# CAN BIG TECH CONTRIBUTE TO BREAKING PUTIN'S CENSORSHIP?

INTERNATIONAL
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**Can Big Tech Contribute to Breaking Putin's Censorship?**

**Disclaimer:** This paper reports on the challenges for Russian independent media and civil society as experienced and expressed by the interviewees. The platforms discussed in this paper have distinct algorithms, policies, and feedback mechanisms but the interviewees may not have a deep understanding of these differences. This paper is reflective of their experience and of their level of awareness based on the information available to them. The aim of this paper is two-fold. First, it presents the perspective of the interviewees using their own voices. Second, it encouraged a dialogue around the impact tech company decisions can have on the current power imbalance between the Kremlin and Russian independent media and civil society. IRI will update the report and its annex(es) based on the new information pertinent to the issue.

> "Today, engineers can help journalism and society.
> **Today, free speech is a technology.**"[i]
>
> Dmitry Muratov, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and editor-in-chief of Novaya Gazeta.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, independent Russian media and civil society groups opposed to Russian President Vladimir Putin's war face persecution and censorship not seen in the country since the fall of the Soviet Union. According to the independent human rights group OVD Info, almost 20,000 people were detained in Russia for voicing an anti-war position. Some, like politician Vladimir Kara-Murza, were given draconian sentences of 25 years in jail for publicizing facts about the war, while others faced credible threats to their health and life. To date, over 250 journalists and media outlets were designated foreign agents or undesirable organizations[i], while only in August and September 2023 close to 8,500[ii] online resources were blocked by the state watchdog Roskomnadzor.

According to people interviewed for this report, international social media platforms and communication technologies quickly became practically the only way to deliver information to the international public and to Russians inside the country and informing the international public of the situation in Russia. Western tech companies took steps to comply with Western sanctions against Russia and mitigate the spread of Kremlin-backed disinformation, but those measures significantly hindered Russian independent media and civil society actors' work. Furthermore, research recently published by the European Commission shows that the Kremlin propaganda machine was able to significantly increase its reach on social media despite restrictions on some Kremlin-controlled media and their official channels.[iii] During research based on interviews with representatives of 16 Russian civil society organizations (CSOs) and media organizations, IRI found:

- All 16 interviewees reported at least one negative effect on their organizations' online presence after the war in Ukraine started in 2022. Fourteen respondents noted a decline in traffic and/or social media growth. The interviewees often could not explain the reasons for the decline in traffic.

- Six respondents reported problems with Google's search engine, which they had not experienced before the war. They noted that websites for independent Russian media either show up far down in Google's search results or are not displayed at all, even when direct quotes from their texts are entered into the search field. Google's Discover, a content recommendation service to which majority of Russian smartphone users are exposed to, did not find independent media content but did amplify Kremlin propaganda messages.[iv]

- Eleven interviewees said they lost critical access to software, online tools, and equipment licensed to Western companies.

- Eleven respondents said their organizations were not able to access or fully use some online advertising services.

- Most of the interviewees contacted their tech providers to address these issues, however, many cases were not resolved and when they were, the process was cumbersome. Western tech companies' stance on this issue, according to interviewees, was a combination of unawareness, indifference, and denial.

- Despite considerable obstacles, Russian independent media and civil society demonstrated a great deal of resilience and creativity in adapting to the new reality, in which they are squeezed between Russian state repression and businesses complying with Western sanctions or reacting to the start of the war.

An unfortunate consequence of this situation is that it reinforces the existing power imbalance between pro-democracy actors and authoritarian governments by depriving an increasingly isolated Russian society of its few remaining independent sources of information.

At the same time, we recognize that tech companies face difficult tradeoffs and technological challenges in dealing with these nuanced issues. With this research, IRI aims to facilitate dialogue between Western tech companies, Russian civil society, international governments, and the media to help mitigate these consequences.

# INTRODUCTION

Tech companies play a crucial role in modern society. Their products are important sources of information, organizing platforms,[v] transformative fundraising tools,[vi] and crucial for documenting and disseminating war crimes and human rights abuses.[vii] In 2023, half of the ten tech companies with the largest market capitalization were headquartered in the United States.[viii] Their decisions, policies, actions, and even inaction profoundly impact social and political issues in many countries. Digital tools and platforms have been transformative for independent media and civil society, giving them a way to reach citizens and navigate repression in societies that are sometimes described as closed or closing.[ix] Authoritarian governments also use and misuse tech platforms to spread disinformation, surveil their citizens, and crack down on free speech.[x]

In 2021, the year before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin attacked domestic independent media. The multi-pronged attack included laws against disseminating "knowingly false" information about the Russian Armed Forces punishable by up to 15 years imprisonment. Some reporters were arrested. Some fled the country.[xi] Independent media faced intimidation, as Russia arbitrarily declared some individual journalists and outlets "foreign agents" and some news organizations "undesirable." Websites of leading independent media outlets were blocked and the Meta platforms such as Facebook and Instagram banned in March 2022. Western sanctions were a rather sour cherry on top of all of this. Compliance and in some cases perceptions of "over-compliance" with sanctions,[xii] coupled with external advocacy, pressured information and communications technology vendors (e.g. internet, telecommunications, and cloud service providers) to voluntarily restrict or block access for users based in Russia and even users associated with Russia.[xiii]

In March of 2022, Access Now, which advocates for internet freedom and human rights online, sent an open letter to the White House calling on the U.S. government "to exclude the provision of services, software, and hardware incident to personal communications over the internet from sanctions."[xiv] The letter argued that limiting Russians' access to unfettered internet communications helped the government stifle independent voices. Access Now also pointed out that such exclusions were common practice in regard to sanctions imposed on Iran, Cuba, and Syria. Shortly after the letter was published, the U.S.[xv] government issued exemptions for internet communications services and related software, hardware, and technologies from sanctions against Russia. Access Now then successfully pursued a similar tactic with the U.K.[xvi] government.

The exemptions were an important development, but tech companies continued to pull out of Russia, with around 180 withdrawing, suspending, or scaling back their operations.[xvii] The effect of this exodus heavily contributed to increasing the reach and influence of Kremlin-sponsored disinformation. A comprehensive study published by the European Commission concluded that the measures applied by Western tech platforms to counter Kremlin propaganda were largely ineffective.[xviii] During the first year of the war, the audience for Kremlin-backed accounts grew by 31 percent as compared to the pre-

war period.[xix] The study posits that the absence of tech companies' systemic policy responses and inconsistent application of measures to counter Kremlin's online activity as the reasons behind the significant impact of Kremlin disinformation campaigns.[xx]

Russian independent media and civil society became collateral damage in the attempt of the Western tech companies to curb Kremlin propaganda. As pointed out by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: "Many other companies, including the international technology sector, are withdrawing from the Russian market due to reputational and legal risks, without necessarily taking into account the negative impacts on human rights of people left behind. This leaves human rights defenders and civil society organizations with little access to the information and communication infrastructure vital for their work."[xxi]

It is up for debate what role tech companies, especially the big tech giants, should play in the global fight for democracy[xxii] as they balance company profits and their reputations against responding to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, calls from governments, media and civil society.[xxiii] This paper aims to contribute to the debate by presenting recent experiences of prominent independent Russian journalists and civil society representatives. From June to August 2023, the International Republic Institute (IRI) interviewed representatives from 16 independent media outlets and CSOs both inside Russia and in the diaspora. IRI asked them to describe the challenges of trying to maintain and manage their online presence after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The questions focused on challenges connected to accessing online platforms, tools, software, and hardware from Western countries. The interviews were conducted remotely, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The quotes used in the report are from the interview transcripts, edited for brevity and represent solely the point of view of the interviewees. Findings of the interviews are supplemented with information from media and research publications. The report was reviewed and validated by thematic experts for accuracy.

# FINDINGS

Western web platforms and tools are very important to the operations of Russian independent media and civil society. All 16 organizations interviewed for this research use an array of them. Most commonly used social media platforms include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). Before the war, many independent media outlets whose websites were blocked in Russia relied on social media as their main platforms to disseminate content. However, after Russia blocked Meta, most interviewees shifted their focus to non-Western platforms such as Telegram, TikTok, and VK (VKontakte), Russia's version of Facebook. Given the heavy censorship on all of Russia's platforms,[xxiv] all the news organizations represented by interviewees still post content on Western platforms. For some interviewees, these Western platforms are a close second choice after Telegram. As far as Western tools, services and solutions are concerned, Google Search, Google Analytics, website builders, hosting and domain providers, content editing tools, and online collaboration solutions were mentioned most frequently.

After the invasion, 14 interviewees said they noticed a drop in traffic and/or growth on Western social media platforms. Declines ranged from significantly reduced numbers for a specific piece of content to drastic decline in visibility of their content of their whole channel or account. In five cases, the interviewees received notification that access to their content was restricted. In the vast majority of cases, however, interviewees said they got no notice and figured out something was amiss. These interviewees noticed an abrupt fall or lack of change in viewership, followers, subscribers and engagements on some platforms, accompanied by growth on others. They also posted content that, in the past, would have attracted substantial interest but now did not. They saw posts or videos which were gaining a lot of views and "likes" suddenly vanishing from recommendation features; sometimes this happened with entire channels.

Because of these challenges, interviewees were forced to spend time and resources fighting to hang on to the audiences they had instead of trying to expand. This, coupled with the organic process of people subscribing

and unsubscribing to social media, makes the future of these websites, and therefore these organizations' potential for outreach, uncertain.

> "Before the aggression [against Ukraine], we had an audience of 20 000.  Within 10 days before being blocked in Russia, we grew tenfold. I remember that number. And it was connected to the algorithms. Of course, they helped us, and our content was visible. In general, we have quite a cool way of presenting content on Instagram, we know how to work with their algorithms. But after the blocking [of our outlet's website by Roskomnadzor], it became more difficult [to continue to grow our audience]. It's understandable that the blocking itself had a strong effect, but Instagram started to hide us more. We generally had a very active and involved audience. These are followers, people who watch [us]. So [now], Instagram is showing us very little and [new] people come to us through reposts [as opposed to seeing content on their feed]."

The interviewees often could not confidently explain the reasons behind the experienced decline in traffic and/or growth, but they gave several possible explanations. Many complained that the algorithms of social media platforms and Google's search engine are opaque, complicated systems which change their formulas often and without warning, making data comparison over time challenging. In some cases, the respondents used screenshots to show changes in traffic, but several lacked the technical skills to retrieve data to support their case.

> "In fact, the YouTube algorithm is a kind of a black box, and no one understands how it works."

Ten respondents guessed that specific social media content may have violated tech company polices, which led to a drop in traffic. For instance, several respondents thought their anti-war posts, which included violent imagery or terminology often used by the Kremlin-backed accounts, may have triggered the ban. All of the interviewees expressed confusion and frustration with what they saw as arbitrary decisions by social media platforms. In five cases, interviewees said the platform notified them that their content was banned without explanation. In other cases, there were no notifications.

> "In the spring of last year, we almost simultaneously fell under a year-long ban on Instagram and Facebook. We got into this ban for [posting] anti-war content and our capabilities, both on Instagram and Facebook, dropped dramatically. Maybe not by an order of magnitude, but by several times. That is, our indicators dropped significantly on both platforms, and we were subject to those bans as a result of some complaints from bots, on the one hand, and on the other hand, after some automatic moderation services told us that the content we publish does not comply with the platforms' rules and policies. And again, that was anti-war content, but not severe to the point of violating any of these platforms' written rules. Sure, it certainly wasn't family-friendly or entertaining, it was anti-war and political, but it didn't contain any overt display of violence or calls for violence, or for any kind of armed action."

> "We also face issues on YouTube. First, we have an impression that it is also subject to suppression. Political content, strictly speaking, is suppressed. They don't really hide it much. Both on TikTok and on YouTube, we are simply seeing that objectively very interesting, exclusive content clearly does not generate views. This is very difficult to pinpoint because no one knows the algorithm that suggests your video to users, nor should anybody know it. That's a company secret and they cannot disclose it so that no one takes advantage. But we are seeing that streams with very high-profile guests, famous, with a very good presenter, generate absolute crumbs [in terms of viewership], while, for example, the same guest on another channel of the same size can generate a million [views]. There is an impression that if you regularly [publish] some kind of content about the war, especially the war against Ukraine, then the algorithms will not recommend you. Apparently, they are afraid of Russian propaganda, that it will slip in, and they suppress [the content] somehow."

Eleven interviewees believed that Russia may have been behind the drop in user engagement on Western social media platforms. Nine respondents said users may have decided to unsubscribe to avoid being targeted by the repressive laws passed by the Russian state after the start of the war. Five interviewees cited challenges regarding VPNs (virtual private networks): many Russians do not know how to use a VPN, and many cannot pay for Western VPN subscriptions due to the sanctions and resort to free yet much less reliable VPN options. Finally, three interviewees believed they were blocked after fake accounts or Russian bots filed a complaint.

> "There were two or three bot attacks, after which the account was suddenly bombarded with complaints, and they were about content that was there two or three years ago, and they [the social media outlets] were seriously limited, to the point of restricting access to the channel. That is, you cannot publish content for several weeks due to bot complaints about Covid-related content that was available two or three years prior. That served as basis for blocking them now. This has been happening for the last six months, and it is not over yet, because these bot attacks continue, and they receive strikes quite regularly."

Six respondents reported problems with Google's search engine. According to the interviewees, independent Russian media websites show up far down in search results or are not displayed at all. This is the case even if a user searches via a direct quote from published content. Interviewees say this is because Russia blocks their websites, and this results in the Google search algorithm downgrading them in search results.  Russia blocks most independent media sites, and this creates a vicious circle. Because people can't get on the sites, Google's algorithm interprets fewer users spending less time on a website as an indication of poor quality and downgrades it in future searches.

This all aligns with data recently published by Lev Gershenzon, one of the former heads of Yandex News.  Yandex, Russia's largest search engine is now fully controlled by the state.[xxv] Gershenzon noticed that Google Discover's news recommendation system systematically feature Kremlin-affiliated sources higher up in its recommendations, including outlets owned by sanctioned individuals. Blocking independent media and controlling Yandex allows the Kremlin to artificially promote outlets peddling propaganda. One example is Tsargrad.tv[1], known for its hard-core anti-Ukrainian, pro-Kremlin, and pro-Russian Orthodox content. The outlet's owner, Konstantin Malofeev, was sanctioned by the EU and U.S. in 2014, and it was blocked by YouTube in 2020. None of this has prevented Google Discover and search[2] from promoting it to over 23 million users in June 2023 alone.[xxvi] In Gershenzon's opinion, this is simply because of the way the algorithm works. Tsargrad's content attracts high numbers of referrals from Yandex Zen (Yandex's news recommendation service).  Google's algorithm then notes that Tsargrad is popular and recommends it on Discover.  Close to 90 percent of Russian smartphones operate with Android which come with Google products pre-installed by default[xxvii] so Google has unprecedented influence over the content Russians view every day.  It is bringing millions of users who remained inside the country to state-controlled propaganda sites daily which, in turn, expands their reach and boosts their revenue.[xxviii]

In addition to the concerns about search results and news recommendations, at least one interviewee from a prominent media outlet noticed a discrepancy between Google analytics data and data from another website performance tracking tool. Google showed a much smaller reach, despite the media outlet's expansion and audience on other platforms. This discrepancy appeared after the start of the war.

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[1] While Tsargrad.tv no longer surfaces on Google Discover (since November 2023), there is a large array of other media which amplify Kremlin propaganda narratives still prominently featured in the service.

[2] The statistics Gershenzon uses combine traffic from Google Discover and mobile search, because there are no publicly available statistics on Discover only. However, there are examples of popular Russian media, which Google stopped showing Discover in 2023 (Kommerstant and RBC) and whose traffic from Google Discover and mobile search sharply declined. This is why he links the bulk of the traffic in the available statistics with what is shown on Google Discover.

"Another problem is Google, which does generate some traffic, but it is almost impossible to find us in Google News. And the level of traffic that comes to us from Google is very low. At the same time, enormous amounts of traffic from both Google News and Google Discover benefit both [state] propaganda resources as well as trash ones that no one really knows. In other places on the internet, say on Twitter, independent media very confidently wins the competition with propaganda. We have seen that, whenever there is no particular censorship and people themselves choose what to read, they will not go for the Russia TV Channel or Channel One. In this case, why would all kinds of official information [sources] like TASS come up on the top of Google? This, apparently, is not a question of public interest, but a question of how the algorithm works. Just the other day I told this to [a person from] Google and it looked like it was complete news to him, like he was hearing about it for the first time. Let's see if they react to this. But for now, it looks like they understand everything, but they don't have much incentive to adjust these algorithms."

"This is a closed loop. As a blocked resource - we were blocked [by the state] back in October [2022] - we are faced with a situation where, because Google's algorithms do not take the blocking into account, they begin to suppress blocked sites. And this is a very big problem. We tried to contact Google. Search algorithms are the Holy Grail at Google. No one will ever touch them."

Eleven respondents noted an inability to access or fully use online advertisement services. Google[xxix] and Meta[xxx] blocked advertising in Russia shortly after the start of the war, as part of their effort to comply with U.S. government sanctions. Interviewees complained that they could no longer promote their content on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to target Russian audiences. Nor could they use Google Ads to bring readers based in Russia to their websites or monetize YouTube content watched in Russia. Moreover, several interviewees with legal entities and social media accounts registered outside Russia reported having issues using Meta's platforms, Google's YouTube or Twitter (now X), even for paid promotion of anti-war content that did not target readers in Russia, and a few interviewees said they were not able to use Meta's Ads Manager or Google Ads at all, though they were not sure why  access to these services was blocked for them. Combined with Russia's repressive laws, these issues significantly undermine independent media's ability to reach users and raise funds. Lack of monetization on YouTube also deprived independent media of a vital revenue source, as many independent media were outlawed in Russia and laws passed in Russia after the start of the war effectively make donating money to outlawed organizations a criminal act. For the same reason, advertisers fear buying ads from independent media outlets.

"They don't let us run ads. Not only are we not able to target Russians who are inside Russia, show to them the crying wives of the mobilized, people coming back disabled, not getting any money from the state, we cannot show any of this to the Russians. It hurts me a lot that Meta and Google do not let us target Russians with information. They are asking to stop the war. But at the same time, it's not like [we are complaining that] they don't give us a grant to show this, [or say] guys, show it for free. Instagram banned us from showing any advertising at all, even using our own money. This is a huge issue for me because I understand the potential of advertising platforms."

Eleven interviewees discussed losing access to Western software, online solutions and tools, and equipment critical to their operations and security. After their outlets were outlawed and Russian providers canceled their services, four interviewees said they could not find a Western hosting service. One interviewee stated that receiving TLS/SSL certificates ensuring a protected connection with the end-user for websites with a .ru domain remains a challenge. Several interviewees noted that Mailchimp, a mass email service, abruptly closed all of its Russian accounts. Many Russian independent media and CSOs lost entire databases of readers, supporters, and donors. The online collaboration platform Slack shut down just as many editorial teams were splitting up and scores of journalists were leaving Russia, as did Adobe, Windows and Microsoft Office. This lack of access to basic online tools is particularly challenging for independent media based in Russia or which have staff in Russia.

> "Mailchimp left in such a way that they said, we won't give you any databases or anything - that's all, and they didn't answer any letters. And that would be it for all the mailing lists. We had a copy on the website, so we saved all of it. But if we hadn't, we would have lost all our contacts altogether."

The interviews also revealed that many software packages will not work on equipment previously purchased in Russia. Also, a number of online solutions are reported to work only with a VPN, and if the user's VPN connection breaks, their account is immediately blocked. This happens often, given Russia's constant attempts to block VPNs and the prevalence of free less reliable VPN services. Independent media outlets registered outside Russia reported additional scrutiny from Western companies when attempting to purchase subscriptions to online services. One such organization which, like all independent Russian media, routinely faces surveillance by the state, had to provide a meticulous explanation of its work to purchase an account on the secure file-sharing service Tresorit. In-country and exiled respondents said they could not use their Russian credit cards to pay for Western software and online tools and services. In the past, Russian nonprofits could apply for free subscriptions and software, but since the start of the war many such programs, including the one managed by TechSoup, have refused to work with any Russian organization.

> "There is a problem with software. If a person is in Russia, it is very difficult to install software - it is impossible. Then what do you do, being in Russia, if you cannot install software that was bought in Europe for money? Microsoft Office, Adobe, software like that bought in Europe will not install on an old laptop that was purchased in Russia before. It's the same with Windows. Then this person gives up and goes [to a peer-to-peer file sharing torrent site] and downloads it. Otherwise, it is not very clear how to work, right?"

The interviewees adapted to their new reality by shifting to alternative open-source or free products and services, but these are usually less functional. Some respondents said they use pirated products as a last resort. Apart from functionality, free and pirated products, as well as old hardware, tend to be less secure.[xxxi] This exposes sensitive information to possible interception by the government, putting the journalists and their sources in grave danger.

> "The fact that an alternative exists does not mean it provides full capacity of the commercial product."

> "For example, yesterday we had a search at one of our authors' places. They came to search it, and seized the phone, but everything was fine. All the passwords there are generally good, but the computer is so old that you can only access it using a wire. The computer is so old that during this search, the cops didn't even bother taking it, because, they opened it, looked, and were like, we saw everything here, we know everything. This is a security issue for the people in Russia and their equipment, those who work with us on a regular basis."

Most interviewees attempted to contact a tech company to address these issues. Many of the cases were not resolved and the successful ones involved prolonged and frustratingly complicated processes. Eleven respondents said their email or chat messages were ignored, tech companies refused to change a decision, denied responsibility for decisions' negative effects, or time-consuming and complicated communication led to a dead end. Tech companies did address the concerns of nine respondents, however, most of these cases involved a long, burdensome, and confusing interaction. In most of the successful cases, the Russian media organization worked through an intermediary organization (such as Access Now), had a special connection to a tech company through a previous program or collaboration, or dedicated tech-savvy staff to manage the long and complex communication process. It is worth noting that a special connection to a tech company is rare and, for most of the organizations interviewed for this paper, staff are in short supply. No matter the outcome,

respondents complained of the long and frustrating time it took them to reach a human representative, then the correct representative, then justify their complaint, and finally, contest the tech company's decision.

Many interviewees confessed that, after trying to lift a ban or reinstate a subscription, they gave up and simply stopped using the platform or service. This, of course, impacted their reach and operations. One recorded example of a company's reaction is that of Mailchimp's. After Western media contacted Mailchimp to discuss its abrupt departure from Russia, a company representative declared that Mailchimp would make exemptions for Russian organizations opposing the war.[xxxii] However, interviewees cited in this research were not able to benefit from such an exemption, nor did they know how to apply for it.

> "We had a meeting with Facebook, where we talked about this problem. And they said: "Let's figure it out," they assigned a person who confirmed that, indeed, since June '22, our views suddenly dropped sharply to some insignificant level. And he confirmed that, in principle, it is impossible to explain this as anything other than an obvious limitation on Facebook's part. But no one inside Facebook could explain to that person what was happening. And then he himself was laid off along with a part of the team, and we still don't have any normal contact that would explain what is going on. At the same time, we were told that shadow bans[3] do not exist on Facebook and that if we were restricted, then we should receive information about the reasons for the restriction. But there were no messages, no explanations, and there was nothing to restrict us for. That is, in fact, Facebook has stopped working for us as a platform, despite the fact that we have hundreds of thousands of people who want to read us, have subscribed to us, and in general our material has always been quite popular. That is, we would now have grown, I think, to several hundred thousand [if it hadn't been for the issues cited]."

Several respondents said Western tech companies stated or implied that their service was restricted or canceled simply because of their affiliation with Russia. Nine out of 16 respondents noted that, in their experience or their colleagues' experience, the tech companies were not interested in acknowledging or understanding the challenges faced by the Russian independent media, much less in doing anything about it.

> "We lived there [on domain name registrar and web hosting company Namecheap] for a month; it was just a trial period. Then I was looking for ways to pay for it. In the end, I found an intermediary to pay for us. After the payment, they asked me for my passport for identification. It turned out that the transaction was somehow dubious to them. I sent them my passport, they saw Russian citizenship and, in short, wrote a letter saying they understand everything, but they are asking us to leave their hosting. I have already found an alternative, everything is fine, but I still decided to talk to their support. And the support responded according to their scripts. That is, when you reach out to customer support, they typically use prewritten scripts, saying things like, we condemn [Russian state actions], overthrow Putin, then we'll talk."

In addition to the challenges accessing Western platforms and services, many respondents brought up two other issues to add to the already complicated and dangerous task of reaching Russian audiences with timely and engaging content that counters state propaganda.

Seven respondents stressed the constant pressure of ensuring the safety and security of their staff, especially for those still in the country. The interviewees spoke about the need to protect their staff and contractors' identities, the need to use encryption on all devices all the time, the outdated security on the old laptops and phones used by many in-country journalists, their staff's limited knowledge of digital, legal, and physical security, and their need for cybersecurity experts and lawyers. Recent events such as the attempted poisoning of Russian

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[3] In this paper the term shadow ban is used as interpreted by the interviewees, namely, any observed drastic decline in visibility of their content without a notification from the online platform. The interviewees may not be aware how this term is defined differently by the platforms which tend to define shadow banning as the practice of blocking or partially blocking a user or the user's content from some areas of an online community in such a way that the user doesn't realize there is any sort of ban.

journalists and activists based overseas,[xxxiii] and the discovery of Pegasus spyware on a prominent emigree journalist's phone[xxxiv] signal that, even for those who left the country, security remains a daily concern.

> "Google distributed their own security keys to conference participants free of charge. We managed to take a certain number of keys and pass them on to people inside the country. But we would like more. Just to bring keys to the country and continue to give these keys to new freelancers. I tried to find out if it was possible to order such keys from Google for free, because our budget is, of course, very limited. The level of digital literacy in the Russian population, including journalists who remained inside the country, is quite low, unfortunately. And even those with a high level [of digital literacy] have very limited access to Western companies' services and products. They simply cannot afford to purchase them, and they can't pay for them, as the [debit/credit] cards do not work. If only there was an opportunity to get this product free of charge from Google for journalists and human rights defenders, that would be great, and then we would figure out how to pass them on to our people. "

Five respondents reported that Western sanctions turned basic financial transactions into a constant struggle. Examples of that included the inability to use Russian bank cards to buy Western products and services, including VPNs. They have a hard time paying employees based in Russia, can't open accounts on money transfer platforms for fundraising (e.g. PayPal), and they face challenges setting up fundraising operations for their new legal entities registered outside the country.

In addition, experts and independent actors fear that the Kremlin's policy of cutting Russians citizens from the Internet will continue, further reducing the possibility of reaching audiences inside the country.  The Kremlin has blocked Facebook, X, and most other Western media, but not YouTube. YouTube is immensely popular in Russia and is used by many independent media actors, including those who contributed to this study. Experts believe the Kremlin is migrating to a fully state controlled VK platform while preparing to cut off access to YouTube even for VPN users.[xxxv] If this happens, it will have a deleterious impact on Russian journalists' ability to inform their fellow citizens about the realities of the war.[xxxvi]

Despite considerable obstacles, Russian independent media and civil society has demonstrated a great deal of resilience and creativity in adapting to a new reality in which they are stuck between the repressions of the Russian state and the sanctions and actions of the Western businesses. However, this has depleted already scarce resources and often involved workarounds that only partially restored the lost functions. Most importantly, independent media lost a lot of their hard-won audience in the process.

# ANALYSIS

The negative cumulative effect of the issues described in the previous section on Russian independent media, the difficulty of advocating one's case with Western tech companies, and what it all means for the Kremlin propaganda efforts are main themes to emerge from the interviews.

The issues highlighted by the interviewees undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of the already struggling Russian independent media. All of the organizations that contributed to this research face state-supported intimidation and harassment. Many had their offices searched, their colleagues detained or jailed, and a few had their colleagues nearly assassinated. Most had to relocate all or some of their staff and their families to a different country on short notice. They had to re-group overseas when the Russian government outlawed their companies.

Despite years of ever-increasing pressure, Russian independent media remains determined to reach an
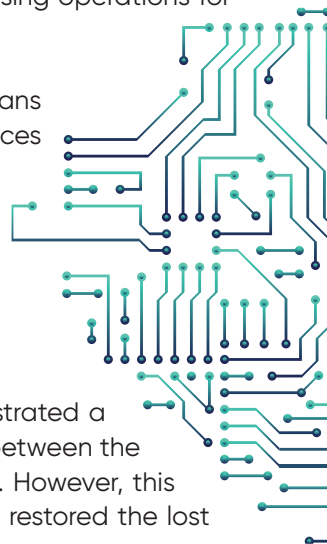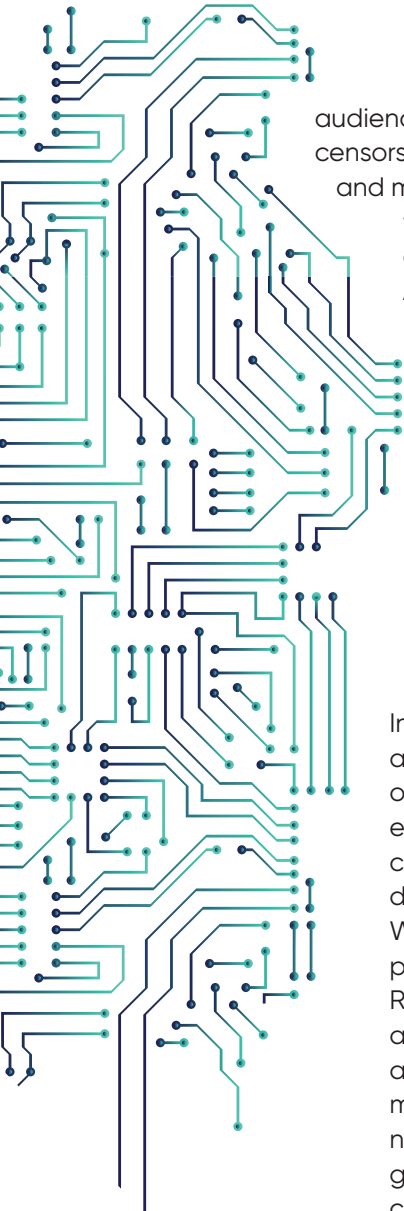
audience inside Russia. As they shift and diversify platforms to avoid Russian state blockages and censorship, they struggle to build and retain their audiences. Few Russian users have access to VPN and many are turned away by new repressive laws and show trials put on by the Kremlin. Even users who overcome these obstacles often do not see independent media content because it is downgraded, hidden, or blocked and because their content promotion options are restricted. At the same time, the independent media spend their already limited time and resources finding workarounds for the basic daily tasks necessary to produce content, securely collaborate with their teams, pay for essential services and products, and raise money for their core operations.

> "It would be great if we had a choice. Honestly, I don't see a choice. And no Russian media in exile really have any choice of whether to remain on a platform or not. We will, of course, stay on Instagram, that's our basic growth channel, a channel where we stay in touch with the audience. You could say our products take off on Instagram. This is more of a philosophical question. Will we gain new audiences or not? Will we just exist there, or will we grow, become a bigger outlet."

Interviewees who tried advocating their case with the Western companies found themselves at an immense disadvantage due to the following barriers. First, the interviewees of this and other research[xxxvii] observe that the algorithms of Western social media platforms and search engines are not transparent, and they change frequently. Interviewees perceive Western tech companies' policies and their application, most notably concerning blocked content and drastic declines in visibility of their content, as opaque and inconsistent. Finally, contacting Western tech companies, and getting a response, was described as an uphill battle.[xlii] Western platforms became even more important after the start of the war as the digital space for Russia's independent media and civil society shrank. Yet many interviewees said that opaque algorithms, policies, and communications made, collecting evidence about a problem and arguing the case with a Western-owned beyond their capacity. Most Russian independent media organizations operate on a low budget, especially since the start of the war, and do not have the resources necessary to take on the challenge. As a result, many organizations give up, leaving their content in limbo and difficult for Russian users to find. Moreover, even if a complaint is successfully resolved, it takes a long time, and outlets may not be able to deliver time-sensitive content to their audiences.

> "You need to try really hard to get out of a shadow ban completely, and communicate with everyone, explain 500 times. I've never interacted directly with Meta. And this makes this even more mysterious, because I have a feeling like I am talking to some leader at the top, who waves his staff so I can appear in the feed again. It's the kind of conversation where you do not understand at all what is happening. We have yet to receive an explanation as to why a shadow ban occurs. That's probably the main question. It seems to me all the media want to know why they got banned in the first place. What should you do to avoid it? Because Meta doesn't share how to avoid getting [shadow] banned."

> "Look at what kind of story you have: by all logic, it would be some kind of super hit video. It should be included in the recommendations. You understand how recommendations work, but you don't know the internal algorithms of selection. You have eyes, and you can observe, but it doesn't get recommended. If you contact the company, they say well, probably, it just wasn't interesting. At the same time, those who have fewer views make a hit, and you don't. That's the main problem of interaction on this topic, which is very difficult to prove, because they say, well, 'that's how algorithms work.' How's that?"

Interviewees said they feel that Western tech companies tend to treat these concerns with a lack of awareness, indifference, or denial. Russian independent media and civil society get a disappointing message that tech companies are not willing to distinguish between those who support the war on Ukraine and those who oppose it. And this is despite the latter putting their safety and freedom on the line to do so.

> "We are stuck. As an example, we are based in [European city name], we publish our content here, develop our content here, but it is Russian language content targeted at Russian audiences, and it seems YouTube doesn't understand how to interact with us, and the Russian office doesn't exist anymore. But the local office in [city name] doesn't know what to do with us, who we are, why we exist. As a result, that office doesn't understand our issues at all. Their communication is bad, they don't respond to our attempts at interacting."

> "With Google, we just need to invest significantly more [effort] in this entire situation, because we had a conversation [with Google] at an event last year, where I said: "Guys, what are you doing there? There is a lot of propagandist trash on YouTube. This was a total surprise to the person representing Google. Two weeks later, YouTube removed 500 propaganda channels. So, they are completely reactive in that respect. Someone says something at an event that they cannot evade, then they react. I think they should be more proactive, have a clearly stated position on disinformation. But we are not seeing that."

The main consequence of the situation described in this report is that the challenges independent media experience in getting reach for their content unintentionally benefits the Russian state who has more resources to amplify its propaganda efforts and stifle independent anti-war voices. A case in point are reports that show Google's news and discover continues to recommend Russian-owned or affiliated sites which sends millions of readers and revenue to those entities.[xxxix] The under-resourced, understaffed, largely exiled, and perpetually persecuted Russian independent media lose their hard-won in-country audience almost by default.

> "YouTube says there's a war going on, so we don't want to support the Russian economy. We don't want to have any relationship with it and therefore, we are turning off monetization. Well, for the authorities, this is not a problem, because they have Channel One, they will convey propaganda. Or other channels – in Novosibirsk, in buses, ordinary shuttle buses, they advertise war and contract military service and call for rallying and winning against Ukraine. That is, the authorities have mechanisms to get to people.  For the authorities, YouTube's loss is not a great loss. But, for the opposition, YouTube or Instagram were very important platforms, in fact, the only ones. The authorities didn't really notice when YouTube turned off monetization, apart from some taxes. But for the channels of some media that speak the truth, for alternative media organizations, for social movements, disabling monetization is a significant problem. They are on their own, they can't promote their point of view and their agenda, they don't have other means. And this is literally sawing off the branch democratic organizations are sitting on. That is, it harms good people and helps bad people. And there are only few who understand this."

# CONCLUSION

Western tech companies often position themselves as above politics and claim to have a neutral stance. However, as this research shows, this just reinforces the existing power imbalance between pro-democracy actors and authoritarian governments, which expend significant resources on online tools and platforms. Given governments' considerable reach and influence of their communications, Western tech companies' hands-off approach has a clear adverse effect: it deprives an increasingly isolated Russian society of its few remaining independent sources of information.

In previous written statements as well as in interviews conducted for this paper, the independent media and civil

society representatives have repeatedly called on Western tech companies to take a clear stand on supporting democracy. This requires them to make their policies publicly available and their actions more transparent.[xl] This request runs up against conflicting economic, technological, and operational demands facing the tech sector, but hopefully this report will encourage further dialogue between Western companies, Russian independent media and civil society, and international governments about how to potentially improve the existing power imbalance. This dialogue is particularly important now, as Russia is likely headed toward complete isolation from the global internet. Without the expertise and resources of Big Tech, democracy risks losing yet another major battle.[xli]

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# RESPONSES FROM TECH COMPANIES TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE

While this report focuses mainly on the experiences of Russian independent media with online platforms following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, IRI is grateful for the collaboration with Google and Meta to share more about the steps they have taken and how their platforms work in general.

Every platform is different in how it surfaces content, its rules, and how it enforces them. What follows are responses provided by each platform to the issues our partners reported.

## GOOGLE

We're continually improving our products in the face of a constantly evolving information ecosystem. This is an ongoing challenge and our teams are absolutely committed to continuing our work in this space.

Discover is a part of Google Search that shows people content related to their interests, based on their Web and App Activity. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, we've significantly limited how Russian state-funded media outlets are surfaced across our platforms, including Discover, globally.

Through these and other efforts, we've continued to raise the bar on the quality of information available on Discover.

We also note the report refers to a third party traffic counter to infer traffic volumes from Discover to certain websites.  The relevant counter appears to combine traffic from Discover and Search, a query-based surface which provides links in response to user requests. The report therefore likely overstates the extent to which Google (via Discover) proactively surfaces links. Some sites discussed in the report do not surface on Discover.

More information about our products and approaches to these issues can be found at the following links:

- Blog: New ways we're supporting Ukraine (December 2022)
- Blog: Helping Ukraine (March 2022)
- YouTube channel monetization policies: Note the timeline updates at the top of the page regarding advertising systems in Russia. Additional information is available via our Publisher Policies
- Overview of how YouTube's recommender systems work (Sept 2021)
- Tackling misinformation during world-changing moments (May 2022)
- The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 2: Raising authoritative content and reducing borderline content and harmful misinformation (Dec 2019)

## META

Meta's Ongoing Efforts Regarding Russia's Invasion of Ukraine
How Does News Feed Predict What You Want to See?
Our Approach to Facebook Feed Ranking
Labeling State-Controlled Media On Facebook Transparency Center

## OTHER ONLINE PLATFORMS

From March 1, 2022, to April 12, 2022, the Technology and Social Change project kept up to date a tracker looking at social media takedowns and content moderation about the Russian Invasion of Ukraine.