Fighting propaganda with censorship: A study of the Ukrainian ban on Russian social media

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In March 2022, Russia took censorship to new extremes, blocking access to Facebook and enacting a law that threatened to punish coverage of its war on Ukraine with forced labor and imprisonment. To what extent does censorship actually reduce activity on banned media among different societal groups in the context of international conflict?

A new study published in *The Journal of Politics* examines this question by exploring the effect of a 2017 Ukrainian ban on online activity among Russian social media users with close affiliations to Ukraine and Russia.

Authoritarian and nonauthoritarian states alike use censorship to police cyberspace, notes author Yevgeniy Golovchenko in "Fighting Propaganda with Censorship: A Study of the Ukrainian Ban on Russian Social Media." In recent years, an increasing number of European states and tech firms have used it to combat digital disinformation and foreign interference.

Even before the Russian attacks in 2022, Ukraine offered some of the most extreme examples of censorship used to respond to information war and online propaganda from abroad. In 2017, the Ukrainian government issued an executive order that forced internet service providers to block access to major Russian websites, including VKontakte, the second most visited social media platform in Ukraine. The Kremlin's control over Russian social media was one of the reasons why the Ukrainian government viewed the VKontakte ban as a national security measure against Russian propaganda and surveillance.

Censorship may successfully limit overall access to information, or it can backfire and draw attention to the "forbidden" or political outrage. "Even if a government succeeds in partially reducing the overall online activity on forbidden media, the ban may backfire if the supporters of the regime become less active on the censored platform than the opposition," Golovchenko writes. "The government would risk making the opposition more prevalent on the platform than the supporters of the regime."

Golovchenko uses publicly available data from VKontakte and a natural experiment research design to estimate the causal effect of the ban on online activity among different user groups. The findings indicate that a vast majority of Ukrainians on VKontakte could circumvent censorship by logging on through tools like VPN. However, the Ukrainian government still succeeded in reducing the overall online activity among Ukrainians on the Russian platform. "Government attempts at curbing Russian influence reduced the wall posting activity on VKontakte among users with pro-Russian attitudes at least as much as among pro-Ukrainian users," notes Golovchenko, who found the same pattern when comparing citizens in Ukraine with few social ties to citizens within Russia versus those embedded in the Russian social network.

Even without legal repercussions for circumventing the ban, the increased access time and effort is enough to disrupt online activity among pro-Russian (and pro-Ukrainian) users, who would instead shift to cheaper and more accessible alternatives. "In other words, the accessibility of the media appears to play a much more important role in the decision to use censored social [media](link) than do politics or [social ties](link) with citizens in the hostile state," Golovchenko writes.

"The results are favorable from the perspective of the censor, who wishes to combat foreign propaganda and disinformation by using one of the most drastic countermeasures available," he writes. He went on to

speculate, "If Russia were to use its newly upgraded censorship infrastructure to ban Facebook to prevent foreign influence, one would expect the ban to be successful from the point of view of the government if Russians were to respond in a similar manner as Ukrainians have." Now that such a ban has come to pass, the effects of its harsher censorship remain to be seen.

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