Why many Russians have gladly agreed to online censorship

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Credit: Wikipedia

The Russian government has persuaded many of its citizens to avoid websites and social media platforms that are critical of the government, a new study has found.

Researchers analyzing a survey of Russian citizens found that those who relied more on Russian national television news perceived the internet as a greater threat to their country than did others. This in turn led to increased support for online political censorship.

Approval of the government of President Vladimir Putin amplified the impact of those threat perceptions on support for censorship, according to the study.

The success of the Russian regime in persuading citizens to self-censor their internet use has troubling implications, said Erik Nisbet, co-author of the study an associate professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"This is actually more insidious. The government doesn't have to rely as much on legal or technical firewalls against content they don't like. They have created a psychological firewall in which people censor themselves," Nisbet said.

"People report they don't go to certain websites because the government says it is bad for me."

Nisbet conducted the study with Olga Kamenchuk, a visiting assistant professor, and doctoral student Aysenur Dal, both from Ohio State. Their results appear in the September 2017 issue of the journal *Social Science Quarterly*.

The researchers used data originally collected by VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) for the Internet Policy Observatory at

the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School for Communication.

For that project, researchers surveyed 1,601 Russian citizens during May 2014 about their internet and media use, risk perceptions about the internet, support for online political censorship and support for the Putin government.

Ohio State's analysis of the survey responses showed that people who relied most on the official government TV news were more likely than those who used other media sources to see the internet as a threat. These viewers were more likely to agree that the internet was used by foreign countries against Russia and that it was a threat to political stability within the country.

Not surprisingly, those who saw the internet as a threat were also more likely to support online censorship.

Support for Vladimir Putin significantly strengthened the relationship between seeing the internet as a risk and supporting online censorship, the study found.

"Government authorities have convinced many Russians that censoring content labeled as extremist protects the population from harm, while at the same time failing to mention that this label is often applied by authorities to legitimate political opposition or opinions that run counter to government policies," Kamenchuk said.

The Russian regime uses its official news outlets, particularly television, to spread fear about anti-government sites. The regime often uses graphic metaphors to sensationalize the risk of some internet content, according to the researchers.

For example, the government has compared some websites it opposes to

suicide bombers and tells citizens its response would be to use internet control and censorship to create a "bulletproof vest for the Russian society."

Kamenchuk said Russians don't have to rely on these official government news sources.

"There is opposition TV, radio and newspapers in the country that are not blocked. People can find them freely. But our studies show that many deliberately choose to ignore those outlets," she said.

Even blocked websites can be accessed through technical solutions that aren't difficult to find in the country, even if they are illegal, Nisbet said.

"But it is tougher to circumvent that psychological firewall than it is the legal or technological firewalls. How do you circumvent the mindset that censorship is good?" he said.

Russia isn't alone in persuading citizens that the internet can be dangerous. Many authoritarian governments, such as Turkey, have labelled opposition websites and social media platforms as a threat, the researchers said.

Despite the importance of self-censorship in countries like Russia, most studies have overlooked the issue, Nisbet said.

"Much of the academic research on the subject comes from the United States, where there is a lot of support for free expression and internet freedom," he said. "But the U.S. is an exception in this regard, and not the norm. Much of the world is much more supportive of censorship than is the U.S."

These results also mean that the United States needs to adjust how it

pursues its goal of increasing internet access and freedom around the world. The U.S. State Department has allocated millions of dollars to promote [internet] freedom, primarily in the areas of technology for getting around censorship.

"That's not going to help a lot if people agree with the [censorship] and don't want to use these tools," Nisbet said.

More information: Erik C. Nisbet et al. A Psychological Firewall? Risk Perceptions and Public Support for Online Censorship in Russia*, *Social Science Quarterly* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/ssqu.12435]

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