was discussed above, cultural hegemony implies the domination of a particular social group by means of establishing a set of cultural and social norms, which will be accepted by the rest of the community as the right way of seeing, doing, and understanding, or, in other words, as common sense. This invites another concept, namely one of metanarrative, first proposed by Jean-François Lyotard (1984: xxiv-xxv) as within a framework of postmodernist critique of traditional forms of knowledge associated with modernity. He defined metanarratives as a characteristic feature of modern Western societies. They are used to legitimate the state with the support of the existing systems of knowledge, cultural norms, and social practices. Some of these all-inclusive metanarratives are the narrative of progress and of meaningfulness of history. In other words, the given metanarrative conceives of human history as following a consistent, coherent trajectory, which will eventually lead to developed, ever more emancipated society.

Not without its own critics, Lyotard's idea suggests that postmodernity is intrinsically opposed to the totalizing quality of metanarratives. Postmodern society grows increasingly skeptical towards modernist ideas, and devalues metanarratives as a legitimizing force for the existing social order. Instead, postmodern culture reintroduces the idea of "the small story" or "the little narrative" (Poster, 2006: 131, Readings, 1991: 47). Little narratives in their turn do not strive to provide a totalizing rationale for knowledge, cultural norms, and history at large; they exist in myriad and

permanently replace one another. The propagation of “small narratives” becomes possible by means of the new digital media that also change the ways in which knowledge is created, stored, and distributed.

Alternative media, therefore, can be seen both as driven by the small narratives and as a driving force for them. Alternative media become established as legitimate sources of information only given the totalizing notion – that is, the metanarrative – of professional media organizations as only recognized media channels can be rejected. Once they are accepted if not as equal but at least a recognized actor within the media system they become the distributor of small narratives as opposed to grand narratives communicated by the mass media. As opposed to the mass media organizations the alternative media outlets are set to serve smaller, more diverse publics. Should it happen that the alternative outlet exists outside the market logic it can focus on alternative stories, which might be too radical or too polarizing for the mainstream media.

It becomes clear that there is no a single way to theorize the complex phenomenon of alternative media. Thus, they can be described comprehensively as “a range of media of projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of “doing’ media” (Atton, 2004: ix). An important aspect of alternative media ontology is that they are integral to the process of social change (Albert, 1997). In the USA, the American gay and lesbian liberation movement was represented by a small, alternative, and basically underground newspaper which introduced LGBT issues into a popular social discourse: “They fought for and won the right to publish and distribute materials that discussed homosexuality” (Ostertag, 2006: 6). So, alternative media are involved in daily struggles of communities and individuals (Couldry & Curran, 2003: 7). They are deeply embedded in contestations between the citizens and communities on the one hand, and the structures and institutions of domination and suppression on the other. At the same time, alternative media, their organization, form, and content, all are shaped by a specific conflict in which they are involved.

#### **5.1.4. The growth of citizen journalism online**

The advent of the internet and proliferation of online communication became a critical point in the evolution of alternative media in general and citizen journalism in particular. Easy-to-use technology changed the previously existing relation dynamics between the news media and their audiences. Probably the most dramatic change can be observed in the shift from the one-to-many way of communication characterized by a stern hierarchy and unidirectional information flow from media institutions to the citizens toward a many-to-many mode of communication (Jensen & Helles, 2010: 2-4). The new mode brought about a significant flattening of the communicative hierarchy, the weakening of the position of the traditional media institutions, and their loss of a complete monopoly on the production and propagation of news content and therefore on the creation of social meaning (Woodly, 2008).

Allan & Zelizer (2010: 18) defined citizen journalism as “a type of journalism in which ordinary citizens adopt the role of journalist in order to participate in news-making.” This is the kind of journalism where amateurs rather than professionals – “the people formerly known as the audience” in the words of Jay Rosen (2012: 13) – play the central role. Equipped with mobile devices and internet access, the members of audience now have an opportunity to speak back to the media (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011). With little to no expenses other than their time, citizens are now able to create their own media narratives.

There are two interweaving tendencies which led to the emergence and strengthening of the phenomenon of citizen journalism. Socially, it is rooted in the need for greater sensitivity of the mass media toward ordinary citizens and their problems (Kern & Nam, 2009: 639). In other words, commercial mass media in the West spent the past few decades focusing on the maximization of profits, rather than trying to become more inclusive for the various social clusters. At the same time, deregulation of media industry led to the concentration of ownership, cross-ownership, and control by non-media companies (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). As a result of this trend, citizens feel alienated from the media institutions. In their striving

for an ever larger audience, mass media succumbs to bad news, scandals, and sensationalism causing disappointment and cynicism on the part of the citizens (Newton, 1999: 577).

Another was a technological tendency of proliferation of digital gadgets and internet access which reinforced citizen journalism (Bai, 2007: 133). Communicative infrastructure in which ordinary citizens can act as media reporters was described by Castells (2004: 3) with the term *network society*, “whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies.” The emergence of the networked society brought about a fundamental change in the previously existing institutional power relations. Together with an opportunity for mass self-communication, social actors gained capacity to challenge institutionalized power relations (Castells, 2007). In the context of the relationship between mass media organizations and their audiences, it means that the former lose the exclusive control of the means for news dissemination. Neither can they any longer make unanimous decisions about the interpretational context of the events and the construction of social meaning.

When ordinary citizens started producing and disseminating their own news regardless of how amateur this content was, they challenged the mass media function of gate-keeping. Shoemaker et al. (2008: 73) defined it as “selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news.” But it is also the “overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed” (Shoemaker et al., 2001: 233). Therefore, the function of gate-keeping was a way for professional reporters to filter information and also to influence the construction of society’s knowledge about the world. With the loss of a monopoly on news-making, news media organizations have shifted from the process of gate-keeping toward what Bruns (2005, 2008) called *gate-watching*. The practice is not concerned with deciding on the issues that can enter the mediascape, but rather with navigating the stream which is now beyond direct control of professionals. In the environment where information is neither scarce nor hard to

produce and publish the power relationship between mainstream media and their audiences is revised (Lewis et al., 2010: 165).

The growing number of media producers has led to the increase in diversity of the media content, which is crucial in terms of the representation of a heterogeneous society. Citizen journalists are engaged in a range of practices which encompass news blogging, photo and video sharing, posting eye-witness commentary as well as reposting, tagging, “liking”, rating, adapting, and commenting on professional news content (Goode, 2009: 1288). They have been particularly instrumental in expanding representations of various social groups worldwide. Their work has targeted a vast selection of issues from local community problems to community emancipation and empowerment to coverage of military conflicts (Rodriguez, 2001; Hamdy, 2010; Mervi & Boklage, 2014). Citizen journalists in some cases offered greater news content diversity than mainstream media (Carpenter, 2010). In doing so, they helped to close the gaps left by the traditional media institutions whose content tends to target large homogeneous audience.

## **5.2. Blogging and journalism: relationship dynamics**

### **5.2.1. Journalism as a profession**

The most tension between bloggers and journalists comes from the notion, strongly supported by the latter, that journalism is a professional activity as opposed to amateurish blogging. A study of professional media workers found them to claim occupational authority which strongly separates professionals from amateur reporters (Örnebring, 2013). The difficulties, however, arise with defining journalism as a profession. Although it is precisely this sense of professionalism, and the prestige that comes with it, that allows journalists to distance themselves from the bloggers, the question remains – Is journalism a profession?



***The concept of profession***

To answer this question, first the concept of *profession* needs to be addressed in greater detail. The examination of the rise of professions is one of the major themes in sociological research (Singer, 2003: 140). The systematization of professions has been a difficult task, for the borders separating different occupations are faint and classification criteria are unclear. There are two main approaches to the systematic examination of professional occupations among scholars which can be delineated, the structural-functionalist and the power approach (Allison, 1986: 5). The latter is concerned with the stakes the occupations have in acquiring professional status and views the process of securing privilege and prestige as a power struggle. The structural-functionalist approach takes on to develop the criteria for an ideal-typical profession. Any occupation which lays claim to being called professional has to be measured against these criteria. The stronger the occupation's compliance with the ideal-typical requirements, the closer its resemblance to a profession.

Collins (1990: 16) defined professions as “occupations which organize themselves ‘horizontally’, with a certain style of life, code of ethics, and self-conscious identity and barriers to outsiders.” Furthermore, sociologists describe them as occupations with special power and prestige (Larson, 1977: x). Professionals are granted privileged position, in particular, because of the esoteric character of their knowledge – and the uniqueness of skills based on it – to which the members of the professional community have an access and which, at the same time, is unavailable to the outsiders. The adherents of the profession have to convince the public that their service is unique and trustworthy (Wilensky, 1964: 148). Professional communities use ethical codes as tools for self-regulation within a community. Altruistic orientation of an occupation helps to assure the trust of the public toward profession.

Combined, these dimensions serve to maintain the borders of professional community and constitute the idea of what can be called an ideological orientation of a profession. Ideology is usually understood as a system of cultural symbols, and represents a set of “shared cultural meanings which enable purposeful social action in

the face of uncertainty” (Marx, 1969: 76). In relation to a professional community, ideological orientation provides a framework, a common point of reference and acts as a guiding mechanism for the members. Professionalism in this context can be viewed as a special means to organize work and control workers, which is advantageous to both practitioners and clients (Evetts, 2011: 406). Acknowledgment of the ideological dimension allows professionals to claim to act “professionally” in uncertain working situations.

### ***Is journalism a profession?***

From a strictly sociological perspective, it is difficult to classify journalism as a professional occupation based on the ideal-typical model (Zelizer, 1993). The community of journalists, although unified by a common ideological orientation (Deuze, 2005: 444), still struggles to establish itself in the same way the traditional occupations protected by the formalized training and licensing are established.

Journalism differs from such classical, and probably the closest to the ideal-typical model, professions as law and medicine in that it lacks the systematic body of knowledge indispensable in order to perform the work of a journalist. It is true that universities all over the world have been offering degrees in journalism for a few decades now (Rogers, 1997: 19). Nevertheless, there is still no agreement about the journalistic doctrine, as well as what exactly constitutes this profession in terms of required training and professional practices. In reality, there are quite a few people working as journalists without holding a journalism degree (Terzis, 2009: 20). Moreover, the presence or absence of a professional degree does not indicate or guarantee the quality of a journalistic work performed by those inside formally defined professional community (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 112).

With a vaguely defined set of entry requirements, one can join the profession of journalism without having to withstand a formal examination of competence. This leaves the normative dimension – that is, the set of beliefs held by a professional community and society at large of how a profession ought to be – of journalistic

occupation as its strongest claim to professional status (Singer, 2003: 144). In this respect, Deuze (2005: 444) maintained that the professionalization of journalism was connected to the formation of journalism's *ideology* to entail the notions of public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics.

Public service is an activity which aims at promoting or contributing to public good, and it is indeed a very strong normative claim that the work of a journalist is first and foremost a public service. Journalistic practices serve to sustain informed citizenry and in this respect, "are not self-justifying, they are not ends in themselves"; moreover, without democracy, journalism would be no more than "something resembling a news business" (Carey, 2000: 133). Media work lies at the core of democratic decision-making and is indispensable for a society to remain self-governed.

Another central element of professional ideology in media work is the notion of objectivity. Often, the definition of the objective journalist is synonymous with the professional journalist in the eyes of both fellow pressmen and the public (Johnston et al., 1972: 523). Objective reporting implies that journalists perform their tasks without politically, economically or culturally motivated biases and information offered as facts is accurate and sincere. The fundamentals of objectivity in mass media embrace the ideas of fairness, disinterestedness, factuality, and non-partisanship.

At the same time, objectivity is among the most ambivalent values in the profession, for it is unclear whether it can be attained in practice. Based on the notion of "philosophical" neutrality, it suggests that reporters can detach from whatever it is they are covering, as well as completely disregard their personal background, which is unrealistic when covering sensitive issues (Salovaara- Moring, 2009: 359). Moreover, journalistic objectivity is often questioned on the basis of reporting being a process of careful selection and filtering, choice of sources, and tone of coverage which is a subject to numerous individual, routine, organizational, extra-media, and ideological influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). While the notion of perfect

objectivity played a crucial role in the professionalization of journalism, in practice some rather speak of *myth* of objectivity (Alwood, 1996: 9). Professional standards prescribe reporters to use official sources to make news. It means that politicians, police, and other official institutions in the position of power are preferred sources and framed as reliable. Thus, objectivity can have a negative effect of misrepresenting and stigmatizing minority groups, especially in a case of social conflict.

The value of autonomy in journalistic work is closely tied to the freedom of press in general. It implies that only when free from pressure, restraints, and censorship, can reporters provide high-quality news (Deuze, 2005: 448). Threats to the autonomy of journalists are numerous, and not limited to direct censorship. Increased corporate ownership, market pressures, extreme speeding up of the news cycle, and blurring lines between news and entertainment, all potentially are serious perils to the sovereignty of journalists (Habermas, 1989; Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008; Stetka, 2012).

The idea of immediacy in news-making underlines an obvious presumption that news must be new. It also reflects on such features as fast decision-making, hastiness, and accelerated real-time (Deuze, 2005: 449). Therefore, delivered by news media, information must be “fresh” and it has to reach its audience at the highest speed possible. With the development of online media, the pressure for immediacy has increased.

Finally, it is the presumed adherence to a set of ethical norms which lends to journalists their status as professionals. It is also their ethical code that permits the media their position as society’s watchdog. Örnebring (2013: 46) found that professional journalists had “a very strong commitment to the practices” which functioned “as operationalization of the ethical rules.” Hafez (2002) in his comparative study of journalism ethics code in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Muslim Asia found that ethical norms have been undergoing universalization despite the differences between the cultures. The devotion to the

principles of truth, accuracy, and objectivity could be considered universal tenets in the ethical codes of media workers worldwide.

### **5.2.2. News blogs and traditional media**

Blogging technology has advanced the practices of citizen journalism. The fusion of its technological affordances as an easy-to-use, low-cost publishing tool, along with the aspiration of citizens to produce their own news, has launched a powerful communicative platform for civil society. As alternative media, the blogosphere has become a channel of representation for a variety of social groups previously excluded from the public debate.

One of the reasons blogging has received attention on the part of media researchers and practitioners is because its relationship with professional journalism forms a point of collision (Singer, 2007). There is a power struggle between the two, which manifests itself in the changing perception of trustworthy news sources by the public. Just a few decades ago, mass media enjoyed a nearly full monopoly on the production and dissemination of news content. However, with the rise of blogosphere, the perception of trustworthiness of mass media has changed.

Bruns (2007: 11) defined news blogging as “the practice of covering the news through blogging – whether by doing original reporting or by providing commentary on the news as it is reported in other news sources.” The conflict between news bloggers and journalists arises because the former bring into question “accepted standards of journalism by blurring the lines of independence, verification, the definition of news, and truth” (Robinson, 2006: 79). The authority of news media is traditionally rooted in their claim to being professionals. Among other things, this claim also means the uniqueness of services they provide. In that sense, journalists have the authority to select information for the audience and decide about the newsworthy subjects. When an ordinary citizen becomes a news blogger it is a challenge to the authority of professional reporters.

The practice of news blogging diluted the idea of being a journalist (Regan, 2003). For one, it forced a reevaluation of the standard of objectivity. While professional reporters are strongly devoted to it, news bloggers abandon the value of objectivity to replace it with connections between citizens, authenticity and greater transparency (Robinson & DeShano, 2011: 978). Bloggers lack the credibility of professional news media, which stems from their adherence to the notion of objectivity. Instead, they opt for more transparency by honestly imparting their ideological and political leanings.

With a reevaluated idea of objectivity, the notion of trust is also challenged. Citizen bloggers call into question the reliability of the mass media with stern hierarchy and a bias toward political and economic elite. They do value truth, but they also acknowledge “that everyone holds his or her own version of the truth”, while attaching the high importance of the “power of collective, of shared knowledge and the connections among those who possess and are willing to exchange it” (Singer, 2007a: 25).

Bloggers gain credibility by openly denouncing the editorial practices of purposeful filtering and careful selection, which are the backbone of professional reporting. Citizen news bloggers are rarely paid for their activities, and lack the financial and institutional resources available in the traditional newsroom. Often a one-man band, a citizen blogger has neither the obligation nor the possibility to follow usual media routines and is free to write on any subjects they consider important. In fact, this desire to provide an alternate perspective to that of traditional media is often a strong motivational factor to keep a blog (Ekdale et al, 2011: 4). Yet, it is precisely those media routines which professionals perceive as a guarantee of quality control in the news when compared to amateur news makers (Örnebring, 2011: 44).

Institutionally unrestricted and self-motivated, bloggers take a unique position as news reporters. They write on the matters they consider newsworthy and provide

them with alternative frames which correspond to their own political leanings. Providing an opportunity for “ordinary” people to talk back to the mass media, the news blogosphere closes the gap between the elite bias of mainstream media institutions and more egalitarian public conversations among citizens.

It is unlikely that blogging alone will be able to replace the existing model of professional media, regardless of how ambitious and successful citizen media initiatives may seem. Thus, it makes little sense to contrast blogging and journalism, clashing them through comparison. As Goldman (2008: 114) put it:

[...] the point to be learned is that we cannot compare the blogosphere and the conventional news outlets as two wholly independent and alternative communication media, because the blogosphere (in its current incarnation, at least) isn't independent of the conventional media; it piggybacks, or free-rides on them.

Blogging has had an impact on news journalism, its practices, and ideological paradigm. However, it does not mean that the two exist as separate communicative phenomena within a public sphere. Instead, there is a new media ecosystem in which professionals and amateurs, journalists and bloggers complement each other (Naughton, 2006: para. 1). What develops is a relationship of interdependence between the traditional mass media and newer forms of communication, embedded in online social networks and citizens' drive. Most likely, bloggers will continue to rely on the traditional media for content and gain authority by providing links to the mainstream news sites; and the mainstream journalists will continue paying attention to the blogosphere in order “to stay at the forefront of public opinion” (Kaye, 2005: 76) and monitor communication stream (Rutigliano, 2007: 235).

### **5.2.3. News blogging practices**

Regarding the question of the news value that may or may not be found in the blog entries posted by citizen bloggers, one aspect has plagued the blogging practice from the beginning. This concerns the idea that many bloggers do little original

reporting and lead a “parasitizing” existence feeding from the content of the traditional media (Reynolds, 2003: 81). It is true that the majority of citizen bloggers will encounter most newsworthy events in the mediated form, that is, they will find information in other news sources which can be elite media as well as other bloggers (Bruns, 2006: 14). Having mainstream news organizations as their sources, bloggers are likely to use them as a starting point for their own media work, which does not undermine its social importance.

Thus, two types of blog writing can be distinguished: reusing content from other sources and original writing. The first type of blog content, and the most common one, is when bloggers recycle the news posted by the mainstream news media. The recycling can take on different forms: simple reposting of content in part or in its entirety, with the purpose of sharing it with the readers and posting a commentary on the content to offer blogger’s own opinion and interpretation. The main critique of such content recycling is that it creates an “echo chamber” when the blogosphere achieves little more than amplifying messages of the mainstream media (Wallsten, 2005: 6-8).

This is a valid argument and many blogs in fact subsist on the mass media. Nevertheless, there is more to it than content multiplication on the web. Cornfield et al. (2005: 3) argued that through active reposting of mainstream news, bloggers can keep agendas alive in the public sphere for a longer time and create what they call buzz. A continuous sound made by many people talking together, buzz in and about the news on the web “can alter social behavior and perception”, “move issues up, down, and across institutional agendas”, and, finally, “shift the balance of forces arrayed in a political struggle, and so affect the outcome.”

News commentary is another popular practice by bloggers which also involves reusing mainstream media material. Usually it is done through the incorporation of commentary into the media story (McKenna & Pole, 2008). More specifically, “bloggers briefly summarize the issue or event [...] (where possible linking to other blogs’ or professional news sites’ reports) before adding their own views or drawing



connections between issues that appear to have been underrepresented in existing reports” (Bruns, 2006: 14). Through blogging citizens can offer their own reading of a news story. They are free to put it in a different context, indicate the connections between multiple issues which did not appear as obvious in the mass media, and provide an overall different frame to the news piece and its subject.

The second type of blog content is the original writing by blog authors. On the one hand, bloggers publish original commentary which can indicate their aspirations to follow the tradition of public intellectuals offering social commentary to stimulate public debate (Freese, 2009: 45). On the other hand, they might get involved in more hardcore reporting (Siapera, 2008: 106). In that case, blog writers conduct media work which can be very similar to that of professional journalists. They gather information from different sources, visit venues where public events take place, and possibly get in touch with the officials. For citizen bloggers, this kind of work is seriously impeded by various constraints, the main one being lack of resources.

The production of news content as it is done by the professional media is a time- and resource-consuming enterprise which is supported by the organizational framework of the mass media. Blog owners can decide to pursue a similar path and adopt the rules and standards of the professional organizations, concentrating on revenue generation (Lowrey et al., 2011). Blogs which center on social movements have another opportunity to gather information, which comes through contact with activists. Moreover, bloggers can themselves become involved in the organization and communication within a movement.

With the proliferation of social networks, especially Twitter and YouTube, which give an opportunity to instantly share content on the web, even more users become a part of citizen journalism and the news blogosphere without being systematically involved in grassroots media work (Lasorsa et al, 2012). Such “random acts of journalism” (Lasica, 2003: 73) become an increasingly important stream of information when citizens can tap their content, eyewitness reports, videos, and photographs into the public sphere before the mass media.

### **5.3. *AntiDogma* as news-producing community**

#### **5.3.1. The ideology of news-producing community**

When a blogging community positions itself as a news-producing and disseminating community, it means that it adheres to certain ideological orientations and pursues activities in line with these orientations. A community's ideological orientations would refer to a set of shared values and beliefs which would be central to the community's self-image. The most straightforward way of expressing these orientations is through the articulation of the mission statement of community, which encompasses its agenda and motivation. In the case of the *AntiDogma* blog, the community rules and its mission statement provide a valuable source for better understanding of its ideological stance within the news media sphere.

#### ***Mission***

Stressing its role as an information source, *AntiDogma* states its main goals to be “*information, analysis, overview, and insight.*” It clearly steers away from being an outlet for the publishing of fiction or poetry, visual artworks or religious commentary unrelated to the LGBT advocacy. In this way, *AntiDogma* situates itself on a level with traditional news media, whose main objective is delivery of relevant, factual rather than fictional, noteworthy information.

The mission of *AntiDogma* appears in the blog post titled *in place of manifesto* and dated April 13, 2006. Its author is the user who is the community's owner and one of its moderators. It is an open blog entry available to anyone with or without a LiveJournal account. Below is the text of community's mission statement in its entirety:

*No matter at which point of your spiritual search you find yourself, with which sexual orientation or gender you identify yourself, what is your nationality, religion or worldview, we are welcoming you in this project. We study and*

*embody the principles of non-violent resistance, formulated by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, in a common aspiration to resist the moral violence and pressure, which is exerted by a certain part of society on the people with non-traditional sexual orientation or gender identity in today's Russia.*

*Why "antidogma"? As German philosopher and humanist Ludwig Feuerbach had said: "Dogma is nothing else, but the direct ban on thought". Dogmata (religious, moral, psychological) in relation to differing [sexual] orientation bloom violently under conditions of ignorance and lack of knowledge, which gives rise to fear, hate, contempt, spite, and alienation of fellow citizens among others from church and other spiritual institutions. Reasonable, educated, open-minded person always makes his own conclusions based on the information available to him, especially on such ambiguous and understudied subject.*

*We gather here to refute with our own example the philistine views about the members of sexual minorities as spiritually impoverished, tasteless, ignorant, lewd, defective or depraved people, prompted only by the need to gratify their own lust. We do not recruit or propagandize our beliefs and lifestyle; we only provide information for reflection and invite you to a discussion. We do not contend that same-sex relationships acceptable, desirable or preferable for everybody. We are of a firm belief that no forced or free "conversion in the ranks" of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered is ever possible either physically or psychologically, and that predisposition to one sexual orientation and gender identity or another, according to scientific research, is first and foremost innate.*

*Violence can be overcome not with violence but with a complete absence of it.  
Welcome.*

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007: 36) considered the pursuit of truth a central task of journalism. Yet, they acknowledge that the journalistic truth is "functional" rather than absolute or philosophical – it is always embedded in social context and is seen as a process rather than a momentary occurrence. These notions are well reflected in the mission statement of *AntiDogma*. It does not directly speak about the truth, but refers to knowledge as an essential part of opinion formation. The statement underlines the continuity of the truth-seeking process through the acquisition of knowledge about

LGBT-related subjects. In other words, information must be given to the citizens for them to be able to make educated decisions.

The manifesto verbalized the challenge of the community, which is to take a stance against the existing hegemony of the mainstream media (Bailey et al., 2008). It mentions the negative stereotypes – referred to as “*philistine views*” – which are spread in Russian society about the LGBT people. Considering the instrumental role the mass media play in the generation and dissemination of these stereotypes (Seiter, 1986), the blogging community is effectively positioned against them as provider for alternative voice and alternative truth.

This entry demonstrates that *AntiDogma*, as an information-producing community, in its practice follows the principles of postmodern journalism which rejects the so-called metanarratives (Wall, 2005: 157). The news production eschews what Lyotard (1984: xxiv) called metanarratives, that act to authorize beliefs and legitimize institutions. Instead, it moves toward small stories which are directly linked to people and their experiences on the individual level. Thus is the phrase: “*We gather here to refute with our own example the philistine views about the members of sexual minorities.*” Along similar lines, the community rules (guidelines for authors) encourage authors to share personal stories along with the news, official documents, and LGBT-related information materials.

The document containing the community rules shows, however, that *AntiDogma* falls short of completely cutting its ties with the metanarratives, in particular the one of credibility of professional media. On the one hand, in an effort to establish its own authority as a news source which does not live off the mainstream news media, rule #3 states that

*The community is not a “link cemetery”<sup>2</sup> or a “mirror” for news and other websites. The preference is given to authored [i.e. original] posts [...] or news which for some reasons went unnoticed, but are nonetheless important.*

On the other hand, the same rule ends with the following recommendation:

*When choosing a link for a post give your preference to the news sites with the reputation of reliable news sources, avoid “mirror” reposts from other [LJ] communities, as well as links to them.*

In that way, the recommendation restores at least to some degree the authoritative position of mass media as news providers which are to be trusted. Lacking the same editorial routines and quality control as mainstream news rooms, the blogging community exploits their credibility and presumed accuracy of information, which are essential to establish an enduring contact between media and their audience (Friend, 2007: 54). Such a push-and-pull approach to traditional media organizations shows how bloggers challenge the previously existing standards of journalism and blur the lines of independence, verification, the definition of news, and truth (Robinson, 2006: 79).

### ***Objectivity, verification, and tone in blog content***

In order to understand how *AntiDogma* authors embrace the ideology of an information-producing community, it is important to consider the community's adherence to the principles of objectivity and verification, as well as assess the overall tone of news coverage. This analysis will justifiably refrain from considering the topic selection as an indicator of objectivity, for the *AntiDogma* blog is a niche medium. In its having a narrow focus on LGBT issues, the authors deliberately chose the subjects which are, for the most part, treated with silence in the mainstream social discourse (Kondakov, 2013b). By carefully sorting out the topic of coverage, the blog

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<sup>2</sup> “Link cemetery” is a Russian internet colloquialism for linklog, a type of blog that collects hyperlinks to web sources its author or authors consider interesting.

is set to address the specific audience and to close the gap in the mainstream media related to the coverage of LGBT community.

One way to estimate the standard of objectivity is at the level of text, namely to look at how the news is reported in terms of content and its tone. The tone of reporting can be examined to measure the degree of neutrality within the journalistic work. For example, the personal tone indicating a subjective bias is usually perceived as amateurism by professional journalists (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008: 38).

While close reading of the news blog posts showed that the tone of reporting has varied, overall the writing was personal and conversational in tone. The strongest difference was noticed between the original and recycled content. On one end of the spectrum were found reposts from the mainstream media. In these cases the blog entries have copied original sources completely together with their professional tone. On the other end were the original news posts by LJ users.

The original texts usually included not only reports of the events but also the evaluations and opinions of the authors. One prominent feature of news reporting on *AntiDogma* was the use of irony, sarcasm, and mockery, as in this example from July 4, 2013 named “*How provincial gopniks<sup>3</sup> protected traditional values.*” The blog post reported about an anti-gay public gathering in a small Russian town. The post fulfilled the function of news: it covered a recent event which could be of interest to the readers of *AntiDogma* and featured a series of photographs from the scene. Yet, it was clearly opinionated and loaded with value statements. The author appeared clearly outspoken about the attitude toward the event’s participants – they were represented as anti-social, uneducated, and parochial. The blatant mockery was present throughout the post in snide comments to the photographs.

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<sup>3</sup> *Gopnik* (Rus. гопник) is a pejorative term which describes a member of sub-culture stereotyped as aggressive, petty criminal (e.g. stealing cell-phones, bullying pedestrians to extort cash) characterized by abuse of alcohol, use of profanities, and low education. *Gopniki* (plural) are perceived as belonging to lower socio-economic classes. Arguably, it is similar in its semantic use to British term “chav”, although there are cultural specifics that shaped and differentiated the concepts in both countries.

This use of sarcastic remarks undoubtedly differentiates *AntiDogma* news from the traditional journalistic work in which the use of humor is perceived as clashing with the standard of objectivity (Holton & Lewis, 2011: para. 47). At the same time, the use of humor in online social network communication is an important aspect of the community-building process, for humor connects people by giving them a possibility to laugh together (Forester, 2004: 224). Looking at a homophobic gathering and pulling jokes at it, *AntiDogma* readers and writers shared the common understanding of the problem and its social context but could also use the blog to “let the steam off” by laughing off the matter.

Furthermore, the widespread use of wittiness demonstrated how blogging established different conventions for the construction of news, in which the narrative style appeared as personal and opinionated. Being able to connect to the readers on a more personal level – in particular through the use of mutually understood sarcasms – can act as another trust-building mechanism for the lack of institutional tools used by the mainstream media.

The discipline of verification is central to the journalistic objectivity and keeps it apart from such forms of communication as propaganda or fiction (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007: 63). It is expected from professional reporters that all information they provide to the audience is substantiated and the truthfulness of factual claims double-checked. Usually, there is a spectrum of “facts” – e.g. names, geographic information, quotations or potentially defamatory facts – which journalists treat as significant to observe in order to comply with the standard of verification (Shapiro et al., 2013: 7). None of these parameters were addressed in the guidelines for the authors of *AntiDogma*, but the reputation for accuracy of the traditional media was considered an important criterion of source selection. This indicated an ideological schism between bloggers and journalists: the former did not stress the need for verification in their own practice, yet applied it to estimate the quality of professional media.

Given the drastically different working settings for citizen bloggers and journalists, the practices of verification in news blogging might follow its own logic, because bloggers can “let loose in some creative writing – all verified because the reporter is both source and the subject” (Robinson, 2006: 79). In the case of AntiDogma’s news content, this was vividly illustrated by the many blog entries reporting LGBT activist protests. In such cases, the bloggers themselves often took part in the events. Usually, they would help to organize it, mobilize others, and participate in it. Afterwards, they would turn their experience into news content for the blog. They reported from the scene and at the same time were a part of that scene. For example, one entry put a question in its title:

*Have you seen the riot of colors on New Arbat?*

And the text of what appeared to be a news coverage for a public rally began with an answer: “*It was us.*” Except for this very personal revelation, which immediately placed the reporter at the scene of the protest as an active participant, the rest of the blog post was written in more protocol-like, dispassionate language:

*Thirty activists were holding five rainbow flags and a few topical posters.*

Furthermore, the entry provided seven high quality photographs and a YouTube video of the event. The use of photographs in reporting is strongly related to the discipline of verification. The bloggers are motivated to apply photographic evidence to their reports, as its status of eyewitness compensates for the limitations of verbal narratives (Zelizer, 2007: 417).

The analysis has supported the idea that in terms of its mission and rules, a loose blogging community holds different notions of objectivity and verification to those of the traditional journalists. The texts found on the blog were closer to literary journalism, which favors creativity and style similar to those of fiction writers (Allan & Zelizer, 2010: 69). This does not discard the content they create as worthless for the public debate, because bloggers perform a vital function of offering credible and intelligent judgment or, as Woodyly (2008: 117) put it: “here’s what I think and why”.



LGBT bloggers offer a more personalized version of news reporting which aims to counter the “distrust of traditional political representatives and processes” (Simmons, 2008: 87). The blogosphere has fostered its own ethics, which shifted from the concept of objectivity in the direction of greater transparency. The credibility of blogs stems from their honesty about political preferences and possible biases (Friend, 2007: 70; Boklage, 2010: 203). The manifesto of *AntiDogma* openly stated its activist cause. It also renounced the position that sexual orientation and gender identity could be a matter of choice or upbringing indicating its disapproval of the official position articulated in 2013 law banning “propaganda of homosexuality”.

At the same time, the divide between bloggers and professional media as information producers is not clear-cut. There is a push-and-pull relationship when citizens try to oppose the mainstream media while simultaneously acknowledging their authority. *AntiDogma*'s mission statement recognized existing misrepresentations of LGBT people in the traditional media and was set to promote an alternative view of LGBT community, which would challenge the existing discursive hegemony and give voices to ordinary people. It also acknowledged the authority of mainstream news organizations, particularly because bloggers are dependent on them for the original content they offer, and chose to use traditional criteria of objectivity and reliability to evaluate them.

### **5.3.2. News blogging practices in *AntiDogma***

#### ***Alternative news and agendas***

Broadly defined, alternative news is information about current affairs which comes from channels other than mainstream media organizations. In this sense, the Russian blogosphere is a critical source of alternative news for the news makes up around 25-30 percent of all content in the form of blog posts, reposts, and comments of other media material (Pankin et al., 2011:36). This resonates with the politicized

character of Russian internet in general, due to absence of open political debate and widespread censorship in the traditional mass media (Volkov, 2012).

Alternative media are expected to oppose mainstream media organizations not only in terms of ideology and mission, but also in terms of its agenda, content, and editorial approach (Joye, 2010: 122). How a media outlet is organized, in particular how editorial decisions are made, is one of the ways to separate alternative from mainstream. In this sense, the *AntiDogma* blog functions as an alternative to the institutionally-structured media organizations. It is self-organized, lacks a clear hierarchy of editors, and completely relies on the contributions from citizen bloggers for its content. Due to applied post-moderation – all blog entries are published immediately and evaluated by the moderators later – the authors of *AntiDogma* enjoy a high degree of autonomy. In practice, any news content can be made instantly available to the few thousand large blog audience.

According to the text of the community rules, production of alternative news is one of its main objectives. In the description of suitable content, it said that the preference, among others, was given to the

*news which for one reason or another went unnoticed but nonetheless are important (especially in regard to photographic reports from the scene and eyewitness reports).*

This statement articulated the challenge to the mass media as inadequate in its representation of LGBT issues. But it also claimed to set the news agenda, focusing on the events which were omitted in the mainstream news. Sometimes this can be achieved through unsystematic, but nonetheless valuable, acts of reporting showing the ineffectiveness of the mainstream media.

In a blog entry posted on November 26, 2013, which contained fewer than 50 words, the author reported a development in the case of a gruesomely violent homophobic murder which happened in Russia earlier that year. The murder of a 23

year-old came during a drunken brawl, after a young man allegedly confessed his homosexuality to the companions:

*Yesterday in Volgograd Regional Court started a trial of Vlad Tornovoy case, who was murdered on homophobia grounds, regardless of whether he was gay or not. In the news – not a word... ACTIVISTS IN VOLGOGRAD, I REALLY HOPE IT WILL BE POSSIBLE TO SHAKE SOMEONE UP TO GO THERE. WON'T LET THEM DOWNPLAY THIS AS BITOVUHA.<sup>4</sup>*

Here the author bluntly blamed the mainstream news media for failing to pay attention to the growing social problem of homophobic crime. Likewise, in the call for action, the author pointed to further damage done by mass media. Influenced by the official political agenda which perpetuates the invisibility of LGBT community, professional media framed the case as a random act of violence, unrelated to the widespread homophobic attitudes in general Russian population.

This post exhibited another evident tendency that, for many *AntiDogma* authors, the body of work in blogging is determined by their experiences of balancing between media work and real-life activism. Many of them are active in the public protest scene, and feel like their stories must be a part of news discourse. They picked up where the mainstream media have stopped and deepen the coverage by providing different angles and mobilizing information on the events ignored or marginalized by the mainstream news organizations. Textual analysis of blog entries has found that the community has extensively reported activist events. The most popular type of activist news was the coverage of public demonstrations, when the texts were supplemented with the photographs. Other posts provided additional details and follow-up information which could be relevant for the LGBT movement.

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<sup>4</sup> *Bitovuha* (Rus. бытовуха) is slang for violent crimes (battery, murder) which happen in a private setting between family, friends or acquaintances. Can be vaguely translated as domestic abuse, but it also covers cases when people involved are not family or intimately related. The connotation often implies that alcohol consumption was among the triggering factors for a brawl which ended in violence.

One such example is the post from June 29, 2013, which covered a pride event to support the rights of LGBT that took place in Saint Petersburg. The post read as follows:

*The participants of the fourth St. Petersburg pride – APPROVED and LEGITIMATE action on Mars Field for protection of LGBT from persecution, were arrested today, the organizer Yury Gavrikov is still held by the police.*

It continued by describing other uninvited but not unexpected attendees of the event – the opponents of LGBT activists from the ranks of religious activists, alleged nationalists (introduced as “*shaved-headed people in black masks*”) and Cossacks, Russia’s conservative minority – followed by an account of police brutality. The report, for the most part, was written in dispassionate language and it remained unclear whether the author was an active participant, an eyewitness or gathered this information from the participants. For instance, the author reported that

*people were literally pressed out of the especially allocated in advance square and squeezed into the buses.*

After that, the blogger provided three links, one to the website of a mainstream newspaper, two – to the YouTube videos filmed at the scene.

This blog entry can be contrasted with the news piece of the mainstream outlet found under a web link provided by the blogger. The brief, mainstream article reported on a formally composed and anonymous police report. It impersonally stated that “*3 LGBT activists were arrested.*” The blogging piece instead offered a more personal account of the events by giving the names of the arrested activists. In this way, for a blogger, the audience becomes more than just an anonymous group of people who are given some news facts. The *AntiDogma* readers are perceived by the authors as a community who share not only experiences but also concerns. It implies that they not only care about the activists being arrested, but also about who these people are. The blogger, thus, performed the double function of being a news provider and an active community-builder. In general, such functional convergence

was a common feature found in the blog entries. Often, the news posts incorporated the elements of commentary, opinion, calls for discussion, community-building, and activism.

The blog entry called “*About ambassadors*” and published on June 23, 2013, served as a convenient illustration of this functional blending. In the post, its author engaged in both random acts of journalism and activism. Essentially, it briefed the readers on the new appointments within US American diplomatic service:

*Have you heard the news, friends? – in the last month President Barack Obama appointed as ambassadors five open gays. To say the truth, he appointed these five ambassadors in five absolutely tolerant countries – Spain, Australia, Denmark, Dominican Republic and OSCE...*

This part of the blog post contained an apparent news value to the readers. But, while the news seemed relevant to the LGBT community, it is unlikely to have been covered in Russian mainstream media for the lack of news value to the general audience. Still, right from the beginning the author attempted to reinforce community’s self-awareness by addressing the readers as “*friends*”. Furthermore, the author wrote an opinion piece that clearly contradicted the standards of traditional journalism:

*I understand: he spares his citizens – that’s why he doesn’t send them to the Third World countries.*

The post was closed with what appeared as an activist element. The author attempted to mobilize the readers to write Obama a letter with a request to send an openly homosexual person as a diplomat to Russia and to whom Russian politicians would be “*forced to show respect*”, “*shake his hand and smile.*” The author ended her post with a combination of personal disclosure, strong appeal to a community based on a shared challenge, and a call for collective action. She confided to the readers:

*It is just that I'm not strong in English. But we can altogether make a petition – like, that's the ambassador we want. And because that's what I want!*

Bloggers can also endeavor to inform people's political behavior through investigative media work. Shortly after the ban on “homosexual propaganda” was passed in Saint Petersburg in 2012, one *AntiDogma* blogger posted what he called “*The statistics of ‘gay law’*”. Albeit short, the entry featured a photographed copy of a parliamentary document which protocolled how the MPs voted on the law. From the paper, the readers could learn which politicians and parties supported the law, voted against it, and decided to abstain or boycotted the voting altogether. Based on this information, the readers from Saint Petersburg could decide whom vote or not vote in local elections. However, the entry did not include any information about as to who was the source of the document and how exactly it was obtained.

### ***News commentary***

Once a common feature of news reporting, the news commentary again becomes prominent across the media spectrum (Kenix, 2011: 31). In the blogosphere, from the beginning it has been a central practice which contributes a significant proportion of blog content. Bloggers routinely repost materials found in the mainstream media which they incorporate with blog commentary (McKenna & Pole, 2008; Woodyly, 2008; Vraga et al., 2011). For many bloggers, who write in their spare time and without financial compensation, the mainstream media remains the predominant source for original news content. There are situations where citizens can gain access to public events and become reporters, such as in case of activist rally or public protest, but they are still limited in terms of the access they have to the institutional politics. It means that most bloggers will get the information about economic and political elites from the professional news organizations (Bruns, 2006: 14).

This tendency of relying on the traditional media was as well found in the news content of *AntiDogma*. A large proportion of analyzed content did not feature original

reporting but recycled the relevant news published elsewhere, often in the mass media resources. Nonetheless, indiscriminate copying of the materials was rare and most, if not all, of the reposted content was expanded on with the blogger's commentary. The importance of providing commentary was also emphasized in the community rules which stated that:

*[T]he project does not have a purpose of becoming a “twin-brother” for other news websites by blindly circulating their materials. However, if it seems to you that news or an article are especially interesting for community members and can lead to lively opinion exchange – make a brief announcement with a link to the original source, and necessarily provide your own opinion on the topic.*

The recommendation acknowledged the dependency of *AntiDogma* bloggers on the mainstream media for information, but it also accentuated the existing contestation of power between the alternative and traditional news. Media organizations control the means of information and communication, which is referred to as symbolic power – the “capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events” (Thompson, 1995: 17). They can easily dominate the public discourse to the point where represented social groups have little say over their media image. Nevertheless, the dynamics of these power relations are complex and versatile, which means that “resistance remains always a possibility, even against hegemonic articulations” (Carpentier, 2011: 146). On the highest level, news commentary on the blog becomes the tactic of resistance and direct challenge to the hegemonic communication of the mainstream media.

The following is the analysis of three examples of how the bloggers directly interacted with the mass media content by providing a critical commentary. On July 1, 2013, one blogger reposted the news from Russian media holding RBC about the investigation by Pavel Astakhov – Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner – of the case of American gay man who together with his partner, sexually abused a child born from a Russian surrogate. Astakhov, already previously known in Russia as a celebrity lawyer, gained international publicity after he proposed a ban on foreign adoption of Russian children, proclaiming frequent abuse and murders as the main

reason for such measure (Herszenhorn, 2013). He has been criticized by bloggers and public commentators for being a publicity seeker, who incites panic while ignoring the needs and safety concerns for Russian orphans inside Russia. The blogger on *AntiDogma* commented on the RBC article:

*Amazingly hypocritical bastard. This is dismay, of course. The most revolting is that in Russia, it seems, no efforts are being made to shed light on cases of violence against children. The most abominable, beyond anything human, cases on which I read all appear in the local crime sections [of newspapers]. And in general, there is a feeling that the ground is being prepared for a new Shizulina's <sup>5</sup> initiative, no matter how absurd and vile it may be.*

The comment criticized the bias in both the work of ombudsman Astakhov, and in its coverage by the mainstream news outlets. It moved from the particular case reported in the article, to problematize the broader social matter: that the government tried to score political points internationally (the ban on adoption followed immediately after the USA signed Magnitsky Act<sup>6</sup>) while completely disregarding the real problems inside Russia. Moving from a specific case toward more general issues, the blogger opened up “focal points of broader political discussion” (Xenos, 2008: 487). Directly, it opened up a debate about the welfare of children inside Russia and pointed to how little attention is being paid to a profound social problem by the mainstream media. The author argued that official news failed to systematically scrutinize the issue and downplayed it from a clear social pathology to the level of random crime reports. In effect, it also challenged the effort in the mass media to relate crimes against children to the LGBT community and to polarize public opinion by promoting negative stereotypes about LGBT people, which is characteristic of the Russian mass media at large (Umland, 2012).

The second example of bloggers’ interaction with the mass media material shows their concern with the lack of LGBT voices in it, even when they provide the

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<sup>5</sup> This is a wordplay on the last name of conservative MP Elena Mizulina and “schizophrenia”; “Schizulina” is used sarcastically to insinuate that the MP has mental health issues.

<sup>6</sup> The Magnitsky Act sanctioned a number of Russian officials as punishment for human rights violations in Russia. For more see Baker & Barry (2013).



overall positive coverage of the community. In such a way, it offered a direct critique of mass media practices, which routinely exclude LGBT representatives from the media discourse. On March 13, 2012, the blog entry “*Material about homophobic law in Afisha*”<sup>7</sup> was posted. It linked to an article which examined the possible consequences of the Saint Petersburg “gay propaganda” law on city’s cultural scene. The material in *Afisha* asked whether it would jeopardize the upcoming concert of German music band *Rammstein* and inquired few public persons to comment on it. The blogger offered his reading of the article and the following critique:

*On the website of “Afisha” they put material about homophobic law. I liked the statement by Shklowsky. But it is anyway striking, how the journalists manage to interrogate the “experts” on the matter graciously forgetting about any representatives of LGBT. In general, the article is positive, but very much “Afisha” style. In short, so that hipsters don’t get bored.*

This is an account of the obvious disappointment the blogger felt about the editorial bias, and how the LGBT community was deliberately deprived of the possibility to speak for themselves. Decades ago, Robert Giles expressed the same concern in the context of the United States saying that: “no voice is regularly heard that looks at life from a gay perspective” (quoted in Alwood, 1996: 304). The author of the post could not intervene with the *Afisha*’s editorial process and confront the representation he felt dissatisfied with. Moreover, following the link to the original page it was discovered that the article did not feature a commentary section for the readers. Thus, the *AntiDogma* author reposted the news, but also turned passive reading into an act of opinion expression. The blogger could publicly articulate his awareness of the bias and, using blog’s own reader comment function, challenge it in a dialogical manner together with other users.

The ability of the grassroots blogosphere to question the professional integrity of mass media by pinpointing their mistakes is well recorded (Singer, 2007a, 2007b; Tremayne, 2007). The last example demonstrated how the *AntiDogma* community engaged in this activity too. On November 21, 2013, an author wrote:

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<sup>7</sup> *Afisha* is a fortnightly Moscow entertainment magazine.

*You'll cry bitterly. Eurosodom has nothing sacred left. Timur and Alisa Selezneva were banned for "propaganda of HETEROsexuality" and "discrimination of sexual minorities". Here's what happened: fognews publishes a fake article, it is picked up by all orthodox patriots and (Attention!) TVC and TV5, passing it off as real news.*<sup>8</sup>

It pointed to the obvious failure of two professional news organizations; both are among the most popular television stations in Russia, to double-check the sources. At the same, it uncovered the eagerness of the state-run media to simultaneously mock and demonize Western society for its recognition of civil rights for sexual minorities.

### ***Networked news gathering***

Social networks dramatically transform the news gathering practices of professional journalists (Bruno, 2011). There are studies, which analyze the use of social media for sourcing by professional journalists (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Kristensen & Mortensen, 2013). Taken the lack of resources available to the media organizations, citizen bloggers can also benefit from the networked communities as information sources. They bring together large numbers of people, all of whom can share what they know, see, and record. This echoes with Lévy's (1997: 13-14) observation made about collective intelligence: "No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity." Likewise, the citizens scattered socially and geographically can share with the community what they deem relevant news. To rephrase Lévy, all news resides in humanity, and using the networked structure of online communities, citizen bloggers can tap in it to convene information.

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<sup>8</sup> The article, recognized as a hoax, claimed that Amsterdam Municipal Court has banned two Soviet movies as derogatory toward homosexuals. *Timur and His Squad* is a 1940 novel by Soviet children's author Arkady Gaidar about the youngster Timur and his friends who are volunteering by doing good deeds (e.g. helping out elderly people). Alisa Selezneva is the main character of the 1985 Soviet sci-fi miniseries *Guest from the Future*. *Fognews*, which published the original article, is a satirical Russian news website. *TVC* or *TV Tsentr* (Rus. ТБЦ/ТВ Центр) is a Russian state-run TV channel. It has the fourth largest coverage in the country. *TV5* is short for Petersburg–Channel 5. It is a TV station based in Saint Petersburg which broadcasts nationwide.

The previously used examples from the *AntiDogma* blog also show how the networked structure of LiveJournal helps to assemble information which would otherwise never reach the public. As in the case of the already mentioned homophobic murder of Vlad Tornovoy, the information about the trial made it in a personal LJ diary of a freelance journalist who had made contact with the press service of the Volgograd Regional Court. Moreover, in the conversation on the comment board, the author stated that the service “*didn’t even know about it* [the date of the hearing], *they checked their database...*” Although the news still did not appear in the mainstream media, it was disseminated in the blogosphere and published on *AntiDogma*.

Similarly, many of the bloggers who have extensively covered the events surrounding the legalization of same-sex marriage in the USA in summer 2013 were found to live in the country. Considering the prominence of the issue in the global media, Russian outlets did report on it, albeit scarcely. *AntiDogma* authors, in the meantime, offered much more background information explaining in detail the historical path to the ruling and the legal implications it was going to have for the same-sex couples.

While the citizen bloggers are distanced from both institutional media and institutional politics, in terms of access to information and specific individuals within political elite, it was found that they take advantage of the online technologies available to them. Concerning such practices Castells (2009: 65) contended that “as people (the so-called users) have appropriated new forms of communication, they have built their own systems of mass communication.” In the case of *AntiDogma*, bloggers were found to make use of online social networks to gather information which was later shared with the readers. The social-networking websites VK and Facebook acted as rich, even if imperfect, sources of information about people, communities, and events.

One such instance was found when bloggers used the pages of the VK social network to gather information about homophobic groups in Russia, in order to publicize their mostly delinquent activities against LGBT people.

In 2013, two related grassroots movements appeared in Russia, *Okkupay Pedofiliay* and *Okkupay Gerontofiliay*. Both groups derived from the Russian skinhead movement, specifically its member Maksim Martsinkevich. While claiming to fight “against pedophiles and perverts”, in practice, both are vicious groups targeting LGBT people. One usual tactic of *Okkupay Pedofiliay* is to engage in an online conversation with unsuspecting users posing as teenagers (often as 16 year-old young men, while in fact, in Russia, 16 is the age of consent which did not seem to concern activists), arranging a meeting during which the men, deemed pedophiles by the *Okkupay*-ers, are brutally beaten and degraded while the act is being filmed on mobile camera. The final measure is publishing the video on the VK group’s page, to prompt stigmatization and further bullying of their victims. In the second case of *Okkupay Gerontofiliay*, the victims were usually gay teenagers who were similarly approached on the internet and promised a financial reward for sexual services. The police were astonishingly reluctant to start criminal investigations of the numerous chapters of the movements throughout the country and the mainstream media were for the most part mum on the issue (Turovsky, 2013).

Close reading of *AntiDogma* entries found a strong interest on the part of community members in this movement. Many blog posts were discovered in which the authors have written about the aggression against LGBT people at the hands of morally and physically abusive *Okkupay* activists. Reporting on this subject also illustrated how bloggers engage in a kind of investigative work by means of social-networking sites.

The blog post from August 21, 2013, was put out under the headline “*New attacks on gay teenagers. Gerontofiliay in Irkutsk.*” In it, the author chronicled the actions of seven *Okkupay Gerontofiliay* activists who abused an 18-year old gay

teenager. The entirety of the blog post was based on information the author sourced from the group's VK page. She provided a VK video, and a transcript of the conversation between the abusers and their victim. At the same time, in anticipation that the video might be taken down from the social network (which eventually happened as the group page was shut down entirely), the author gave a YouTube link to a copy of the video with the words: "*if these monsters will try to delete the proof, the video is copied here.*" Below the transcript, the author gave a list of attackers with their names and links to VK profiles against each name. In addition, the collection of six groups of photographs of abusers from the social network was posted in which the blogger identified each youngster by their name and indicated whether or not the person "*took part in harassment*".

On the one hand, the diversity of content gathered by the blogger – personal information, photo, and video content – was astonishing, and showed the richness of social networks in the information they can provide, which is easily available to anyone with the VK.com account. The entire blog article was based on the content from social network.

On the other hand, it pointed to one of the central ethical issues which arise within the personalized communicative space of social media, namely the question of user privacy. Many users of social networking sites are unaware about the degree of their visibility to the others, for the internet "places private information about private people into the public view" (Whitehouse, 2010: 322). In the given example, the perpetrators were visibly minors, 14-15 year-old teenagers. Potentially harmful information about them (association with neo-nazi organization, involvement in violent acts) could have long-standing negative consequences. Similarly, the video depicting the victim of the attack was copied and further publicized. The fact that it was being proliferated in the blogosphere without concern for the privacy of all those involved in the event, indicated that citizen bloggers could be driven by passion and the sense of rage in their reporting rather than ethical values. In a way, the blogger has done the same thing as the young hooligans did to their victims: it was an act of public shaming. The rage can be explained by the sense of lawlessness in the face of

authorities staying passive which results in mob justice. The ethical question, therefore, remains: “Does the value of information gained outweigh the harm done to the individual’s sense of privacy [and] the public understanding of privacy[...]” (Whitehouse, 2010: 320).

## CHAPTER SIX

### ***ANTIDOGMA* AS COUNTERPUBLIC: DELIBERATIVE COMMUNITY BUILDING**

#### **6.1. Deliberative communication**

##### **6.1.1. Public discourse and deliberation: conceptual delineation**

###### *The concept of discourse*

Before moving to the empirical investigation of deliberative processes on the *AntiDogma* blog, this section will provide some necessary clarifications of the theoretical concepts of discourse and deliberation as they are being applied in this study. Here, the demarcation of two concepts from one another, as well as delineation of their empirical significance in the context of this analysis is due.

The difficulties with the definition of discourse arise from the fact that it is being used in different disciplines, from social studies theory, to linguistics, with each putting its own label on the concept (Mayr, 2008: 7). In a somewhat restricted sense, discourse is understood as a process of communication that is written, spoken or circulated otherwise. As a form of social relations in broader sense, however, it acquires a greater complexity of “relations between relations” that go beyond narrowly conceived communicative events, and encompass “objects in the physical world, persons, power relations and institutions, which are interconnected elements in social activity or praxis” (Fairclough, 2013: 3). Therefore, discourse is not just a series of communicative acts in the form of written or spoken word, but also a social and cultural process in human life, and refers to how we understand and communicate the relationships between people, things, communities, and social institutions.

A particular discourse includes the set of ideas and a vocabulary used to speak about these ideas. People who share common ideologies and ways of speaking about things form what Little and colleagues (2003: 73) describe as discourse communities. They are essential to people's lives, and help to create and sustain the sense of identity and belonging which points to the communicative function of language in human life. This means that identities are not fixed nor simply reflected in the ways the language is used. Instead, various ways in which the language is used are a part of human experience, and co-create people's identities.

Language serves as an agent in the process of identity building and sense making. For that reason, this study applies the concept of discourse to the content of the blog to define the relationships that emerge within LGBT community and between the LGBT community and mainstream society. The focus is on the ways in which the former relates to the latter, as reflected in its communicative practices. LGBT discourse, in the broader sense, represents the set of ideas, ideologies, values, and attitudes about what it means to be an LGBT person and a member of the LGBT community. In a narrow sense, it also refers to a particular vocabulary and situational uses of language expressed in an array of communicative formats, throughout different communicative situations, which can be detected in the texts from the blog.

This study is at the same time an endeavor to survey the relationship that the LGBT discourse has with the wider social and political context in which it occurs, for it always occurs within a wider hegemonic discourse of sexuality based on the notion of heteronormativity. Heteronormative discursive order defines the meaning and contents of "normal" sexuality, the gender roles, especially the roles played by men and women in heterosexual relationships, and how this standard is imperative for sustaining an effective community. The discourse of heteronormativity stipulates relationships and romantic love between partners of different sexes as a yardstick for all "normal" relationships, which instantly sets the members of the LGBT community as outsiders deviating from the norm (Ingraham, 1999: 27). LGBT discourse appears as the opposition to this hegemonic position, both in its ideological underpinnings and



its uses of language. The LGBT community can thus develop its own discourse with the set of ideas supported by selected vocabulary and the use of language.

The perspective this work takes on the concept of discourse as twofold. On the one hand, it is interested in the LGBT discourse as an assembly of communicative events, that is, concrete texts found within the *AntiDogma* blogging community. On the other hand, it tries to surpass the manifest meaning of those texts and look at LGBT discourse as an ideological position, which is defined by a particular set of ideas and use of language, and exists within a larger hegemonic discourse of mainstream society.

### ***Deliberative communication***

This study requires a definition of the concept of deliberation, which we need to set apart from the concept of discourse. While discourse encompasses a set of ideas and a vocabulary used to communicate these ideas, as well as an assembly of concrete communicative events, the notion of deliberation implies a distinct communicative functionality, which is not entailed in every kind of discourse nor in every given discursive event. A particular kind of discourse can be considered as deliberative as long as it can be described as “the act of thinking about or discussing something and deciding carefully” (Miriam-Webster, 2017). There are many forms of deliberation, which can differ in their process and content.

The tradition, which places people debating each other at the center of the democratic process and participation, is well established in the social sciences (Gastil, 2008; Bohman, 2000). This approach usually links the notion of deliberation to the political process, when deliberative activity of the citizens has to be centered on public issues and ideally must result in a direct impact on the political decision-making. This work implements the concept of deliberation to study the discursive practices of blog users, but uncouples it from its political dimension in a strict sense.

Usually the term deliberation invariably refers to democratic or political deliberation, meaning that citizens participate in a political debate, which is expected to inform concrete institutional action. However, we can distinguish between strictly political institutional deliberation and informal deliberations and opinion-formation, which take place among individuals outside the realm of formal politics (Smismans, 2003: 487). Such deliberative activity outside of the realm of formal politics sustains communities, and allows them to develop a collective voice through the development and expression of common values and goals.

To assert the relevance of the concept of deliberation for this study, we will put forward its definition and operationalization. Burkhalter and colleagues (2002: 400) outline several criteria of deliberative process. It needs to take place in a group of at least three participants, and applies to face-to-face communication, but can also appear online. It includes the exchange of accurate information within a group. Many approaches stress that deliberation is an exchange of arguments based on impersonal information, such as statistical data and other reasonably objective sources. The authors (Burkhalter, 2002: 402) also emphasize the importance of a broader conception of public voice in the form of bearing witness and personal testimony, which is of particular relevance for this study. The main reason for the inclusion of personal testimony within the repertoire of reasonable deliberative argumentation is the political and social situation in Russia with regard to sexual minorities. Partial criminalization of homosexuality in the form of the ban on “homosexual propaganda” and the persecution of LGBT citizens makes it extremely difficult to gather reliable objective information about the community, for instance, by means of social surveys.

The interest of this study is in the deliberative practices of the blogging community, with the focus on the manifest qualities of the conversation. The question is, what are the guiding principles of a given conversation, and how is it being conducted by the participants in terms of its form and style? Communication between community members is deliberation, when participants weigh an opinion or a judgment publicly as a part of a group exchange. It must be guided by the norms of

overall rationality, civility, and purposefulness. The degree of deliberation can be established through the application of the criteria of deliberative discussion.

### ***Criteria of deliberative discussion***

The selection of criteria of deliberative discussion is helpful in the task of characterizing the form and style of the communication exchange, which takes place among the members of a blogging community. The following is the outline of criteria drawn extensively from the work of Kies (2010: 40-56). The author coherently sums up and operationalizes characteristics of a deliberative discussion, which encompass inclusion, discursive equality, reciprocity, justification, reflexivity, empathy, sincerity, plurality, and external impact.

*Inclusivity*: this criterion means that everyone willing to participate in the discussion can do so without considerable obstacles. The deliberative venue should be open to everyone interested in the debate without any qualifications.

*Discursive equality*: everyone should be able to introduce new topics into the discussion, and be able to state their positions and opinions. The arguments should be judged by their merit in terms of rationality and justification rather than economic or social position of the person.

*Reciprocity*: this attribute means that the participants actually engage in an exchange of communication for an overall benefit of the conversation. Rather than having just one or very few participants speaking to the passive audience, reciprocity means that there is an exchange in a dialogical or polyphonic manner taking place. At the same time, it also means that whenever someone speaks, their message is being listened to. While reciprocity is difficult to measure at the level of text without the actual interaction with and direct observation of the users, the fact that commentaries remain visible to everyone and generate responses can be interpreted as evidence of reciprocity within the blogging community.

*Justification and reflexivity*: these characteristics of communication imply that any position or opinion shared in a deliberative forum must be supported by reasoned justifications, and grounded in coherent argumentation. Deliberative discussion must be reflexive in the sense that assumptions made by the participants must be critical, and take into consideration the wider context of the debate.

*Plurality* means that the multitude of opinions and positions can be openly expressed in the process of deliberation. The mission of *AntiDogma* clearly states its orientation toward diversity of opinion. It is reasonable to expect that as a niche outlet, an LGBT blog will attract like-minded participants. However, the ideological stance of the blogging community as manifested in its formal documents encourages openness and plurality.

*Empathy* means that participants are sensitive to the views and positions of the others, and not only try to understand their arguments but also share their feelings.

*Sincerity*: this norm implies that participants are truthful about the information they bring to the deliberative forum, but also about their intentions and motives to partake in the debate.

*Public concern* is closely related to the Habermasian definition of the public sphere, which postulates that deliberation in the public sphere must be placed around the matters of public concern rather than private issues. Nevertheless, this work relies on the research tradition, which emphasizes the importance of personal and private storytelling as a means of social activism, in line with the 1970s maxim, postulating “the personal is political” (Crawley & Broad, 2004; Weinstein, 2014; also Hanisch, 1970). The private experiences of the people are elevated to the level of the public and eventually the political when confronted with everyday discrimination and persecution by the authorities.

*External impact*: this criterion refers to the influence the deliberative debate should have on the opinion formation and decision-making processes outside the

immediate context of deliberation. This is one of the more problematic features, in terms of both operationalization and measurement. In particular, whenever deliberation takes place within a less formal or a completely informal setting, its external impact becomes difficult to detect, measure, and evaluate.

This research will study the empirical data against several of the criteria outlined above. In particular, with its focus on the internal communication within the blogging community, this work does not seek to evaluate its external impact on either mass media or politics. Likewise, taking into account that it concerns itself with text rather than with human subjects, we will avoid making any claims about the criteria of empathy and sincerity, since the examination of intentions and motives would require direct engagement with the blog users. The study will consider, in a qualitative manner, the extent to which the debate in the commentary section of *AntiDogma* meets the criteria of inclusivity, discursive equality, reciprocity, justification, reflexivity, plurality, and public concern.

### **6.1.2. Online deliberation: promises and limitations**

From the early days of the internet, it has been surrounded with rhetorics swinging between optimism and fatalism. Optimists have seen the web as a technology holding a great promise in revitalizing stalling democratic communities and bringing more power to people where democratic rule is young or yet non-existent. The most extreme forms of such cyber-enthusiasm included exaggerated rhetorics about a new type of society in which, thanks to cyberspace, all power will shift from political institutions to the individual citizens (for overview see Breindl, 2010). On a less radical but still positive note, the internet was holding a promise of bringing about a long sought Agora, where people could come together to participate in a public debate, seen as a cornerstone of democracy. Hauben & Hauben (1997: 319) described the onset of online communication as an “exciting time, because the democratic ideas of some great political thinkers are becoming practical.”

More skeptical analysis considered the real and potential impact of information communication technologies with greater caution (Hindman, 2009; Morozov, 2012). For instance, the internet has been blamed for decreasing the quality of political debate, while also making government accountability more difficult (Wilhelm, 2000; Sunstein, 2001).

However, some attributes inherent to the web make it a suitable medium for political communication with democratic potentialities. For instance, interactivity is among the most revolutionizing features of online communication (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011: 170). Ideologically, it transforms a passive user of analogous media into someone who can interact with the media and their content. Most importantly, however, the interactivity of digital media “offered unprecedented opportunities for making connections between individuals, within organizations, and between individuals and organizations” (Lister et al. 2009: 23). It promotes horizontal communication among the citizens and vertical communication between citizens and political elites, which can take place both in synchronous and asynchronous fashion through multiple communication channels online (Hacker, 1996: 217).

As a result of greater interactivity, there is a promise of a greater equality within political conversation, which is a significant pre-condition for a successful political deliberation. In physical interaction, people can easily find themselves shut out of the conversation by the “dominant others” (Witschge, 2002: 13). Online, people can be part of a debate regardless of her bodily identity, level of education, and social status. To a certain degree, this equality is achieved by the affordance of anonymity provided by online communication. Different channels of internet communication offer different levels of users’ identifiability which is “likely to influence the nature of online deliberation” (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013: 1160). Thus, the disembodied character of online interaction can have an equalizing effect, for it liberates individuals from being perceived based on social clues, which is inevitably the case in face-to-face conversation. They “may find it easier to issue unpleasant decisions as they are divorced from the human consequences of their actions” (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013:

1160). People who feel marginalized by the society may feel more freedom to speak their minds under condition of anonymity (McKenna & Bargh, 1998: 692).

The relative anonymity of online communication is problematized in the critique of the phenomena of *flaming*, a quickly escalating hostile expression of strong emotions and feelings (Lea et al, 1992: 89), and *trolling*, which is sending posts in order to provoke other participants with the mere purpose of disrupting a conversation (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011: 172). It has been argued that the users, who remain unknown to each other and free from the social cues of face-to-face interaction, are more likely to be rude toward each other (Papacharissi, 2004: 227). Instances of flaming and trolling force a justified question about the overall quality of political deliberation online and whether the meaningful political debate takes place in various internet venues. It is, however, necessary to keep in mind that given millions of people today having access to the web, the quality of content they post online will vary drastically from the instances of verbal abuse to the outstanding exemplars of citizen reflection and deliberation (Agichtein et al, 2008).

Free from the restrictions of physical space, online space potentially solves the problem of bringing together large groups of people parted by geographical distances. As Coleman & Götze (2001: 17) claimed, the internet technology “makes manageable large-scale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation”, something previously seen as practically unfeasible and therefore highly problematic. Not only does the internet facilitate the political discussion among greater numbers of people, but it also potentially increases the diversity within a group of discussants. Witschge (2004: 113) emphasized that the group heterogeneity is strengthened by the digital communication technologies, since the web “is a place where difference is not hard to find” (Dahlberg, 2001b: section 2, para. 17). A study conducted by Stromer-Galley (2002) has found that users participating in political internet debates have indeed looked for dissimilar opinions and enjoyed their engagement in such diverse conversations.

At the same time, this ability to transcend the physical borders is crucial for the community-building process, for it brings together people who share similar values but not the location. This characteristic is important, for it can help people realize that there are a number of other individuals who share similar values, opinions, and experiences, and who may also be going through the same struggles as members of a broader society. This capacity often acts in a paradoxical manner. Namely, the internet simultaneously promotes the heterogeneity and homophily of a conversation. The principle of homophily in social groups means that the contact between similar people occurs easier and at higher rate than among the dissimilar ones (McPherson et al., 2001: 417). Elaborate critique of this effect of online communication was offered by Sunstein (2001, 2008). The author examined the phenomenon of fragmentation, resulting from highly specialized and homophilic online discussion groups. According to this reasoning, people are likely to seek the views which will make them more comfortable, that is, corresponding to their own, and so to form the publics of interests which are narrowly focused and isolated from the wider public discourse. Moreover, fragmentation can trigger the so-called group polarization. In the process of online deliberation of an issue among like-minded individuals, they may “end up thinking the same thing that they thought before – but in more extreme form” (Sunstein, 2008: 99). In support of this assumption, Davis (1999: 168-186) has found that internet users tend to participate in the discussions which support their preexisting views. Although always a possibility, fragmentation, nevertheless, does not eliminate the possibility of cooperation between various issue and interest groups within larger progressive movements (Breindl, 2010: 56).

## **6.2. Counterpublicity and issue publics**

### **6.2.1. Theorization of counterpublicity and counterpublics**

In her revision of the historical public sphere in the work of Habermas, Fraser (1992: 110) stressed the fact that he spoke of a singular public sphere as a unique space defined by a set of normative conditions. For Habermas, the “singularity” of



this space was associated with the wholeness of the public sphere, as well as with better democracy, while fragmentation would result in the ineffectiveness of the public debate and its dissolution. More recent inspection of the public sphere, however, indicates that the structures of the modern world – political, social, and institutional – facilitate as well as demand the departure from the idea of the unified public sphere as a singular space toward a pluralistic model (Verstraeten, 1996: 350). In this regard, many have spoken in various contexts about the multiplicity of publics (Squires, 2002; Warner, 2002; Milioni, 2009; Kelly, 2011). These alternative communicative arenas encompass a variety of communicative modes, most importantly the ones beyond critical-rational debate, media forms, and organizational structures, as well as inter-public relations of domination and contestation.

Fraser (1992: 123) replaced the Habermasian model with the more inclusive concept of subaltern counterpublics. She described them as discursive spaces where the members of subordinated social groups could come together to participate in public debate. Historically, members “of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics” (Fraser, 1997: 81). Rejecting the idea of a single public sphere allowed for the recognition of the political and social struggles of these social groups which often take place outside of the traditional public sphere (Squires, 2002: 446).

Together with the notion of singleness, the concept of counterpublic rebuffs the idea of universality fostered by the regimes of power and legitimization (Asen & Brouwer, 2001: 8). In her consideration of the feminist counterpublic sphere, Felski (1989: 164-174) suggested that its purpose was to stand against the homogenizing and universalizing claims promoted by the bourgeois, white, male- led mass media-based public sphere. Therefore, counterpublics “voice oppositional needs and values not by appealing to the universality of the bourgeois public sphere but by affirming specificity of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or some other axis of difference” (Asen & Brouwer, 2001: 7). The multiple publics emerge to uncover and possibly resolve the existing imbalance in power between the dominant social groups

represented by the mainstream discourses and relatively powerless marginalized groups with the lack of the economic, political or social resources (Cohen, 1999: 33-78).

Fraser (1992: 123) defined counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter- discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” Although they exist in the opposition to the dominant public sphere, counterpublics are not isolationist or seeking separation from the wider discourse (Asen & Brouwer, 2001: 6). As Mansbridge (1994: 63) pointed out, they have to “oscillate between the protected enclaves” and more hostile environments of wider public. Engagement with the latter is necessary for the counterpublics, because it prevents group polarization, detachment from constructive criticism, and cultivation of narrow-mindedness, extreme views, and intolerance.

In a society with pronounced inequality in access to the dominant public sphere, the counterpublics play a double role. Firstly, they act as “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” (Fraser, 1992: 124). They become a domain where members of a group work out their own forms of public debate, for instance through alternative media, and use them to articulate their own group identity, needs, and interests. Communities alienated from the mainstream public sphere linked to the mass media, market or the state, use the arena of counterpublicity to create the language which can later be used in a broader public debate. In this sense, counterpublicity becomes the field of identity work done by the members of subordinated groups. Secondly, the counterpublic sphere is a venue of agitation, activism, and contestation. Its members try to reach the wider public and make the society outside of the oppressed group aware of their presence. Challenging a group’s invisibility in the mainstream discourse and the negative representations which often prevail in the dominant public sphere are among the central tasks of counterpublicity in its relation to the dominant public.

As was already mentioned, counterpublics never exist in isolation from the dominant discourse. They are influenced by it, and their discursive horizons are determined by the excluding structure of the public sphere and its high-handed dynamics. As Warner (2002: 86) observed, counterpublics are also publics and follow the same circular postulates the dominant publics do. Asking what places a public into opposition to the general discourse, he answered that it was more than a merely antagonistic character or content. Instead, he contended:

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas of policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among the media.

In other words, counterpublics are more than multiple arenas for alternative discourse, debating a different set of topics, and speaking differently. Counterpublics find themselves in an antagonistic relationship with the dominant public, and occur as a response to the pressure of its command. Therefore, the introduction of counterpublicity also means the radicalization of the dominant public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007: 47). They expand the discourse of the general public sphere normalized through rationality and universalism and subject to critical consideration what stayed outside the limits of the rational debate. The discursive radicalism is cultivated through the inter-discursive contestation between inside and outside, rational and irrational, dominant and subordinate. As the antagonistic relationship is based on the fact that the dominant discourse always tries to silence the counterdiscourses, so the counterpublics try to undermine the position of the dominant. By constantly elaborating on the existing issues, and by bringing up new ones, counterpublics transform the nature of public debate. Instead of reaching for a finite solution, it becomes an ongoing process of perpetual deliberative contestation.

### 6.2.2. Counterpublics online

Today, the formation and perpetration of counterpublics is inseparable from internet technologies (Palczewski, 2001: 1). For this reason, there is a need for a closer examination of the relationship between them. The technological affordances of the web quickly made it into a communicative space, in which the groups excluded from the mainstream public discourse could form their own discursive spheres and pursue their contestation activities. As Wimmer (2009: 37) articulated it:

The Internet has helped to realize the idea of a decentralized communication network, maintained by civil society and understood as a medium that provides for self-organization. Critical counter-public spheres can no longer be conceptualized without these new technical possibilities [...]. Moreover, counter-public spheres have their organisational basis predominantly through their digital communication which often takes place online.

The centrality of web infrastructure to the counterpublics and issue publics associated with social movements and causes becomes apparent as it intertwines “the different aspects of the democratic public life” (Miloni, 2009: 413). It provides the information, assists in the mobilization of action, and resource generation but also facilitates dialogue and making of linkages (Stein, 2009: 752-753). This latter capacity is particularly important for the establishing of counterpublics, because it supports their “dual function”. Internally, it facilitates identity and community building within the group through promotion of the sense of group identification and belonging. Externally, it advances communication of their propositions to the wider society and offers its critique (Felski, 1989: 168).

Counterpublics depend on common identities shared by their participants. The experiences of oppression and discrimination inform these identities and group solidarity, which are developed internally. The internet provides a multitude of communicative possibilities for the people to share knowledge as well as personal stories and life events with each other, in order to locate common experiences and values which will potentially constitute the foundation for a larger social group.

Social media are particularly convenient in this sense as they offer simple tools for the political positioning of individual users and online communities. Users are encouraged to share their profiles online which indicate their political position, but even less straightforward tools can be used for this purpose. For example, Zappavigna (2011) spoke of the symbolism of Twitter's hashtag (#) as a linguistic marker which is used to build communities around certain political attitudes.

In this respect blogs have been valuable, as they not only allow users to publish different kinds of content, but also to interact with each other and even form online communities around the practice of blogging. For example, in a study of digital activism by a group of Muslim women, Echchaibi (2013: 852) observed that the technology was used to discursively "influence an ongoing and contested process of social change in Islam." The author found that although launched by a sole Muslim-American woman of Iranian origin, the outlet rapidly grew into a community blog to encompass a total of 21 women of different nationalities all unified by the mission of contesting the ongoing debate of women in Islam plunged in prejudice, misogyny, and sexism.

The same study also found the intersection between various digital channels to be another effect of the web from which counterpublics could benefit. After operating solo for about a year, the author, the subject of Echchaibi's study, has turned to Facebook to recruit writers from a Muslim feminist group. The text-based communication within this online community allowed for a careful selection of skillful writers who demonstrated their desire to contest the dominant discourse in the counterpublic arena.

The external function of a counterpublic consists in communicating the groups' views and interests to the wider audience, including that of the dominant public sphere. Although one should not overestimate the potential of digital technology to integrate the excluded voices into the mainstream discourse, neither should it be trivialized. Social networks have been used by citizen activist groups to articulate counterpublic discourses and bring them into a broader public sphere. For instance,

there is record of Twitter being used for both internal communication within group members, but also interaction with the established media organizations (Neumayer & Valtysson, 2013: 8). As already mentioned, citizen activists apply hashtags to signalize their political position, which serves the internal function of a counterpublic. But this same tool is used to connect to the mass media: professional organizations use hashtags to monitor and navigate trends on Twitter. Thus, it becomes an instrument of visibility of a counterpublic in the public sphere.

It seems that online communication is better suited to support the development of multiple counterpublic formations than of a singular Habermasian public sphere (Zhang, 2006: 42-45). At the same time, it can be beneficial in resolving the resulting from it disputes emerging from the democratic pluralism. As a multimodal structure, it can unite different counterpublics into a heterogeneous yet interlinked communicative space. The Russian blogosphere, which is primarily based in the LiveJournal blogging platform, and is introduced in detail in the respective section, is an example of such formation. It allocates every user an individual space in form of a personal diary and simultaneously offers a social network-like function of connectivity, when users become the members of various interest groups and blogging communities.

### **6.3. *AntiDogma* as counterpublic: the function of deliberative community building**

#### **6.3.1. Communicative structure of *AntiDogma* discussion and its deliberative dimension**

The examination of the function of deliberative community building of the *AntiDogma* blogging community begins with an assumption that the commentary section beneath each blog entry constitutes the main communicative space for the participants. Although the blog entries themselves are a crucial part of the discursive practice within the community, it is nevertheless a less direct form of verbal

interaction between users. Thus, it is the comments posted by the members which are conceptualized as user deliberation on *AntiDogma* blog. To analyze users' deliberative communication attention has to be paid the structure of the blog.

We have outline a number of criteria that have to be applied in order to examine to which extent *AntiDogma* provides its users an open deliberative venue in which they can engage in a community debate. In order to be considered such space it has to assure inclusivity, discursive equality, reciprocity, justification, reflexivity, plurality, and public concern.

There are two ways in which the criteria of deliberative communication can be examined. On the one hand, it is the technical architecture of the website and on the other hand is organization of online discussion space, for example in terms of its openness, moderation, and anonymity (Janssen & Kies, 2004: 4).

Identifying the technical aspects of a particular deliberative space on the web provides a better understanding of the course of deliberation for there are a "multitude of technical architectures of communication" all of which will have different "impact on the way people communicate" (Janssen & Kies, 2004: 4). Compared to face-to-face interaction, online conversation is usually in written rather than oral form, asynchronous, and possibly anonymous or at least pseudonymous. The asynchronicity of online deliberation will "constitute a more favorable place for the appearance of some form of rational-critical debate" (Janssen & Kies, 2004: 4), for the users can take time to formulate their arguments.

### ***Identification and openness***

The formal openness of the online deliberation venue refers to its technological and organizational features, which facilitate the inclusion of a variety of opinions to be offered in a debate (Witschge, 2007: 16). These features correspond to the criteria of inclusivity and plurality of the debate because the degree of openness is necessary for it to be inclusive of different participants and therefore thematically diverse.

While all prospective authors on *AntiDogma* must have a LiveJournal account, the readers who wish to post a comment can also do it using one of their social network accounts such as VK, Facebook, Google, Twitter or Mail.ru. Further restrictions are eliminated by the options of using an OpenID<sup>9</sup> or writing commentary completely anonymously. This secures for a high degree of discursive openness when everyone with the internet access can join the conversation.

The overview of comments posted on the blog entries has found all of these options being utilized by the users, although the comments from LJ account holders were by far the most prominent. The naming practices were diverse as well: most commentators posted under pseudonyms (which were simultaneously their LJ names) such as “*loly\_girl*”, “*doc\_rw*” or “*ptizza*”; some used hybrid of what appeared as human first and last names and something else, for instance “*denis\_silvers*”, “*Tima\_[myopenmind.com]*” or “*ilupin*”; the small fraction of readers have commented using their social networks (Facebook and VK) accounts and thus exposed what appeared to be their real names. Some pseudonyms were clearly chosen to reveal sexual identity of their users, i.e. “*queerness*”, “*melancholy\_gay*” or “*lgbtqia*”. The commenting rules did not address the issue of identification either directly or in form of recommendation leaving it to the user’s own free decision.

### ***Moderation of commentaries***

Along with the openness, moderation of commentaries is another aspect of the community which is central of the inclusivity of debate and will have a direct impact on plurality of positions and opinions which can or cannot be states within the community. The commenting section is found below every *AntiDogma* blog post, unless the option is intentionally disabled. The commenting happens in an asynchronous manner, meaning the posts are saved indefinitely and the readers have time to elaborate their answers, leave the conversation, come back to it, and catch up on the contributions others could have made in a meanwhile. They are not limited in

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<sup>9</sup> OpenID is an open standard which allows users’ consolidation of digital identity and facilitates a quick sign in to numerous websites.



size which gives the community members an opportunity to post long, elaborated texts. Although the posting of commentaries acts as an instrument of deliberative inclusion for blog users, they are not completely unregulated. There are two documents which delineate the boundaries of deliberation on AntiDogma: the rules of commentary and the “Rules of procedure for Primary Moderators (PM) and Conflict Commission” examined below.

Initially it was the community moderators who were responsible for the quality control of the messages readers sent as comments. Their task was to check compliance with the rules of commentary. As the community grew in size, however, the moderators have decided to abandon this convention. Concerning this matter, the community owner wrote, in a conversation with another user, that it was feasible while the community consisted of 100-500 participants. In the course of the next two to three years after it was launched, the number grew to around 2,500 which made it practically difficult for just a few users in charge to monitor the entire stream of comments. It was at that point that the moderators decided to delegate the task of commentary administration to the individual bloggers. Another impetus for this change, as becomes clear from the text of the “*Rules of procedure for Primary Moderators (PM) and Conflict Commission*”, was the fact that moderators seemed determined to promote free speech in the discussion section, after receiving numerous complaints from community members about what they perceived was silencing of unwelcome opinions:

*To be honest, we got tired of constant reproaches for the “baiting of disagreeable”, “censorship” and other such savageries. Therefore we sincerely congratulate everyone (as pleased as well as displeased): from now on the burden of commentaries moderation carry the authors of the posts.*

As a result of this regulatory change, the function of Primary Moderator (PM) was introduced in the *AntiDogma* community. Any blog author whose post was published in *AntiDogma* now became a PM. They were granted a number of technical privileges to act on the commentary in the following ways: to switch it off, to freeze

it, to hide it, and to delete it (the measure was not advised and it was recommended to hide comments which did not comply with the rules rather than delete them).

The second effect of the document was the introduction of the Conflict Commission (CC) which included five *AntiDogma* members. The rationale of the CC was to solve the conflicts occurring in the blog comments. These alterations illustrate the wavering trajectory of the policy's outcomes. On the one hand, individual users were granted more authority and autonomy. They now could control their own discursive spaces and, most importantly, were encouraged to solve conflicts independently before calling in the CC. As the document stated:

*CC does not accept for consideration requests which submission was not preceded by the efforts to resolve the conflict with involvement of Primary Moderator (post author) and/or moderators (individuals not involved in the conflict).*

On the other hand, the members of the CC maintained the prerogative of banning users from the community, something the PM could not do, and for which they had to send a query to the CC. They also had the right of stripping the PM of their moderator privileges in cases of “*unequal use of technical capabilities*” as well as for “*systematic deletion of comments*”. In other words, although given the privileges of independent regulation of discussions within their entries, the PMs had to abide by the higher community rules, and remained under control of the CC. In addition, the *Rules of procedure* would permit the Conflict Commission to alter the rules based on the simple majority vote of its members.

At the same instant, there were further moves aiming to enhance regulatory openness within community. It became apparent that the moderators had taken steps to guarantee the transparency of decision making in order to strengthen the democratic character of the community, even though the aim was not explicitly stated. This was done in two ways. First, referring to the PMs queries to the CC it stated that:

*Query is submitted as a [public] commentary to this post. Queries sent [as personal messages] to CC members are not considered.*

According to this regulation, PMs and other discussion participants had to use a discussion section to initiate a complaint which would be in plain sight of all readers. In effect, this increased the transparency of moderation procedures and prevented the possibility of decision-making about the banning of users being done behind closed doors.

One of the document's clauses has secured the Commission's right to consider new CC members based on a nomination by at least 30 percent of community members (as listed on profile page). There was, however, an apparent tension between the democratic aspirations and the Commission's claim to authority: the community members could only nominate new members while the final decision whether to include them in the CC would be made by its current members. Yet again, the *Rules* underscored that when participating in the discussions the members of the CC would not have any technical privileges over Primary Moderators and could ban users only following the formal inquiry of specific cases.

There were altogether ten resolutions made by the CC, all in the period between October 14, 2009 and November 28, 2011. All but two queries have dealt with user communication in the commentary section and contained accusations of users posting "*personal insults*", "defamation" and "*boorishness*". One user had expressed his concern that the blog post in question was spreading "*direct propaganda of homophobia*". Finally, one member had complained about an entry being "*explicit trolling*" and "*flood*"<sup>10</sup>. Some of these queries have demonstrated how the networked character of online communication could create ambiguous situations and complicate regulation efforts. There were cases when verbal friction between two users would extend beyond the domain of the *AntiDogma* blog (i.e. in personal diaries or other LJ communities) and the members would try to use those communications as evidence against each other. The standard reaction of the CC was to inform the community

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<sup>10</sup> Flood (Rus. флуд) is Russian online slang for sending meaningless, repetitive texts

members that the Commission lacked “*the opportunities to establish verity or falsity of the statements [...] made outside the borders of the community and make decisions based on it.*”

In each of the ten mentioned cases, one of the CC members had posted a reply with a confirmation saying it had taken the matter to consideration and later put out a resolution. The repertoire of actions taken by the CC in those cases varied. They issued two warnings and two reminders mentioning that in accordance with the “*spirit of the community*” all PMs and participants in general must aim at “*creating climate favorable for constructive communication.*” On three separate occasions, users had been banned for a period of one month for direct insults of other participants including the use of foul language. The user accused of trolling was banned for a month as well. Lastly, two queries have been declined based on the fact that there were no efforts to resolve the conflict independently as provided in the Rules.

### ***Rules of commentary: in search of ideal deliberation***

To make an assessment of online deliberation, the question must be asked what the rules of the communicative space are and how they are maintained and perceived by the participants (Witschge, 2008: 81). The explicit guidelines for what can and what cannot be posted on the website must further be studied by applying discourse analysis. In particular, analysis of the rules of commentary can provide a better understanding of the extent to which the criteria of justification and reflexivity are considered important for the debate.

On the *AntiDogma* blog, the commenting behavior of the participants is regulated by the set of commenting rules which are published in the entry called “*let’s live together amicably*”. Already the entry’s title demonstrates the prominence of politeness as a central principle of interaction among the community members, to guarantee an amicable atmosphere. The guidelines ban obscene language and

personal insults and explicitly call upon users to be respectful toward each other by using a formal address “*You*” <sup>11</sup>:

*3. Foul language in explicit form is prohibited (we are not a market place), and it is not welcome in implicit (i.e. @\$%!) form.*

*4. Nothing costs as cheap and values as high as politeness. If possible, please address the participants you don't know with [formal] You.*

*5. Personal insults, direct or indirect, are forbidden. All personal conflicts are resolved outside of the community privately and in personal diaries [blogs]. Calls for violence, hate speech, intolerance, propaganda of homophobia are forbidden (in accordance with the Criminal Code of Russia promotion of hatred against a group of people is a crime). Please remember there is a difference between who people are and what they do.*

Lakoff (1979: 64) has defined politeness as “a device used in order to reduce friction in personal interaction.” In linguistic terms, polite communication allows individuals to engage in a verbal exchange avoiding the escalation of interpersonal conflicts and inflamed speeches. As seen from *AntiDogma*'s set of rules, community moderators are evidently inspired by the ideal concept of democratic deliberation, which favors mutual respect among the participants. Most importantly, they also adhere to the norm of critical-rational debate based on “reason-giving” which means individuals “should listen to one another and give reasons to one another that they think the others can comprehend and accept [...] aim at finding fair terms of cooperation among free and equal persons [...] speak truthfully.” (Mansbridge et al., 2010: 65-64). This is well illustrated by rules #6 and #7:

*6. Try to be objective. In order to have a constructive dialogue it is recommended to support your conclusions with the references to the studies and documents in psychology, sexology, medicine, law, sociology, demography etc. which are generally acknowledged by the scientific community.*

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<sup>11</sup> In Russian, there are two second-person pronouns: informal *ty* (Rus. ты) and formal *vy* (Rus. вы).

*6.1. Systematic unmotivated statements (except personal opinions) which claim to be scientific and have a persistent negative connotation can be regarded as offensive and deleted by moderators.*

*6.2. To avoid misunderstandings it is recommended to accompany the personal opinions of the participants with a clear indication that this is a personal opinion (“I think”, “in my opinion”, “imho”).*

*7. It is earnestly requested to refrain from commenting if the topic under discussion seems to you absurd, confusing or meaningless.*

Rule #6 instructs commentators to “*try to be objective*”, thereby implying that the statements posted in the discussion section must be dispassionate and nonpartisan. Moreover, the participants are explicitly encouraged to engage in “reason-giving”, and prove their statements by linking to the “*studies and documents*” or, in other words, to use rational argumentation. It is not enough to make personal independent statements; instead they have to be supported by claims which are “*generally acknowledged by the scientific community*.” One of the most obvious ramifications of this regulation to rational-critical debate is the possibility of exclusion of the participants who, for some reason, may be unable or unwilling to offer such judicious arguments. Rule #7 is unequivocally exclusive of potentially irrational statements in the sense that it advises participants against their involvement in the debate in case they lack understanding of the topic.

The sub-paragraph #6.1 further expounds this limitation: it strongly discourages “*unmotivated statements which claim to be scientific*” and with “*persistent negative connotation*.” The passage does not use the word “homophobia”, but it is apparently this particular type of rhetoric the moderators want to prevent. MacDonald (1976: 23) defined homophobia as “an irrational, persistent fear or dread of homosexuals.” At the same time, homophobic rhetoric does not have to appear in the form of extreme demonization and stigmatization of a group by means of strong language. In fact, anti-gay groups are known to adopt a more reserved approach, which allows for biased opinions to be disguised, by using rationalized language and scientifically-

sounded, albeit often pseudo- scientific, argumentation (Irvine, 2005). Thus, it is this kind of communication the rule #6 aims to impede.

The passage also implicitly demarcates what is perceived as rational argumentation, viz. based on authoritative sources, from those viewed as irrational, namely personal opinions. The commentators are instructed to mark them with special cue phrases, such as “*I think*”, “*in my opinion*”, and “*IMHO*” (online acronym for “*in my humble opinion*”). Although it does not mention the use of emotion, it implies the connection between posters’ personal opinions and the irrational, the subjective, and the emotional and opposed to more substantiated claims described in #6. Marking own opinions as opposed to neutral statements is also a call upon users to be frank toward each other.

This set of regulatory statements attempts to prevent any confrontation which could develop into a heated debate when strong language is used by the parties. It proves that regardless of the actual climate of the debate, the community is at least aspiring for a Habermasian ideal-typical public sphere with the reign of rational-critical argumentation. The ban on inflammatory statements (and the option of reporting them in case of refusal to obey it) protects community members from personal insults and homophobic attacks. On the other hand, the regulation to appeal to scientific sources and rational objective argumentation can privilege some users while simultaneously disadvantage the others. Thus, the option of anonymous commentary is counterbalanced by the restrictions on what can be posted.

### **6.3.2. Counterpublic deliberation in *AntiDogma***

#### ***AntiDogma as an online counterpublic: a balancing act***

Counterpublics become communicative spaces for marginalized groups, where they can consolidate forces and make decisions as to “in what way or whether to continue the battle” against inequality and oppression (Mansbridge, 1996: 47).

*AntiDogma* provides such space for its participants. The foundation for it is already laid in how LiveJournal defines a community, which it outlines as

*a journal where many users post entries about a similar topic. Users who are interested in a particular subject can find or create a community for this subject. [...] After you find and join an interesting community, you can post comments or entries to the community.*

This definition emphasizes the importance of shared interests (“entries about similar topic”) as a core aspect of community building. Knowing that others share similar interests improves the relationship of trust between users. The widespread homophobia and repressive legislation concretized in the ban on “propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality and transgenderism amongst minors”, makes any public initiative of a conversation about LGBT status in Russian society an endeavor fraught with risk. Moreover, even though homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia, it is still strongly embedded in an aura of illegality and marginalization, and in the words of Kondakov (2013c: para.15) “the silence and secrecy surrounding it for so long means that Russian has never developed a gay vocabulary.” In that sense, *AntiDogma*’s mission statement (see chapter 5) accentuates its orientation toward the sustaining of a community, and challenging the silence of the dominant public sphere. Systematic use of the pronoun “we” in its text serves a double purpose. It indicates the presence of a group of people united by common goals and attitudes. It also implies that newcomers are met with an expectation to be willing to abide by those postulates, in order to be included in the community. In exchange, they are offered a safe space to discuss the matters relevant to LGBT people with a lesser risk of verbal attacks.

The formation of a counterpublic does not mean, however, that it ceases all contact with the discourses of the dominant public sphere. The interactions between them always remain present and, as pointed by Squires (2002: 458) “are usually highly scripted, and members of marginal groups are compelled to conform to a ‘public transcript’ which reinforces unequal social positions and frustrates natural



impulses to perform reciprocal actions on the oppressor.”<sup>12</sup> The influence of the dominant public discourse about sexual minorities is visible in what can be called a preventive twist within *AntiDogma*'s mission statement, which says that community does not “*recruit or propagandize our beliefs and lifestyle*”, neither does it assume “*that same-sex relationships are acceptable, desirable or preferable for everybody.*” The passages are easily read as a response to the “propaganda ban” which has legally fortified the idea that both sexual identity and sexual orientation are a matter of exposure to certain information.

Thus, communication within a counterpublic becomes a balancing act between subjugation and resistance, which results in a discursive ambiguity in its stance toward sexual identity and orientation. On the one hand, the statement seems to submit to the propaganda ban: it affirms that community does not engage in it which simultaneously implies that it is in fact possible to propagandize sexuality. On the other hand, it reinstates an essentialist position that “*predisposition to one sexual orientation and gender identity or another, according to scientific research, is first and foremost innate.*”

Likewise, a counterpublic appears to balance between openness and seclusion, as it is meant to be a protected space for the marginalized group but is never fully isolated from the dominant public sphere even when it is the most oppressive. Although a relatively safe venue, as it gathers like-minded people, *AntiDogma* is not completely isolated from the larger network and it is indeed accessible to all users. The discussion of its technological aspects has demonstrated that the blogging community offers possibilities for completely anonymous communication. This openness increases the risk that participants will be exposed to the homophobic verbal assaults on the part of unidentified internet users. The discursive safety is maintained by means of relative seclusion of a community. Namely, its moderators keep the right

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<sup>12</sup>Squires (2002) borrows the notions of “hidden transcripts” and “public transcripts” from the work of J.C. Scott (1990) in which the “public transcripts” are understood as certain behavioral norms which dominant group demands the subordinate group to follow in order to strengthen their power.

to ban users and certain posts can be “locked” from the LiveJournal users who are not *AntiDogma* members.

***Discursive community: safe space, dangerous space***

Once a blogging community constitutes a counterpublic, it is expected to provide a safe space for a marginalized group to speak their mind openly. However, as was discussed above, the relatively open structure of *AntiDogma* makes it permeable for anyone, which brings an element of risk into the community’s communication flow. There are no formal mechanisms to verify the identities of its users, as well as their attitude toward sexual minorities, and therefore no guarantee against prejudice and hate speech. More importantly, the internal organization of the community, which brings to the forefront the ideas of politeness and civility, may do a disservice to the practice of discursive resistance. These ideas arguably benefit the ones in the dominant position because it is indeed them who get to set the rules (Mayo, 2002: 178). Abiding by these rules, the marginalized group can end up being an accomplice in silencing its own resisting voices. The payback for the comfort of having an amicable conversation thus happens to be the relinquished “opportunity to display our own self-righteous anger” (Carter, 1998: 35).

The interplay of safety and danger makes an online counterpublic into a zone of ambiguity in which the participants use the discussion to “establish and challenge the lines of power among themselves” (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008: 188) and more generally as members of marginalized or dominant social group. The structural inequalities ingrained in the relationship of sex and gender in real life can easily be translated into online discussion. Thus, considering an online counterpublic a safe space, the question remains “for whom ... [it is] safe and why” (Mayo, 2002: 185). An interesting study of it provided a blog entry posted by user *kelavrik\_0* on March 9, 2013 and which generated a total of 224 replies in its commentary section:

*What you may be disliked for.*

*And not by some unbridled homophobes, but ordinary people who normally regard you neutrally. Very simple, for the efforts to impose your own [opinion, way of thinking]. Here is a topic about [gender] neutral pronoun [link provided]. For what reason can someone dictate another one how to address unfamiliar people? Take notice, the question is not about insulting address, but simply with the indication of sex. Or with an indication of age: woman, girl. This is how everyone addresses [everyone else], but there are some people who begin to resent such innocent address. As someone in comments said: "Such bastards. Should be punched in the muzzle for this." Excuse me, for such reaction someone himself will get punched in the muzzle and in the eyes of a majority, with a neutral attitude to LGBT, it will be quite deserved. The person was addressed the way it is accepted in the society and he starts scuffling. And it is easy to extend this attitude to all of you. Roughly speaking. When you say that you want to integrate into society so that you are not alienated, that's OK. But when you start dictating to society, which in its majority heterosexual, then you won't be understood, to put it mildly.*

The text was posted by a user who is a listed member of the *AntiDogma* community. As it becomes clear from the text, the user is a heterosexual man who, after reading another *AntiDogma* post about the Swedish initiative to introduce gender-neutral pronouns, becomes indignant about what he sees as LGBT people trying to dictate the rest of the society how to speak. The suggestive and even presumptuous tone of his blog post, on the one hand, can be interpreted as an appeal to the LGBT members of *AntiDogma* to respond to it and, on the other hand, is clearly charged with conflict. The language of the author is antagonistic in the way he bluntly accuses the LGBT community of alienating the heterosexual majority which, according to the blogger, is not homophobic but presumably turns that way as a justified reaction to the unreasonable demands of sexual minorities. The author's resentment was intensified by a comment made elsewhere in the blogosphere, that those who fail to use gender-neutral pronouns are "bastards" who need to be "punched in the muzzle".

The author tried to point out, if not his solidarity but at least his sympathy for the struggle of queer people for their rights, when he wrote that "*When you say that you want to integrate into society so that you are not alienated, that's OK.*" While it expressed approval outwardly, one can easily read the subtle overtone of

condescension in the passage which was backed up by numerous referrals to the universalizing claims of the dominant discourse both in the blog post and subsequent comments. He frequently spoke of the majority, referring to heterosexual people, and their presumed perception of gender-neutral pronouns as enforcement by a few. Some other words the author used in the conversation were “*normal*”, “*adequate*”, and “*traditional*”. In other words, the implication was that the LGBT community has the right to demand better treatment, but it must be aware that some demands are simply “*inadequate*”<sup>13</sup> in the eyes of the dominant society, and therefore, should not be imposed upon it.

The author refrained from any direct allegations or strong language and claimed it was the comment of another user about “*punching*” that provoked his rage. On the surface, the conversation remained polite, and yet it was its civility which was used as a tool to shut down the more antagonistic voices that confronted the author. Essentially, the post restores the power of the dominant group over the minority by trying to stipulate the conditions of resistance and its boundaries. Without regard to the needs of LGBT people and their right to independently determine these needs, it dictates what the author believes to be “*reasonable*” demands. The numerous references he made to the notions of majority, normality, and tradition, specifically language tradition, indicate that he tried to speak on behalf of heterosexual, cisgender majority.

A short exchange with another *AntiDogma* member has demonstrated how civility can be used to repressive ends, which Mayo (2002: 185) described as “practices [...] that constrain and impede nascent justice claims.” Out of more than 200 comments posted to the blog entry in question, only one contained strong language and was explicitly uncivil. At one point during the conversation with the readers, the author continued to defend his original position by arguing that people who required to be addressed with a pronoun opposed to their biological sex (i.e. women ask to be referred to as “he”) were “*inadequate*” and “*most likely will not be*

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<sup>13</sup>In this particular context the word inadequate acquires the meaning of being abnormal and can be used colloquially as a synonym for “crazy” and “nonsensical.”

*dealt with* [by other people]”<sup>14</sup>. The deprecating nature of these statements produced a valid discontent on the part of one respondent, who decided to protest in the most straightforward, even if not the most cordial, manner:

*Aren't you being fucking saucy to judge who's is adequate and who is not?*

Despite its coarseness<sup>15</sup> the phrase encapsulated what was wrong with the original statement, namely that it was a thinly disguised effort to reinstate the hegemonic order and police others, by determining what is accepted by the majority as “normal” and what is not. It was an effort to delineate the boundaries of resistance and preserve the power position of the dominant group which, following this logic, would still be an authorizing body to decide on the course of LGBT protest. In the end, the civility was used again to power down the counter- hegemonic attempt when the author replied:

*You are indeed inadequate [crazy].*

Thus, the author has dodged the challenge by using the expression of anger to his own advantage. He likened what he saw as preposterous demands of sexual minorities to the explicitly uncivil communication of a reader, branded them both “*inadequate*” and therefore, unfit for the mainstream society. Coincidentally or not, the same respondent did not post any more replies after that statement. Either it was out of a desire to avoid further confrontation, or for other reasons, but the respondent was effectively silenced and the question remains if the counterpublic has failed to provide a safe haven for marginalized opinion it was expected to encourage.

### ***Counterpublic discourse: from individual to collective self***

As a counterpublic, *AntiDogma* becomes a space where community members and other readers come together to speak to and be heard by each other. This process

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<sup>14</sup> Here “to deal with” means to have a relationship, to interact with somebody

<sup>15</sup> In Russian, the verb *ohuet'* (Rus. охуеть) is a profanity and when used in public constitutes a form of disorderly conduct. See Kodeks ob administrativnih narusheniyah: Statya 20.1 Melkoe huliganstvo [Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences: Art. 20.1 Petty hooliganism]

of being heard is a crucial aspect of the human condition (Arendt, 1958: 198). The users who engage in the conversations on the blog use language to project themselves and elucidate who they are and what they do (Gee, 1999: 13). In other words, they use language to construct their identities, which are understood here as consisting of “multiple facets; [...] subject to tensions and contradictions; and [...] in a constant state of flux” (Burgess & Ivani, 2010: 232). On the one hand, the participants of *AntiDogma* illuminate their identities for others and for themselves through the practice of writing which is always affected by the “accumulation of life experiences” (Ivani, 1998: 181). On the other hand, they discursively inscribe themselves into a larger community unified by a shared collective identity. To this effect, the discursive space of *AntiDogma* serves as point of intersection between users’ individual and collective selves.

One of the common practices found in *AntiDogma* discussions was the sharing of personal stories and experiences with other users. For instance, one user posted a blog entry asking his readers to share the “*rubber stamp questions*” they have heard, once other people knew they were gay. In essence, it was a request to share personal stories of coming out and experiences that accompanied it. Quickly, the conversation took a humorous turn and commenters tried to deride the narrow-minded stereotypes about sexual identity and orientation with irony and sarcasm. One user, however, took it more personal as she wrote:

*It's not even funny to me :( all my life I was hiding, because I wanted a "classical family", and now I have mutual love and want to build a family with her. And what will I be told? Until 35 you didn't find a normal man and switched to women. But in reality it's only with 35 that I found a normal woman, but you can't explain that :).*

The sincerity of this brief passage revealed a lot about its author as she chose to disclose some intimate details. At the same time, through telling her tale she could show what has been called commonality of experience with others and foster the stronger sense of community through realization that she was not alone (Plummer, 1995: 56; Alexander, 2002: 87). Her posting demonstrated a spectrum of sexist

prejudice, which could in fact be encountered by any lesbian living in Russian society. First, it framed lesbians as heterosexual women who simply failed to “find a normal man.” Second, it depicted female singlehood as a pathology and a personal failure which had to be overcome at any cost. Thus, the transition to lesbianism appeared in this stereotype as a radical measure to find solution to the situation. To respond to these prejudices, the author reinstated her agency by telling that “*it’s only with 35 that I found a normal woman.*”

Another user provided an example which also illuminated the prevalence of what Rosenthal (1990: 1) called a devastating “intersection of ageism with sexism” against women:

*I was asked probably twice in one week how am I going to live with a loved woman when we get old. I flat-out don’t understand why these lovely ladies seem to think, that an old husband is more attractive than an old wife...*

The questions heard by the commentator illustrated the value which is placed on young women who are the only ones to be considered sexually desirable (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013: 3). The self-esteem of older women, meanwhile, is diminished to the point that they are not worth of living with later in life. Interestingly, the author made it clear that those who asked her the question were in fact other women – “*lovely ladies*” – who demonstrated the signs of internalized ageism (Gerike, 1990). Similar to the previous case, the implication that such prejudice could target any lesbian, and in fact any woman, appeared to deepen the sense of collective identity. The user shared her experience with other community members, and at the same time made use of a counterpublic sphere to contest the rhetorics of the stereotype by posing a rhetorical question, whether an old man later in life “*is more attractive than an old wife.*” An important benefit by the blogger by making a confession in a counterpublic was in the form of support she received from fellow members.

Finally, written elaborations on the individual self can become a vehicle for an activist message when concerned users share their personal experiences to encourage others and give them sense of community. Shortly after the ban on “propaganda of homosexuality” was passed in Saint Petersburg in 2012, one user posted a protest video of the All Out campaign which discouraged foreigners from visiting the city as long as the ban stands and asked the users to sign an online petition to the city’s governor. The first commentary to the clip was a pessimistic statement saying

*Nothing will come out of it. No one will pay attention. ... So much has been signed already. Was there any use of it?’*

The author took to action by trying to encourage the reader using activist argumentation and personal background. He explained that the goal was the “resonance” and that the motivation was not to “*bring to reason fucking stupid officials.*” “*We attract the attention of the public*”, the blogger wrote.

Another reader, a Russian expat living in Western Europe, acknowledged the effect the video had on people abroad, citing his British friend who refused to visit Saint Petersburg, despite the fact that “*the hotel room was already booked*” and added, implying that new legislation will force gay people back in the closets:

*In general I’m infinitely happy not to be in Russia now, I’m sorry [for that] =/. Cannot imagine [again] not being able to hold hands with a person you love or flirt a little...*

The following was author’s reply:

*None of us, not a single activist I know will get back to the closet – neither in Piter [Saint Petersburg] nor anywhere else. And those who think they can shut our mouths with such laws are naive.*

The text was a reaffirmation of his position as an LGBT activist. He referred to a community he identified with and emphasized his connection with others through a



claim “*not a single activist I know.*” At the same time, he used a personal reference, namely the intimate concept of the closet, which he immediately conveyed in the domain of public. He represented being and living out of the closet simultaneously as an act of personal courage and as an activist statement. For the blogger, the act of coming out was not only a personal step, but a matter of civic responsibility.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *ANTIDOGMA* AS SITE OF ACTIVISM AND MOBILIZATION

#### 7.1. LGBT activism in context of new social movements research

Theoretical conceptualization of the social movement phenomenon can be a complex task. They are understood as networks of social actors who undertake collective action and challenge the existing power in a pursuit of some degree of social change (Hannigan, 1985; Castells, 2001; Stein et al, 2012). For a long time, the research of social movements was determined by the Marxist paradigm, which emphasized the logic of class antagonism. Marxism saw collective action as being rooted in the very social structure that leads to the escalation of class conflict, resolved through the popular uprising of the suppressed class. The Marxist approach was expanded on by the theorizations of Lenin and Gramsci (Tarrow, 1998: 11-12). For Lenin, social mobilization depended on the strong leadership of professional revolutionaries, and Gramsci proposed the concept of cultural hegemony – “the common sense of capitalist society” – which had to be subverted in order to foster collective consciousness necessary for triggering of a movement (Tarrow, 1998: 11-12).

In the 50s and 60s, scholars turned to the collective behavior theory to fathom why people become activists in protest movements. It postulated that social movements were just another form, although a well-organized one, of collective behavior similar to other “emergent” social phenomena such as rumors, riots, collective enthusiasm, and revolutions (Tarrow, 1998: 14). This tradition explained the occurrence of social movements by the upsurge in grievances and individual deprivation experienced by people (Zald, 1992: 328). In the 70s, the resource mobilization paradigm based on rational choice theory was developed (Olson, 1965; Gamson, 1977; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). Underscoring the logic of costs and benefits, it presented an instrumental and even utilitarian view of social

movements (McClurg Mueller, 1992: 5). Namely, it aspired to understand how social movements are set in motion and organized, what resources are needed for it, and how particular political systems can provide, or conversely deprive of the opportunities for mobilization.

Finally, the newest approach appeared to be more sensitive to the cultural factors which form social movements (Johnston & Klandermans, 2004: 4). New social movement (NSM) research emerged as a response to the reductionism of the Marxist interpretation of the collective action, which privileged the economic logic of collective action, namely that it is rooted in economic inequality and class antagonism (Melucci, 1980: 199). Moreover, it was a reaction to the social movements of the 1960s which appeared to differ from the previous ones in their “issues, tactics, and constituencies” (Calhoun, 1995: 173). The researchers of NSM acknowledge that other logics – politics, ideology, and culture – also come into play and evoke collective action built upon collective identity rooted in ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Buechler, 1995: 442). The NSMs are thus catalyzed by a drastic transformation of society’s conflict structure, resulting from the weakening of traditional social bonds of family, class, and religion (Raschke, 1985: 413).

Although it is difficult to find a common denominator for a multitude of new social movements – such as the peace movement, the solidarity movement, the women’s movement, and indeed the LGBT movement – all of them to a certain extent are concerned with the advancement of minorities and/or protection of people’s autonomy against oppressive powers (Kriesi et al, 1995).

### **7.1.1. LGBT movement**

The roots of the gay and lesbian movement go back to the founding of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, the first ever organization to acknowledge and defend the rights of sexual minorities, in Berlin in 1897 (Tamagne, 2006: 60). Contemporary LGBT movement, however, began in the second half of the 20th

century with “a few brave individuals in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Paris, and Los Angeles” (Adam et al., 1999: 1). Along with other new social movements, e.g. feminist and civil rights, the LGBT movement emerged to protest against homophobia and discrimination based on sexuality and in the beginning especially targeted laws against homosexuality.

In 1978, The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (IGLA) was founded to campaign for the equal rights of sexual minorities worldwide. Although applying the universal norms of freedom and sexual identity in various national and cultural contexts can be altogether problematic, it can nonetheless be argued that the discussion on sexuality and sexual identity has been globalizing (Altman, 1996, 2001). The LGBT movement also appears increasingly internationalized and institutionalized, with its agenda becoming politically articulated (Paternotte et al., 2011).

Arising from shared experiences of discrimination, there are certain similarities between the national LGBT movements around the world. Adam et al. (1999: 345) point out that there are two levels of activism common to all of them. On the one hand, LGBT activists worldwide strive to end homophobia (and increasingly transphobia) and stemming from it, the discrimination of sexual minorities in various realms “from the armed forces to the household.” On the other hand, they seek to establish “a space, in social terms as well as in terms of an actual physical area where homosexuals can meet” (Adam et al., 1999: 345).

The authors notice that dissension between striving for deeper assimilation and separatism is widespread, as the two positions coexist in all countries (Adam et al., 1999: 346). Supporters of assimilation advocate more discreetness in the displays of homosexuality and the need for sexual minorities to be “normal.” Proponents of separatism, instead, refuse to conform to heteronormative social standards and believe it to be a part of the LGBT struggle for equality to be proud of their sexuality and its manifestations. How the two viewpoints alternate or coexist in a given society

is usually determined by its socio-political and cultural climate, tradition as well as general attitudes toward (sexual) “otherness”.

Yet, no LGBT movement exactly replicates any other. There can clearly be various degrees of similitude, as, for instance, more likeness can be observed between Anglo-Saxon societies with strong democratic tradition or countries of Eastern Europe that deal with the legacy of authoritarian and totalitarian past. However, as Adam et al. (1999b: 349) wrote: “country paradigms and national imprints” always “shape the country-specific path along which gay and lesbian movement may progress.”

There are multiple factors which will determine the strength of the movement, its trajectory, and the outcomes. For example, the vitality of civil society is crucial to the mobilization of citizens in a protest movement. In Russia, most people share an attitude of distrust toward social organizations, which poses a serious obstacle in the way of collective action (Evans, 2012: 233). Coupled with a general “sexophobia” revealed in an unwillingness to subject sexuality to a public debate and widespread conservative attitudes stimulated by the Russian Orthodox Church, LGBT organizations remain a semi-acknowledged niche even within political opposition (Kon, 2009: 43). They are also challenged by restrictions in both the public and private realms. In the public realm, the state officially sanctions the expression of sexual difference and seriously hinders the visibility of sexual minorities. At the same time, even the private realm, which was intruded on by the state during Soviet era, offers only limited opportunities to live non- normative sexualities without significant risks (Horne et al., 2009).

Another crucial factor of the movement formation is the shared understanding of sexuality and sexual identity as a foundation for solidarity. As Adam et al. (1999a: 2) remark: “Same-sex bonding in many cultures does not necessarily entail a sense of personal identity or an idea of a community of shared interests. The content and meaning of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are contested terrain, varying within and among

societies.” Interpretations of these identities are in a state of permanent flux and reconsideration even within a particular community.

### **7.1.2. The role of identity in gay and lesbian activism**

Thinking of LGBT activism as an identity movement often begins with an *essentialist* assumption of homosexual identity as being constant over time, and therefore inevitable and unchanging (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998: 10). Regardless of whether conceived of as an innate feature or a result of socialization, it presumes that sexuality, once acquired, remains a fixed category capable of creating a distinct social group with more or less defined boundaries, similar to those of ethnic or religious group. The early homophile politics in the United States of the period from 1940 to 1964 gave rise to activist organizations which recruited people as essentially *gay men* and *lesbian women* and had an assimilatory goal of convincing the mainstream public that homosexuality was neither a sin nor a mental illness (Bernstein, 2002: 540-542; Gamson, 1995: 395).

One problematic of the essentialist view on homosexuality lies in that it creates a rupture within the community, which strives to embrace various sexual minorities, yet focuses almost exclusively on homosexuality. While trying to challenge heteronormativity and stemming from it heterosexism, the essentialist approach to homosexuality produced very similar outcomes. It disciplined sexuality in terms of a divide between “homo” and “hetero”, and marginalized those who could not identify with the established sexual identities of gay and lesbian community. For example, the discipline of this dichotomy made it difficult for bisexual and transgender people to adopt the collective identity shared by gay people.

Furthermore, having originated in the United States and other Western countries, the gay and lesbian identity was quickly given its “westernized” outlook. Altman (1996: 80), for instance, suggests the existence of a global gay identity, which is unmistakably evocative of Western understandings of homosexuality organized around a hetero-homosexual axis. In other words, living a gay life implies taking on

“a particular set of styles and behaviors” (Altman, 1996: 80) which are at the same time those of white, middle-class Westerners.

The commercialization of gay spaces, for example, created an expectation of a particular kind of consumer behavior. That is, as a gay man, one must eat at *gay* restaurants, stay at *gay* hotels, and go to *gay* clubs, among other exclusively *gay* things and activities. In that sense, the essentialist notion of homosexuality appeared to reinforce the essentially white identity produced by capitalist social structures, and alienated gays and lesbians who were not white, middle-class citizens (Jagose, 1996).

Around the 1970s, some scholars were growing displeased with the essentialist approach to sexuality as “natural” and, influenced by the works of Foucault (1978, 1988) and McIntosh (1968), started adopting social constructionist paradigm. The main premise of this strand of thought is that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Likewise, the identities are not fixed entities given to people biologically or culturally to never be altered. Instead, they are pliable and constantly build upon people’s life experiences. For sexuality, it means that its interpretations vary throughout different societies, cultures, and historical periods. In addition, it stimulated the debate on gender identity promoted by feminist critics which meaning is well formulated by Seidman (2003: 19-20):

We are not born men or women; we acquire these gender identities through a social process of learning and sometimes coercion. [...] [O]ur sexual desires, feelings, and preferences are deeply imprinted by our gender status. [...] [T]he division between men and women [is] a product of social processes. [...] [I]ndividuals acquire a sexual nature as they develop a gender identity.

With this re-examination of the nature of gay and lesbian identity, the new concept of *queerness* was introduced in the discourse of sexual minorities. For a long time, the word “queer” was used pejoratively to describe homosexuals. In the early 1980s, two parallel tendencies occurred, one in the realm of LGBT activism and another one within the academy: *queer* politics and *queer* theory (Gamson, 1995:

393). And the term *queer* was introduced to address the problems posed by the essentialist view of sexuality.

The task of queerness as a discursive category for describing of sexual identity is to overcome the oppression of fixed identity categories that press people to bracket who they are into a pre-established set of qualities. Halperin (1995: 62) spoke of queerness as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence.” In other words, instead of trying to define sexuality as essentially “homo” or “hetero”, it avoids any essentialization at all and explains it in relational terms. As a result, a multitude of sexual identities and orientations could be embraced by queer community without people having to adhere to a particular homosexual norm.

The idea of queerness betrayed a structural dilemma hidden within the identity movement, not only those centering on sex or gender but also ethnicity or race. Namely, that fixed identities serve simultaneously as a basis for oppression and political power (Gamson, 1995: 391). Queer identity and, based on it, queer politics positioned itself against more conventional forms of gay and lesbian activism seeking normalization and assimilation of sexual minorities into heteronormative paradigm. It did not, however, problematize the content of sexual collective identities, but questioned their “*unity, stability, viability, and political utility*” (Gamson, 1995: 397, italics in the original). It was the dictatorship of the norm, and the “normal” ingrained in any sexual identity, either hetero- or homosexual, which was challenged by queer theory. And queer politics in this sense appeared as to oppose “society itself” by “protesting not just the normal behavior of the social but the idea of normal behavior” (Warner, 1993: xxvii).

### **7.1.3. Activist identity work**

Identity is considered among the central aspects of social movements and crucial to comprehension of their dynamics. The question still remains as to how



collective identities are acquired, and what is the nature of the link connecting personal and collective identity. To address this issue, the present section will outline the concept of *identity work*.

As was illustrated above, queer theory recognized sexual identity as a flexible construct in a state of permanent modification and influenced by a multitude of factors. Similarly, many researchers of social movements considered identity an “emergent” quality of a collective action (Gamson, 1992: 67-68). Epstein (1999: 77) pinpointed this dynamic nature of collective identities, which he described as being “rarely stable” and “as much the product of as the prerequisite of movement activism.” Identity work is therefore an integral part in the process of collective identity maintenance

Snow & Anderson (1987: 1348) initially proposed a concept of identity work on the individual level to explicate “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept.” Taking it a step further to include collective identities, Schwalbe & Mason-Shrock (1996: 115) identified identity work as “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or other.” Activists engage in identity work in order to create symbolic resources, which entail and support collective identities as well as delineate their boundaries. It is also critical to “the maintenance of both collective identity and the correspondence of the personal with the collective” (Snow & McAdam, 2000: 47).

The substance of identity work is in articulation of the similarities among movement members on the one hand, and the differences between them and group or groups they oppose on the other (Einwohner et al, 2008: 4-5). Activists create identity representations – for example, in movement events, documents, activist slogans or interactions with mass media such as interviews – that allow setting up the components of collective identity which Taylor & Whittier (1992: 109) defined as *boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation*. Boundary markers – “social,

psychological, and physical structures” – position people as members of a particular community. They allow communities to foster the sense of awareness about similarities and shared culture of its members while at the same time providing a “frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out- group” (Taylor & Whittier, 1992: 111).

Cultivation of consciousness is another important aspect of identity work within a social movement. It consists of “the interpretative frameworks that emerge from a group’s struggle to define and realize members’ common interests in opposition to the dominant order” (Taylor & Whittier, 1992: 114) and has to be understood as a continuous process. It is due to the presence of consciousness that community members realize their subjugated position vis-à-vis oppressive groups and attempt resistance. Consciousness provides the oppressed group with alternative meanings that reflect in-group experiences while challenging the out-group structures of domination.

The process of negotiation as a part of identity work refers to the endeavors of movements “to change the symbolic meanings.” In the context of new social movements, it is particularly exemplified in the blurring boundaries between “being” and “doing” as well as between personal and political as more “forms of political activism [become] embedded in everyday life” (Taylor & Whittier, 1992: 117-18). Movement insiders negotiate the meanings – for instance, those of being gay or transgender person, the dichotomy of essentialist versus constructionist view of homosexuality – in private and public settings in implicit or explicit manners.

There are different roles identities can play in a movement. Bernstein (2002: 539) argues it can be used for *empowerment*, as a *goal*, and as a *strategy*. In the first case, collective identity preexists social movement, and is used to mobilize and empower people for collective action. As an instrument of empowerment, collective identities can converge with the personal identities of individuals (Snow & McAdam, 2000: 47). In other words, the two are isomorphic, meaning people join movements

because the personal and collective struggles initially resonate. In other cases, when there is no correspondence, the identity has to be constructed, which would accommodate both the individual and the collective. It is achieved when people's personal identities are aligned with the collective values and goals to encourage their participation in activist projects.

When activists attempt to “challenge stigmatized identities, seek recognition for new identities, or deconstruct restrictive social categories” (Bernstein, 1997: 537), it appears as a goal of a social movement. This is a particularly vital issue in the societies where a queer community could not develop its collective identity due to harsh persecution of sexual minorities. In Russia, queer identity is still the project under construction with gays, lesbians, and bisexual and transgender people developing their own social meanings and vocabulary (Kondakov, 2013b: 158). So, the formation of an identity which would be liberated from the pejorative connotations it acquired during continuous oppression is among the goals of the movement.

Lastly, there are two dimensions of identity as a strategy when it becomes “the subject of debate” (Bernstein, 2002: 539). Strategically, activists can utilize identity for critique, which is to criticize the existing hegemonic categories, values, practices, and social structures and to emphasize the difference between the dominated group and the prevalent majority. In this situation, the activists can draw attention to and openly condemn homophobic attitudes prevalent in a given society. On the other hand, it can be used for the education of the majority about the categories, values, and practices of minority by stressing the similarities between the two while seeking the acceptance and inclusion of a minority in the broader society. Most importantly, different strategic uses of identity, either for critique or for education, usually take turns over time, as movement members choose a particular approach considered advantageous under given circumstances.

## **7.2. The role of media in mobilization and coordination of collective action**

### **7.2.1. Social movements and the mass media**

Mass media and social movements have been seen as interacting systems that form a relationship of interdependence (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). It is noteworthy that this interdependency is not symmetrical. That is, the movements depend on the media to a much greater extent than vice versa. Usually, activists have a goal to expose their causes not only to their followers but to a broader population as well (Rucht, 2013: para.19). The exposure in mass media becomes an important resource of movement operation and mobilization and it is particularly important for social movements how they are framed by the mass media.

Gamson & Wolfsfeld (1993: 116) argued that there are three reasons why social movements need the media. The first rationale for the activists to seek media representation is for *mobilization* purposes. The media conveys the discourses connected with the movement, such as its goals and principles, and by doing so, establish the connection between the movement and its body of supporters. With the rise of internet technologies and especially easy-to-use, affordable online networking tools, this reliance of activist groups on the traditional media for mobilization becomes less pronounced. They are increasingly being given the opportunities to set up their own media channels and connect directly to citizens.

Two other reasons are *validation* and *scope enlargement*. The media validate social movements by reporting their activities to the large audience. The media coverage serves as a sign of recognition to the influence of the movement and a confirmation of its visibility in broader society. That is to say, the newsworthiness of a movement manifests its relevance. The media can also contribute to the success of a movement by enlarging the scope of a conflict. As the authors put it: “Where the scope is narrow, the weaker party has much to gain and little to lose by broadening

the scope, drawing third parties into the conflict as mediators or partisans” (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993: 116). By making use of media resources, movements can connect to other political and social actors such as interest groups, political parties, or governments and gain access to otherwise unreachable elites (Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986: 73).

The media appear to be instrumental not only in the success of activist movements, but also in their failure and possible demise, for the relationship between the two can be described as “a dance of death” (Molotch, 1979: 92). There is a struggle over meaning, as both systems strive to offer public their interpretation of the events (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993: 119). Mass media utilize frames to represent social movements and can choose to use negative frames to describe their ideology and/or practice influencing its image and undermining the public perception of their legitimacy. For instance, the media practice of framing activist groups as dangerous and deviant entities that pose a threat to social order has been well documented by researchers (Gitlin, 1980: 27; Cottle, 2006: 183).

The mass media, on the other hand, depends much less on the social movements. Even though the latter may provide a good copy filled with “drama, conflict, and action” for the news, they still have to compete with other stories that get coverage (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993: 116). There are a number of biases which are argued to be present in the Western mass media when reporting on public protests (Baylor, 1996: 243). Class bias refers to the fact that media owners and executives often have close links to political and business elites which can underpin their unwillingness to give favorable coverage to social movements and protests they stage. Along similar lines, commercialization and financial pressures of the crumbling media market are likely to push forward business interests. Finally, journalistic routines cause reporters to use conventional sources – police, government officials, press releases, and so forth – in their coverage. In the case of the Russian media system, the situation is aggravated by the strong degree of state control over news media. Since journalists often lack freedom and autonomy to

decide on the subjects they get to cover, public protests appear even lower, if at all, on the list of news priorities determined by government officials and hardly get reported by the mainstream television channels and newspapers (Orttung & Walker, 2013: 2-3).

### ***Mediation opportunity structure***

To improve the understanding of the relationship between citizen activism and the media, Cammaerts (2012) proposed the concept of mediation opportunity structure which he elaborated from the theory of political opportunity structure and the concept of mediation. Tarrow (1994: 85) identified political opportunity structure as the “[d]imensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.” It describes the structural characteristics of the activists’ external environment which can influence the choice of protest strategies and its overall trajectory (Kitschelt, 1986: 57). Mediation is in turn defined by Thumim (2009: 619) as a process that “encapsulates both the detail of specific instances of production, text and reception, and the broader context of media use.” Thus, based on these two conceptions, mediated opportunity structure is “the potential for audiences, users and citizens to resist dominant frames, appropriate ICTs in their everyday lives and become producers of media themselves” (Cammaerts, 2011: 50).

Mediated opportunity structure can also be estimated in relation to the mainstream media, and in this case refers to the degree of their openness or, on the contrary, hostility in the representations of the activism and protests they provide (Cammaerts, 2012: 130). For a protest movement, it can be difficult to receive complimentary coverage in the mass media even in the societies with high degree of media freedom. On the most basic level, journalists can have little interest in reporting activist happenings. The newsworthiness is likely to increase in cases of increasing violence, for instance acts of vandalism or police resistance, but it is then likely to be negatively framed.

In Russia, the mediated opportunity structure of the mainstream media is even less favorable. The media system functions under numerous constraints which can vary from direct pressure on the Kremlin-owned media to more indirect measures of recommendations, curatorship, and harassment. The events in Ukraine in 2013-14 provided the most recent example of the frames pro-government Russian media use to represent the protesters (Boklage, 2014). The emphasis was strongly made on the disorderly character of protests while the activists have been systematically depicted as extremists and radicals.

### **7.2.2. Activism and online communication**

Social movements and their activists need mass media in order to increase their visibility and gain greater publicity and recognition on the part of the broader population outside their direct environment (Cammaerts et al, 2013; Rucht, 2013). Yet, the relationship of protest movements with the mainstream media as discussed above remains ambivalent, as a result of the asymmetric dependency between the two. This reinforces activists' motivation to seek and utilize alternative communication channels (Stein, 2009: 750). The arrival of the internet has transformed the ways in which social movements and activists communicate with supporters and broader public. It can help their causes achieve visibility and connect them directly to their supporters bypassing the traditional media channels.

Earl & Kimport (2011:10) spoke about the leveraging affordances of online communication technologies relevant to the collective action. Sustaining communication channels necessary to organize a protest can be expensive while the internet tools can drastically decrease “costs for creating, organizing, and participating in protest.” In case of Russian LGBT activists, even keeping in contact with the like-minded, not to mention reaching the wider audience, becomes a costly venture when relying on the traditional means of communication such as telephone or even approaching people in person through door-to-door canvassing. Without a doubt

internet facilitates fast and increasingly cheap communication between people throughout the country.

At the same time, web tools reduce the movement's dependence on the physical co-presence of the participants in time and space in order to engage in collective action (Earl & Kimport, 2011:10). This, again, is particularly important for Russian activists who, due to the country's size, sometimes are separated by extremely long distances. The diminishing of physical disconnection is also important in that it helps to transcend the national borders and globalize local issues. Relatively isolated activists can therefore collaborate with their allies worldwide and become a part of a transnational community of protesters and advocates (Bennett & Toft, 2010).

Combined, these affordances can advance the mediated mobilization when online technology is used "for sociality, participation, and coordinated action" (Lievrouw, 2006: 119). According to resource mobilization theory, the accumulation of resources, such as trust, authority, and connectivity, is indispensable in order to mobilize people for collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977: 1216). As members of social networks on the web, users immerse themselves in a stream of information where they can build communities by communicating on political issues. Online networks effectively serve as sites where activists can coordinate offline events and encourage each other for participation. In addition, they can facilitate online-only activist endeavors, such as signing petitions, sending emails to officials, spreading awareness through sharing content on social networks, creating contentious user-generated content, and fund-raising and crowd-funding. Notably, the impact of online activism often appears not as a result of systematic and intentional efforts by users, but rather "emerge from" less purposive "interactive process" (Bimber et al, 2005: 371).

One example of how the internet's leveraging affordances can be taken advantage of is the website AllOut.org. The organization positions itself as an online platform for global LGBT activism against homophobia. Its website repeatedly



stresses the importance of ICT for its work and states that “[t]ogether, our tweets, voices and texts will make them pay attention” (Elliott, 2010: para.15). The use of social media is also crucial at the endpoint of the project to estimate the impact of activist efforts. The platform architecture allows

to measure the response to every post, tweet, and email, and optimize our campaigning work to reach the broadest audience [...] Some of our key indicators of success are membership growth, measurable changes in public conversation through social and traditional media, policy change, donations from our members, and direct support to partner organizations.

Financially, the organization relies on its members while “[d]onations from [its] supporters go a long way because [the activists] *maximize technology* in order to work globally with very low overheads” (italics added). AllOut.org provides news to the global LGBT community and monitors the violations of human rights of sexual minorities. In addition, it regularly launches web awareness campaigns, issues petitions to eradicate homophobic legislation, and organizes rallies and flash mobs.

The technological optimism about the effects of the internet on the state of activism is counterbalanced by more critical voices which warn against the unjustified cheerfulness. Morozov (2012: 179) became one of the most prominent critics of the phenomenon called *slacktivism*, which he deemed a basically meaningless political engagement through social networks such as Twitter or Facebook. Costing nearly nothing and requiring as little effort as clicking “like” or “share” button, the reasons to pursue such activity, “have nothing to do with one’s commitment to ideas and politics in general” (Morozov, 2012: 179). Moreover, giving people a false feeling of political participation, slacktivism, according to its critics, can divert them from taking actual political action.

Despite lowering the costs of citizen mobilization on the micro- and meso-level, reasonable doubts still remain whether online activism, with its rather ephemeral nature, will be able to significantly impact the decision-making process within institutional politics (Breuer & Farooq, 2012: 6). The low costs of engagement

with online protest could in fact belittle the importance of certain issues in the eyes of political actors overwhelmed with “low-quality, redundant, and generally insubstantial commenting by the public” (Shulman, 2009: 26).

Admittedly, not all forms of online activism are considered slacktivism by the critiques (Christensen, 2011). For instance, hacktivism – using hacking techniques for political ends – is viewed as a valid form of protest, for it requires more effort than the sharing of content on social networks and is often associated with personal risks. Since hacking is illegal, hacktivists actually face penalties for their campaigns.

Another point of problematization of online communication in the context of political contention and collective action concerns perceived fragmentation of public sphere (Sunstein, 2001: 51). Joining communities of interest, users are able to easily avoid the exposure to alternative political opinions and remain in relatively isolated enclaves unaware of other causes. Social networking sites can easily create highly homophilic networks which potentially “exacerbate the effects of individual-level selectivity” and lead to stronger polarization of views (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2012: 50).

In Russia, according to Kiriya (2013: 22), protest networks are strongly marginalized and cut off from the system of the mainstream media. They form a parallel discursive sphere, with a limited set of discourses, and minimal access to the wider population beyond politically interested internet users. In effect, the communicative networks of the protest movement form “information ghettos” while the government maintains control over gate-keeping and guards the boundary between the official and the parallel public spheres making the former completely inaccessible for activists.

### **7.3. *AntiDogma* as an activist platform**

#### **7.3.1. Organization of protest: mobilization and coordination**

The exploration of the *AntiDogma* blog posts has discovered that a significant share of blog content was directly devoted to various practical activist tasks. Community members employed different tactics to facilitate protest action both online and offline. As an activist platform, the *AntiDogma* community is characterized by almost complete absence of formal organization. It functions to the greatest extent as a self-organizing network with little-to-no coordination of blogging activities by its members and relies on individuals' initiative to produce content and take up action.

#### ***E-tactics***

Earl & Kimport (2011: 8-9) conceived of e-tactics as an array of online-only activist practices, such as boycotts, online petitions, and email and letter writing, and many of them were employed on *AntiDogma*. This section will take a closer look at the calls to sign online petitions which were frequently made by the community members.

Predictably, the calls would intensify around the time of significant events in Russian politics that concerned the LGBT community directly or indirectly (e.g. through family politics). For instance, the calls for online petitions became more frequent. Many online petitions circulated by *AntiDogma* bloggers were hosted by the website Democrator.ru.<sup>16</sup> Since the website allows both voting in support of petitions

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<sup>16</sup> Democrator.ru is a petitioning website which was launched in 2010. The project is privately financed. Its stated goals are the strengthening of civil society and a direct relationship between citizens and government. The website owners have agreements with a number of public officials and organizations to provide feedback for citizens' appeals (Sadchikova, 2013). The petitioning procedure begins when a registered user adds a "problem" (social issue they wish to petition) to the website. Once, and if, it gathers enough supporting votes, the hard copy of a petition is forwarded to the addressee (governmental body or public organization). According to the website, the "problems" are forwarded to the intended organizations when they pass the threshold of at least 50 votes of support from the users. However, it also includes a clause reserving that "these criteria vary for different types of organizations and categories of problems."

and against them, *AntiDogma* bloggers mobilized the readers to vote against LGBT hostile initiatives.

In 2012, shortly after the ban on “homosexual propaganda” was passed in Saint Petersburg (and approximately one year before President Putin had signed the nationwide ban), an anti-LGBT Democrotor.ru user had initiated a petition to introduce such a general ban. Quickly, one *AntiDogma* blogger composed a request to vote against it. The author had also offered detailed instructions for the voters to prevent possible mistakes and avoid users supporting the petition by accident:

*Where you see a little blue line “Support problem”, there is a little white triangle, if you click on it – there will open a little red line “Vote against”, that is where you should click.*

In order to avoid the alienation of less internet-savvy members, the blogger put directions in a particularly simple language. Revealing their awareness that different users may have different levels of familiarity with the platform’s architecture, the author tried to make it as easy as possible for everyone to take online action.

Readers of *AntiDogma* used the commentary section to engage in a debate about specific e-tactics and their efficiency. For example, one blog entry urged the readers to sign a petition on *We the People* (platform hosted by the website of the United States government) as a response to the law forbidding the adoption of Russian children by foreign same-sex couples as well as by single people from countries where same-sex marriages are legal. The petition, written in English, asked the American government to sanction President Vladimir Putin. Although the post did not ignite a vivid conversation – a mere five comments were written – the bloggers’ responses produced an interesting example of a critical assessment of the petition as a tactic. The first commentator made the following remark:

*There is nothing we must [do]. Translate it in Russian. One should not sign anything without reading. Who knows if it’s FSB provocation?*

Although short and displaying what might sound like conspiracy theory overtones, the statement illustrated vividly how activists or potential activists feel about the Russian authorities and especially the Federal Security Service (FSB) and former employing organization of President Putin. Strong distrust and suspicion toward political institutions is not unusual among Russians (Shlapentokh, 2006). It also shed some light on Russia's activist environment and the fact that bloggers feel concerned about the government monitoring their online activities and even actively trying to unveil the dissentient citizens by provoking them.

The analysis found several petitions created using the *We the People* platform. They similarly requested sanctions against President Putin and a few other Russian politicians actively involved in homophobic law making, notably Yelena Mizulina who serves as a Chairman of the Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs in Duma. One document pleaded with the American government to provide asylum for Russian and Belorussian LGBT citizens.

Much of the user debates in the commentary sections pointed toward the skepticism of bloggers with regards to whether petitions were a potent method of political contestation. One user wrote that it was “*naive to fight evil with signatures*” while another one put sarcastically: “*Yeah. Don't forget to 'like' this ferocious post on VK – SO WE'LL WIN.*” In other words, the author of the last statement called into question the very logic of aggregation, embodied in the social media (Juris, 2012: 59), and its potential to have tangible political impact.

Yet another participant of the debate opposed both bloggers with what seemed like a rhetorical question: “*If you don't want to fight anything, why do you put a spoke in others' wheels?*” The exchange exemplified the lack of unanimity in members' judgment on what constituted activism and what did not. The divergence of opinion on the effectiveness of online petitioning substantiated this lack of accord.

### ***Mobilization and coordination***

*The AntiDogma* blog is regularly presented with entries that aim at mobilization of people to take part in different kinds of collective public expression and protest, such as walks, marches, pickets, and flash mobs. In order to attract attention, activists make use of the multimedia features available via web communication tools. For instance, the texts are often accompanied with video pleas. On January 9, 2014, two activists, both leaders of Moscow LGBT rights organization Rainbow Association (*Raduzhnaya Assotsiatsiya*), posted an invitation to join the LGBT column in an anti-fascist march which was planned for a few days later in Moscow. Activists had written a text and recorded a video plea which they uploaded to YouTube. In it, they talked about the growth of hate crimes against LGBT citizens, as well as the commonplace of incidents of discrimination at work and in public locales. They also touched upon the “fascist” statements made around that time by a famous Russian theater and film actor, and one-time Orthodox priest, Ivan Okhlobistin, that gays should be put “alive into an oven” (Child, 2013: para.3). The activists ended their invitation with the following:

*If you don't like this situation take a banner, write on it everything you think in this regard and step out on January 19 in Moscow in the column of Rainbow Association.*

In the text, bloggers emphasized the humane aspect of LGBT activism, as they drew a parallel between homophobia and fascism, framing participation in the march as an expression of civil dignity. At the same time, they underscored a relative easiness with which people can express their positions publicly, namely that they can put it on a banner and manifest during a demonstration.

What seems peculiar, however, is that neither text nor video addressed the potential risks involved in participation in a march. It contained no mention of whether the event was authorized. Yet, according to the bill that was passed in Russia in 2012, the participants of unapproved protests face massive fines (Herszenhorn,

2012: para. 1). LGBT activists run double the risk due to the “propaganda ban”, and face possible sanctions for displaying LGBT slogans. The call had generated only one comment, in which an *AntiDogma* reader laconically summarized a feeling of unease: “*I somewhat chicken out :(.*”

Another example, on the contrary, showed how blog communication was used to coordinate an event and protect the activists. On May 17, 2012, an International Day Against Homophobia, the Russian LGBT Network, an NGO, was organizing a series of flash mobs throughout the country.<sup>17</sup> The organization posted on *AntiDogma* to inform its readers, who were also possible participants, about the legal support it arranged for the activists. The text read as following:

*Despite the fact that Rainbow Flash Mob neither a picket, nor a rally, nor a demonstration and not even a gay parade, and thus does not require an approval, in some regions of Russia police sometimes have questions to the participants.*

*Should an initiative group [local activists responsible for the staging of events in different cities] will not have a lawyer, group representative can call [Russian LGBT] Network lawyer and have an emergency advice. We ask you to write down a number of a lawyer who consults your Federal district specifically.*

Furthermore, the blog entry provided a list of telephone numbers and the names of legal advisers whom the activists were prompted to contact, were they to be confronted by authorities. The excerpt further illustrated the lack of confidence Russians have in the country’s legal system and law enforcement. Although the assembly law does not stipulate that authorization is needed for an event such as a flash mob, which is not a recognized political gathering, the weakness of Russia’s legal system cannot guarantee that the participating citizens will be not harassed by the police.

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<sup>17</sup> This is a global event known as Rainbow Flash Mob and is held annually on May 17 since 2009 with support of Russian LGBT network. Neither a political protest nor demonstration, it seeks to increase the visibility of LGBT community and promote tolerance toward sexual minorities. To participate in the happening, people are expected to gather together, bring a color balloon with a signed postcard attached to it, and fly it simultaneously with the others. At the end, participants usually take pictures of scores of colored balloons in the air.

Other instances of the mobilization practices also indicated the networked character of the global LGBT movement at large, and how web technologies help establish links between activists in various locations. An entry posted on behalf of the *Stop Trans Pathologization (STP)* campaign attempted to organize a worldwide event, *International Day of Action for Trans Depathologization 2013* by recruiting activists globally. The call contained brief information about the *STP* campaign, and the actions it previously staged. Most importantly, it provided contact information for anyone interested in organizing an event in their localities, to receive relevant information and starter kits.

This exemplified a wider tendency for *AntiDogma* to run as a dissemination/recruiting channel, and message amplifier on the part of formally organized activist groups. The amplification was achieved through the use of multiple online channels to distribute important information. The announcements of public events made on *AntiDogma* often provided links to the event pages on VK and Facebook. Readers were informed about specific hashtags they had to use were they to tweet about gatherings. The importance of such practices was demonstrated by Bruns and Burges (2012: 4), who argued that they created ad hoc publics around specific issues and events. In the case of *AntiDogma*, which is a relatively loose community with no strict boundaries and fluid membership, it contributed more generally to the “connective good, linking members of public together” (Thorson et al, 2013: 21).

### **7.3.2. Identity work in *AntiDogma* blogging community**

Since the Russian LGBT movement finds itself in the stage of formation, the identity work constitutes a crucial part of activist pursuits. The *AntiDogma* community also contributes to the general discourse of LGBT identity, the movement, and its overall goals. This section will look at the example of collective identity work, which illustrates how it can be directly integrated into public action and become crucial in deciding what discursive tactics are implemented by activists.



**“Provocation?”**

The debate, with a total of 74 comments, occurred after one blogger (1) posted a photograph taken at a rally against LGBT discrimination in Saint Petersburg. In it, a group of activists displayed posters with the following slogans: “[Bring] *Sodom in every home!*”, “*Sodomy unites!*” and “*Lesbians – the asset of Russia*”. Wondering whether it was a provocation on the part of activists (either pro- or against-LGBT) the author wrote:

*(1) Guys, who can comment on this photo from the protest [...]? Now, I get poked for it by homophobes with unconcealed malevolence, so I'd like to orient myself better in the situation and understand, what is was.*

The conversation that materialized from this entry produced an interesting instance of identity work, and how its discursive dimension can become intertwined with the more hands-on activist practices, such as demonstrations and protests. It revolved around the question whether the slogans were appropriate to use in support of an LGBT cause, and what kind of public message they were sending. In this sense, both the use of the posters and the discussion surrounding them, provide a vivid example of collective identity presentation, which offers “articulations or frames presented to audiences that are designed to convey messages about the lived identities of movement participants” (Dugan, 2008: 22).

As Einwohner et al. (2008: 4-5) theorized on the nature of identity work, it is always conducted with the consideration of the opposition between “us” and “them”. This dichotomy was already articulated by the author within the text of the blog. He distinguished community members by addressing them in an amicable and informal manner using a colloquial form of the word “*guys*” from the “homophobes”, who, in this situation, can be seen as both those hostile toward LGBT and outsiders of the *AntiDogma* community. Similarly, much of the conversation in the commentary section revolved around the differentiation between “us” and “them” as addressees of activist communication.

The positions on the slogans varied among the participants. On the one end of opinion spectrum were those who spoke in favor, and perceived them as amusing and clever fun. As some commentators put it:

*(2) The posters are cordial. No need to see provocation in everything. Neither should heterosexuals. There are jokes, banter and fun. We somehow completely unlearn to apprehend humor, for us everything is a capital offense. Enough of this hell )*

*(3) If an interlocutor doesn't understand irony – it's his problem.*

These remarks clearly meant to downplay the provocative character of the poster statements, and the possible antagonism with the mainstream society they could trigger. Moreover, they appeared to try to narrow the rupture between minority and majority by appealing to the universality of humor and that it must be recognized by everyone.

On the other hand, especially critical judgments came from the bloggers whose interpretation of Sodom was strongly affected by their religious sensibilities, and who felt personally offended. For example, when one participant asked (4) “*what is so provocative here?*”, another user exclaimed with perplexity:

*(5) It is strange to hear such question from a believing person!*

The stance can be summarized by this detailed response, in which the participant, in very concrete terms, described what they saw as a negative connotation of such a slogan:

*(6) Sodom is a very bad thing. It was when corrupted bandits raped, battered and killed people of both genders including children, infringed on personal immunity and sanctity of the home, broke the holy rules of human living together, such as hospitality. This has no relation whatsoever to LGBT.*

At the same time, some participants did not emphasize the religious meaning of the word Sodom, but were concerned with its overall negative undertone and particular application to express contempt toward homosexuals:

*(7) The word “Sodom” has certain negative connotations. No wonder that homophobes call gays sodomites – with the purpose to insult and degrade as much as possible.*

In other words, the critics of the tactic assumed the association which is made between the Biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the discourse of promiscuity which has long been used as a tool of dehumanization and stigmatization of sexual minorities (Klesse, 2005: 445).

In terms of activist strategy, they apprehended that slogans could be detrimental to the struggles of the LGBT community against discrimination. Many appeared concerned that statements could be used by homophobic commentators to “*prove the point*” that there is indeed a “propaganda of homosexuality” being proliferated by LGBT people and organizations in its most blatant, crudest form of instigating to engage in indiscriminate, immoral, and dangerous sexual behavior.

Some participants were well aware of the two-directional structure of movement communication, namely that some messages are circulated inside the activist community, while others target larger audiences outside the LGBT community, and that there is a difference between the two.

*(8) You understand, for joke to be a joke, and for banter – a banter etc., there must be certain mutual understanding between the authors of slogan and its addressee. Every agitational text has its target group. Not sure that it is thought through here – as a rule, people who are capable of understanding the irony of Sodom poster need not be explained that HS [homosexuality] is a variation of norm. Another (and major) problem is that such slogans can be easily used to demonize LGBT.*

On the one hand, the author (8) understood the humorous constituent of the phrase. On the other hand, he problematized the context in which it was used. In the passage, he made an implication that public rallies organized by LGBT activists are aimed at average citizens, who are more likely to have negative attitudes toward sexual minorities and would thus be angered by the posters.

Similarly, another blogger expressed disapproval:

*(9) This is stupidity on the photo. The action is "Rally to protect human rights and equality". How "Sodom in every home", "Sodomy unites" and "Lesbians are the asset of Russia" develop the topic? And whom are they addressed to? And once in the press – how do you expect a journalist to interpret them? "This is just a joke"?*

Many commentators were discontent, not only with the possible negative image of the LGBT community the posters projected, but also wished to avoid confrontation with the mainstream public, which they feared could increase the risk of physical aggression against gays and lesbians:

*(10) This is obviously humor. But stupid and dangerous, as many homophobes are already crazy.*

In some comments, the authors reproached the use of slogans and stressed their position as being allied with the traditional heterosexual norms. Not only did they not wish to challenge them, but they seemed to have a full acceptance of these norms, while at the same time feeling threatened by activists. One participant, a lesbian woman, wrote:

*(11) Why do I need a clever enemy if an idiot friend is enough. [...] Either they were paid for such open idiocy, or in every community there is a group of morons who need to be contained – all the same here, as normal people stayed at home with their families while these blockheads dragged themselves along [to the rally]. [...] Neither me, nor my friends will go to the rally. Because you don't want to be associated with inadequate jackasses.*

This commentary (11) offered an illustrative example of how LGBT people can “appeal to normalization in order to gain wider acceptance, tolerance, and so on” (Meeks, 2001: 329). Those are achieved by meeting the expectations that the heterosexual majority imposes on the minority for assimilation of the latter into the mainstream society. As Seidman (2002: 133) captured the conditions of the normalization of homosexuality: “Only normal gays who conform to dominant social norms deserve respect and integration. Lesbians and gay men who [...] choose alternative intimate lives will likely remain outsiders.” Thus are the appeals to traditional values of family, household, and so on which are set off against more radical LGBT discourse.

Finally, contrasting the comments that denounced the posters as unnecessary and even dangerous provocation, two bloggers turned to what seemed more like a deployment of identity for critique, which Bernstein (1997: 537) described as a confrontation of “values, categories, and practice of the dominant culture”:

*(12) Let's be liked by homophobes!*

*(13) They [posters] are splendid. Especially “Sodomy unites” (doesn't it? – how is it actually worse than “No war make love”? even better, because they're with humor) and “Lesbians – the asset of Russia”*

Both statements show no efforts to justify the slogans as a joke. The first one (12) is succinct, but it demonstrates its author's resistance to conformity. Nothing in the comment indicates whether he likes the posters, or agrees with their content. Yet, through the use of sarcasm, he rejects the idea that they should not be displayed in order to avoid provocation. In a slightly different way, but along the same ideological lines, the second commentator (13) employs the discourse of anti-normalization which “entails a challenge of dominant considerations of sexual morality and sexual normalcy” (Meeks, 2001: 330). While he acknowledges, and praises, the humorous aspect of the phrases, he does not attempt to downplay the messages they communicate. Most importantly, the author of the comment chooses the strongly

affirmative word “splendid” to describe them, and so explicitly shows his commitment to the perspective of anti-normalization.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION

#### 8.1. Summary

The final chapter will highlight the theoretical premises of this work, reflect upon its main findings, and outline the contribution it makes to the discipline of media and communication research. Theoretically, this study has two starting points outlined in Chapter 1. First, it considers the normative theory of the public sphere and its critique. Public sphere was proposed by Habermas (1989) as a realm of public life outside institutional politics and the market for citizens to come together in order to deliberate the issues of common concern. Public sphere understood as a network and a flow of discourses, is essential to the involvement of people in the political process. Following its critique, this work also concentrates on the notion of counterpublic as an alternative to the single public sphere which is briefly addressed in Chapter 1, as well as at length in Chapter 6. Counterpublics appear particularly useful in theorizing communication of a multitude of social groups many of which find themselves in the opposition to the dominant public sphere that represents social majority.

The second consideration of this dissertation is the democratizing potential of the internet in general, and of the blogosphere in particular, which has been attended to throughout this work. Various online tools offer citizens the mechanisms of direct communication with each other and with social institutions, such as political and media organizations, regardless of physical boundaries and limitations. Most importantly, the web gives ordinary people an array of opportunities to become involved in the public discourse. While formerly a monopoly of the mass media, the production and dissemination of media content is now carried out by non-professionals, whose motivation is very often rooted in civic impulses rather than financial gains. In this respect, the practice of blogging facilitates uncomplicated self-

publication of user-generated content while at the same time provides a channel of deliberation.

This is particularly important in countries where civil society is weak and the sphere between the private and the political is limited, of which Russia is a clear example. Chapter 4 offers a review of the Russian mass media system. It depicts the historical conditions of the mass media formation that supported a strong instrumentalization of news media by the ruling elite which, in effect, has restricted their critical potential as a watchdog for political power. Today, the main characteristics of Russian public sphere are banalization and commodification of public debate which does not serve as vehicle for the critique of the political system. Likewise, journalists in contemporary Russia experience a number of pressures adverse to their professional tasks. Along with economic challenges, a complex system of direct (e.g. legislation which limits freedom of expression) and indirect (e.g. pressure to editors and reporters in form of blacklists, recommendations, and curatorship) constraints impedes the work of media organizations as reliable news sources and political watchdogs. The official Russian public sphere is characterized by trivialization of public discourse which main purpose is to discredit any form of political dissent. It offers a facade of plurality while in practice maintaining the political status quo of the present government. In effect, Russian public sphere fails its key function of bottom-up communication between civil society and political institutions.

Empirically, this study is informed by the interest in a specific case of the Russian LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) blogging community hosted by LiveJournal, a platform whose political significance in the Russian context is illuminated in Chapter 4. As discussed in Chapter 2, discrimination against LGBT people in Russia is widespread, despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 and its medical depathologization in 1999. Living openly as an LGBT person is still fraught with various risks, ranging from prejudice to discrimination in the workplace to physical assaults. The state of human rights for sexual minorities in the



country has worsened recently, when the nationwide ban on “propaganda of non-traditional sexuality” was passed in 2013, which is broadly designed to cover lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships and to prohibit their positive representation. In effect, it deems any public campaign aimed at support of human rights for sexual minorities potentially illegal. Indirectly, it sends a powerful signal to the mainstream society that sexual minorities and their life styles are not welcome in the country and cannot be accepted by the wider community. One of the main consequences of pervasive homophobia has been that the Russian LGBT community has remained largely invisible in the mainstream media. It has been excluded from the general public discourse by means of silence reserved for any alternative discourse of sexual “otherness”. In this situation, the online sphere, still relatively unrestricted when compared to the largest national media outlets, remains a privileged space for LGBT citizens to participate in a meaningful conversation about their political and social status.

As mentioned above, the general approach of this dissertation was that of case study, which had a purpose of closely investigating a specific phenomenon – the Russian LGBT blogging community called *AntiDogma*. A loosely organized grassroots gathering of internet users, it simultaneously produces an issue public centered on LGBT-related topics and a counterpublic sphere, as it positions itself against the dominant public sphere and the hostile discourses aimed toward sexual minorities and promoted by the mainstream media. This study was set to provide an in-depth description of this community, placed in the context of contemporary Russian media system and widespread prejudice against LGBT citizens increasingly supported by official politics.

The analytical approach presented in Chapter 3 delineated three broad spheres of functionality for a blogging community in which it was hypothesized to be instrumental as a part of a larger Russian LGBT movement. Namely, it outlined:

1) *information and news production function* closely related to the phenomenon of citizen journalism; the intention was to discover how *AntiDogma* functions as an alternative news source which seeks to close the gap which exists in the mass media in relation to LGBT coverage.

2) *function of deliberative community building* associated with the perceived potential of the blogosphere to promote dialogue among citizens; as a counterpublic, *AntiDogma* is expected to provide an arena for deliberative communication for community members and foster the sense of shared identity and belonging. The study was set to analyze how the community building potential of the blogging platform is implemented in practice through a conversation guided by the norms of rationality, mutuality, and overall purposefulness. It assessed to which extent *AntiDogma* could function as a counterpublic arena.

3) *function of mobilization and coordination* is linked to a set of phenomena broadly described as online activism. Following this inquiry, the work has considered how blog communication can be utilized to symbolic and practical activist ends that strive for more citizen action in support of LGBT cause.

To examine how these functionalities are realized by blog authors and readers, the study applied the method of qualitative content analysis with the elements of quantification, which allowed for close consideration of the blog content, focusing on the language as a means to construct a social world and at the same time to make sense of people's experiences in it.

## **8.2. Citizens as news-makers**

Chapter 5 of this thesis has focused on the news-producing function of *AntiDogma*. Mainstream Russian media, and particularly the largest national Kremlin-controlled outlets, fail to provide adequate coverage of LGBT-related issues. Yet, news media carries the essential democratic function of informing citizens on

political and social issues, as well as influences the perceived importance of these issues (McQuail, 2010: 98). The absence of LGBT topics in the news is detrimental to the community, in the sense that it remains socially invisible, meaning that abuses of the rights of LGBT people, be it on the individual level of hate crimes or on the higher level of discriminatory legislation, go largely unnoticed by the general population (Gross, 2001: 12). In such situations, online communication becomes a vehicle for public discourse and an alternative news outlet that offers a selection of topics that are either ignored by the mass media, or offered negative coverage that intensifies the stigmatization of sexual minorities.

The mission statement describes the *AntiDogma* blogging community as an information outlet set to provide LGBT-related news among other things. The news media work of bloggers consists of focusing on the relevant events which were omitted by the mainstream media, and to close the gap that generates the invisibility of LGBT citizens. In addition, bloggers challenge their hegemony, defined by Gramsci (2011: 369 quoted in Liguori, 2015: 105) as ideology generally accepted as common sense, which is manifested in the stereotyping and demonization of sexual minorities. The most straightforward way to contest the hegemony of mass media is to engage in a public critique of their professional integrity. *AntiDogma* bloggers have offered a public commentary of mass media work, and have addressed specific examples of media content, e.g. television programs or newspaper articles, which were either deficient or damaging to the image of LGBT people.

Another logic of hegemony contestation is to reject the so-called metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984: xx) used for the authorization and legitimization of traditional beliefs and institutions, usually promoted by the mass media. Bloggers usually accomplish this by engaging in journalistic practices that concentrate on personal stories written in less formal language (Robinson, 2006: 73). Bloggers' experiences take central place in the news coverage, as the boundary between reporting subjects and objects gets blurred. Many *AntiDogma* bloggers were found to report the events in which they were active participants. For instance, in cases of protests and rallies, writing a

news piece about the event was often a part of an activist project: the author would help to organize it, participate in it, and finally write a report for a blog. This blurring of the boundary, however, does not mean that blog authors deliberately obstruct the truth. In effect, they balance out the perspective taken on LGBT issues by the traditional media. Most importantly, *AntiDogma* does what Gans (1979: 324) described as “encouraging people to develop opinions and to act as if the agenda items were relevant to their interests”. In this sense, within the LGBT audience, *AntiDogma* as a news source delivers a challenge to the normative order of Russia’s mainstream media.

Nevertheless, the complete break from metanarratives and media organizations that carry them was never possible, in particular due to the remaining dependency of citizen bloggers on mass media content. In a certain way, *AntiDogma* regulations reinforce these metanarratives as they apply traditional criteria of trustworthiness based on the outlets’ reputation: prospective *AntiDogma* bloggers are instructed to link to “reliable” media outlets. Similarly, throughout the organizational documents of the blogging community, such as the mission statement and the rules of commentary, high value was placed on “generally acknowledged” scientific discourses.

Lacking the resources available to the professional media, citizen bloggers, therefore, often fall back on the information provided by the mass media. To avoid this, bloggers can make use of networking tools by exploiting the vast wealth of information they provide in order to generate their own content. Social networks, in particular VK and Facebook, offer information about events and individuals, which is easily accessible to any internet user and which bloggers can use as sources in their posts. While the practice facilitates the work of citizen bloggers, it also prompts the question about the ethics of amateur reporters. Many private details become publicly available on social networking sites, and users may have little awareness of just how much personal information they disclose. Without editorial control and professional ethical guidelines, bloggers can engage in controversial news-gathering practices that not only yield unverified information but also pose threats to the privacy of users.

This oscillation between the efforts to challenge the normative authority of the traditional media and the remaining dependency on them corresponds to the overall character of the relationship between the mainstream media organizations and the myriad of amateur online news sources, which is one of tension and symbiosis (Singer, 2007: 88). It is the task of the bloggers to scrutinize journalistic work, dissect their stories, and question their biases. At the same time, traditional media maintain their dominant position as information providers (Trenz, 2009: 42). The case of *AntiDogma* shows that as an informally-organized news platform, it does not provide enough resources or structure to produce a stable, self-sufficient stream of information. It further supports the observation that in addition to bringing more diversity into the media sphere, blogs remain parasitic of the work of the mainstream media.

### **8.3. Deliberative community building in counterpublic arena**

Chapter 6 looked at how the *AntiDogma* blog served as a space for deliberative community building, and to what extent it meets the criteria of deliberative discussion, such as inclusivity, discursive equality, reciprocity, justification and reflexivity, plurality, and public concern (Kies, 2010: 42). It also examined the blog as a counter-public space that exists parallel to the mainstream public, and offers a safe space for subordinate groups to nurture the sense of identity and community belonging.

In terms of its approach to the organization of discussion among the users, and expectations about how the discussion is conducted, *AntiDogma* shows a clear inclination for a deliberative form of conversation characterized by overall rationality, civility, and purposefulness. In practice, it is an inclusive space where everyone can contribute their opinion without serious obstacles. The analysis of discussion topics showed that the community is oriented towards discussion of the matters of public concern rather than personal matters. Whenever the latter were made a subject of

debate, they were always contextualized in a manner that would establish their relationship within the broader concerns of the LGBT community. Following the maxim that “the personal is political” (Hanish, 1970: 76), the users of the *AntiDogma* blog embedded the discussion of personal matters in their political and social context of discrimination and inequality experienced by LGBT citizens in Russia.

The most important aspect, however, is that *AntiDogma* serves as a counter-public space, in which deliberative conversations are instrumental for the process of community building. The concept of counter-public encompasses an array of parallel deliberative spaces, which exist in relative opposition to the dominant public sphere (Fraser, 1992: 123). Counter-publics are crucial for discriminated minorities, because they offer a space of assembly where minority members can discuss their interests without interference of the oppressive majority and its order. They are set to foster the sense of community and belonging among its members, as well as advance the communication of group interests and offer critique of the mainstream society.

*AntiDogma* blogging community corresponds to the given definition of a counter-public. The analysis shows that it functions as a space of withdrawal and regroupment for its users (Fraser, 1992: 124). It brought together like-minded people and signaled the participants about the presence of others with similar stories and experiences, namely about the presence of a communal bond between the users. The overview of the discussions found that most people participating in them felt confident to initiate conversations with a considerable degree of candidness and disclosure. In this sense, *AntiDogma* provided a safe space for its members to voice their positions and speak about personal details, which would be extremely difficult to state safely elsewhere in the mainstream forum. The sharing of personal experiences and grievances in the form of testimonies appeared to be a routine practice in the commentary section. Both registered members of the blog and its unaffiliated readers showed enthusiasm about participating in a conversation.

Nevertheless, *AntiDogma* experienced a challenge usually faced by counter-publics, which is the need to oscillate between a protected enclave and a hostile

environment of the mainstream public (Mansbridge, 1996: 57). It balanced a high degree of discursive openness and inclusivity with the need to shield its users from possible aggression. The participants demonstrated a high level of awareness about the possibility of the community being penetrated by the hostile actors with the purpose of exposing people, for example from conservative, religious or other government-affiliated groups.

It is indeed the openness of the community and its aspiration to sustain an environment of plurality of opinion that potentially leads to its vulnerability. As a counter-public, *AntiDogma* still functions within the realm of Russia's mainstream online public, and in effect, can easily become exposed to assaults that are difficult to prevent. There are a number of rules for the commentary section that community members must adhere to in order to be able to participate in a discussion. The norms of politeness and civility of conversation help in the detection of open hostility, but they can also work as a mechanism of exclusion for individuals who follow different conversational standards, for instance, those favoring emotions and passionate language (Dahlgren, 2005: 148). *AntiDogma's* rules explicitly prohibit strong language and discourage its use in implicit form (e.g. when letters of explicit words are replaced with symbols). Furthermore, they encourage readers to use rational argumentation, cite scientific publications, and abstain from discussing the subjects of which users do not have sufficient understanding. As a result, the counter-public discourse is set to follow the same rigid structures of the dominant public sphere, which work to exclude the minority voices as irrational, emotional, ridiculous or absurd.

#### **8.4. Online mobilization and activism**

Chapter 7 of this thesis set itself a task to examine how a blogging community could be utilized as an activist platform. It conceptualized activist tasks on two levels. On the one hand, there are practical activist endeavors concerned with the material aspects of specific projects. These can be, for example, the logistics of citizen mobilization to participate in street action or online campaigns. On the other hand, it

considered the symbolic aspects of activist work conceived of by Snow & Anderson (1987) as *identity work* to develop the collective identities necessary for sustaining of the LGBT community and its movement.

The analysis found that the *AntiDogma* blog was instrumental in assisting both the material and symbolic activist realms, although its practical applications were limited. Lacking formal organization, as it is based on a relatively loose community of bloggers with open boundaries, *AntiDogma* appeared as a tool of dissemination and amplification for other activist groups with higher levels of institutionalization. These groups have tapped into the pool of *AntiDogma* readers, who share a common interest in LGBT issues, to prompt their engagement with activist campaigns.

Some entries demonstrated how the medium of a blog can be used for activist coordination to anticipate and possibly minimize the risks linked to participation in citizen action. Available legal assistance was publicized using the blog, and the protests were reported in real time to keep readers updated on the state of affairs at the site.

Overall, however, in practical terms it is problematic to consider *AntiDogma* a systematic activist project. It is characterized by an almost complete absence of formal organization, and could not demonstrate a clearly outlined set of tactics and goals pursued by its members. Rather, it has to be understood as an accumulation of scattered individual initiatives, whose contributions are emergent through interactive but random collective efforts.

At the symbolic level, *AntiDogma* provided a venue for identity work, where community members and readers could not only discuss the tactics used in LGBT activism, but also collectively reflect on the messages the community wished to send to the general public. The observations made by this study are in line with the previous research on identity work, in that community members engage in setting up various elements of the collective activist identities such as boundaries,



consciousness, and negotiation (Taylor & Whittier, 1992: 109). The users have demonstrated a high degree of awareness about the two-way directionality of activist communication, namely that the distinction has to be drawn between messages that target an audience inside the LGBT community, and those intended for the outside mainstream community. They were aware that the boundaries of the activist community have to be negotiated internally within the members of the community, as well as externally with the mainstream media, and society at large.

In alignment with the study by Adam et al. (1999), identity work on *AntiDogma* corroborated the idea that collective identities can be used in two ways. On the one hand, it is instrumental to the facilitation of what Meeks (2001: 329) called the assimilation of a minority into mainstream society when the LGBT community seeks acceptance and is willing to meet certain expectations of the wider community. On the other hand, there are also participants who supported the separatist approach and focused on the critique of the oppressive order of heteronormativity. It appeared that *AntiDogma* users did not have a universally shared understanding of how LGBT identity is to be utilized. Some bloggers insisted on complete “normalization” of sexual minorities, by emphasizing their similarities to the mainstream society and adopting heteronormative standards, articulated in their support for traditional values, especially that of family. Others have expressed their confrontational position toward the dominant community. They preferred to concentrate on the critique of explicit and implicit homophobic discourses which continue to deepen discrimination and prejudice, and rejected the conformity of normalization. This observed that divergence in ideological attitudes is important in the sense that the preference for one or another will dictate the morphology of activist action. Preferences for the ideas of assimilation or separatism will determine whether the activist community will pursue activist practices that are informed by consensus-seeking or conflict-ready behavior.

## 8.5. General notes on the contribution of this study

The present study looked at the media practices of the blogging community from several perspectives in order to examine how the grassroots blogosphere performs the media functions usually carried out by the professional media (McQuail, 2010: 98-99). A closer look at the content of *AntiDogma* blog entries demonstrates that as a non-professional media project, it does not allow for a clear-cut distinction between its different functions. The blogging community offered a vivid example of how the different functionalities become blended, and how it is increasingly difficult to set apart the realms of information production and dissemination, deliberation, and activism. Intentionally or not, bloggers appear to pursue different goals simultaneously when they put content online: they want to inform their readers but also spread awareness, to mobilize civil action but also deliberate its tactics and strategies.

Nearly all of the examined blog posts were assigned more than one media function, and demonstrate the close intertwinement between news delivery, community maintenance, and activism. In other words, citizen-produced content rarely appears as news in the stricter sense, and is often accompanied by commentary, polemics, and activist statements. This finding appears to support previous research on the blogosphere, which discovered that blogging practices tend to blur the line between objective and subjective and between facts and opinions (Robinson, 2006: 79; Robinson & DeShano, 2011: 978). This brings about the conclusion that the production and circulation of thematic news, although important, cannot be seen as the main function of a grassroots blogging community. It appears that function of deliberative community building is what bonds its members together. The conversation, argumentation, and commentary exchange between the members of a grassroots group all establish the connection between people, and stand for greater authenticity and transparency of communication.

*AntiDogma* serves an important function of bringing together like-minded people. Through the circulation of LGBT discourses in form of news, commentary, mobilization statements, and user exchange, it elevates sexual minorities from the sphere of invisibility created by the mainstream media (Gross, 2001: 12; Sonwalkar, 2005: 262). The blog signalizes its members about the presence of a community of people with similar views and shared values, and provides a safe space for interaction, which is a central function of the counter-public sphere (Fraser, 1992: 123). The problem arises, however, with the translation of counter-public interests as they remain ostracized from the mainstream society. Placed in a restrictive ecosystem of the Russian mass media, the *AntiDogma* blog will inescapably remain segregated from the wider community, with only a limited outreach beyond the grassroots media. The examination of the communication exchange between the readers has found that although they deliberate with enthusiasm, they always remain aware of the possibility that the community can be penetrated by hostile outsiders. Due to the need to protect themselves from possible abuse, the community always maintains a degree of seclusion and guards its boundaries. There is also a detectable anxiety among the users that the state might infiltrate the community's conversations in an effort to expose people's sexual orientations and views on sexuality.

Beyond this, the *AntiDogma* community is still faced with a monolithic and unresponsive official public sphere, which maintains its monopoly on symbolic resources and controls the stream of information between the civil society and the state. Analysis of the official public sphere in Vladimir Putin's Russia confirms its strong tendency towards the homogenization of public discourse, and the promotion of state-sanctioned agenda (Etlings, 2015: 279). At the same time, the more liberal, unofficial online public sphere remains too scattered, and is effectively rejected by the mainstream media (Chebankova, 2011: 335). This leaves open an important question about the existing power inequality in the Russian public sphere and the ability of the grassroots communities to push their agenda into mainstream discourse. The potency of the online blogging community as an intra-group communication channel is undeniable. However, its ability to narrow the gap between sexual minorities and the mainstream society is more problematic and remains to be seen.

## 8.6. Limitations and directions for future research

Future research should address the relationship between online communities and the mainstream media in greater detail. This is of particular interest with regard to sexual minorities in the light of restrictive legislation, which the Russian government imposed on LGBT-related topics. The research should look into the extent to which the mainstream media follows the “ban on homosexual propaganda” and restricts the coverage of LGBT issues. Next, it is important to study whether there is a detectable link between the more liberal online LGBT public and the professional media outlets. On the one hand, it would shed light on the problem of LGBT underrepresentation, and on the other, on the responsiveness of the mainstream media to the informal online public in general.

One limitation of this study stems from it being fully embedded in textual material rather than being engaged with human subjects. It is true that textual analysis as a method of cultural studies allows for the evaluation of content in its own right. Texts can and must be read as complex cultural and social artifacts that carry their own ideological meanings and become a part of larger narratives regardless of the intentions of their producers. Nonetheless, the possible shortcomings of this decoupling between the texts, their authors, and their audience must be recognized. In particular, the text-only approach can hinder the integration of the context of text production and consumption as a crucial moment in understanding of social phenomena (Philo, 2007).

Therefore, it would be worthwhile for the future researchers to direct their attention toward people, actual producers and consumers of the blog. Conducting interviews would shed light on many different aspects of activist media work. Personal conversations could offer important insights into the subjective experiences of being a media activist in contemporary Russia and dealing with attendant risks, as well as reveal bloggers’ intentions in creating content. Trust- building mechanisms between bloggers and readers could be explored in greater detail and their motivation

to produce and consume blog content could be studied. In this respect, an online environment offers a number of opportunities to directly contact authors and commentators in order to conduct interviews.

Finally, future research could apply a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach, which acknowledges the importance of both physical world and the emergent world of language, culture, and subjective thoughts (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004: 18). For instance, this would provide a better understanding of *AntiDogma* community as a network. Following this methodological paradigm, the analysis of hyperlinks within blog posts would help to explicate the variety of relations between the blogging community and other actors in the media system including other blogs and blogging communities, mainstream media, and social networks.

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