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Nation Branding and Internet Governance: Framing Debates over Freedom and Sovereignty

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Introduction

Scholarly inquiry into the dynamics of internet governance is dominated by attention to its legal and regulatory implications. In the United States, internet research centres at many major academic institutions are hosted by law schools.[1] However, the law affects not only legal relations but also social ones, and the question of who controls the internet concerns many principles of action outside jurisprudence and policy. In this chapter we examine the extent to which the communications structures articulated by states (as well as other actors, including corporations, activist groups and non-governmental organisations) are integral to the ongoing struggle to determine rules of engagement on the internet. In particular, we consider the role of national 'branding', or the use of strategic communication by national elites to create and communicate a particular version of national identity for international audiences.[2]

As debates over internet governance have escalated around the world, state leaders have sought to contribute their particular national perspective, hoping to influence an outcome favourable to their jurisdiction. Creating an internet strategy has become a critical component of states' broader approaches to international communication. Nation branding consists not only of conveying a positive national image and set of national values to an international community, but also of developing what Monroe Price calls 'strategic architectures of media and information systems'[3]: large-scale, systemic attempts to control or regulate patterns of information access, distribution and expansion to achieve various national objectives.

Attempts by states and other powerful state- and non-state organisations to control global media and information flows obviously did not originate in the digital era. Neither did the strategic narratives these

institutions wield to garner support for, and/or suppress opposition to, their motives and interests. But the particular types of globality engendered by the internet have contributed to greater convergence of geopolitical, technical, and economic concerns, even as they have given rise to distinct cultural and political visions of how to resolve such concerns. As other chapters in this volume attest (see Oster's and Warf's chapters), there is a clearly demarcated geography in cyberspace, one that requires attention to the political and cultural contexts in which debates over internet governance take place. Disparate national responses to the issue of internet governance have manifested themselves in recent debates over censorship, privacy, e-commerce, and information leaks, among many others. The widespread tendency to view the internet as a borderless space has infinitely complicated the discourse around internet governance, even as it has reinforced the continued importance of national borders and boundaries in international policy.

In this chapter we demonstrate the intricate relationship between internet governance and nation branding by examining how two dominant normative frameworks for internet governance – 'freedom' and 'sovereignty' – are strategically deployed by national leaders. Our aim is to reveal the discursive bases of transnational power.' To be clear, we do not mean to reduce the complexities of internet governance to an either/ or proposition; as we discuss later in the chapter, there are important problems with conceiving of these as opposing perspectives. Rather, we wish to convey how this binary is deliberately constructed by political decision-makers as a means both to identify allies and opponents and to align national values with internet policies.

To further explain the relationship between internet governance and nation branding, in the next section we provide an overview of the nation branding phenomenon and its key characteristics. We then examine three current instances in which discourses of nation branding and internet governance intersect, reviewing the uses of strategic narratives of legitimacy in Estonia, Russia and the United States. We close with a brief discussion of the role of communication in global governance debates.

Nation Branding

Nation branding is a form of strategic communication adopted by national elites and related decision-makers to communicate national priorities among domestic and international populations for a variety of interrelated purposes. At one level, it is a conscious strategy of capital

(re)generation, combining private and public sector resources to generate fiscal advantage. As such, its aim is to help the nation state successfully compete for international capital in areas such as tourism, foreign direct investment, import-export trade, higher education and skilled labour.

A second dimension of the practice is to convey an image of legitimacy and authority in diplomatic arenas, to earn state leaders and other national elites a seat at the table in multilateral decisions, for instance, or membership in transnational organisations. As Price explains, the nation state is engaged in ongoing positional power struggles, and is defined largely by its capacity 'to exercise authority in a world in which the large-scale strategic communication of others (including other states) becomes a defining factor in establishing a state's legitimacy'.[6] Nation branding is therefore adopted by states to model their singular rights and powers while diminishing challenges to these powers by other voices. In this capacity, it can be used for both proactive and reactive purposes: to repair reputations damaged by political and economic legacies, to dodge unfavourable international attention in the aftermath of unpopular domestic decisions, or to control and manage impressions in case of unforeseen or unpopular world events.

Third, the phenomenon serves a recursive function. By modelling national distinctions internationally, national leaders hope to generate positive foreign public opinion that will 'boomerang' back home, fostering domestic approbation of their actions and sowing pride and patriotism within the nation's borders. This helps to explain another appeal of this process: its professed ability to render the stakes and claims of nationalism less antagonistic or chauvinistic than its previous incarnations. Nation branding is a form of soft power. The public articulation by national leaders of a conscious strategy that draws on their jurisdiction's territorial, cultural, commercial and geopolitical specificity is seen to yield greater results than the narrower conception of traditional power resources.

Although attending to a nation-state's 'brand' along these lines has clearly become a growing concern in political and diplomatic circles, it is important to recognise the limitations of this practice. Nation branding is at its core an essentialist project meant to reinforce the 'natural' social and political form of the nation[7] and maintain an artificial symmetry between nation-state and society. Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, it is also an elite project that does not necessarily reflect the will of its jurisdiction's citizens. It is crucial to distinguish the ongoing need for national institutions and solidarities[8] and the methodological nationalism that attends (and obscures) much internet governance discourse.

We are not suggesting that nation branding is a 'false' narrative or a purely manipulative practice. It is part of the work of nationalism in the contemporary era.[9] But it is important to remember that nation branding is designed to gain consensus among relevant parties for the speaker's views, and to create or deepen norms that favour the narrator, often while destabilising local practices.[10] Such 'narratives of legitimacy' do not seek to communicate transparent national 'realities' but rather attempt to successfully persuade an audience that the national speaker's version of the concepts is the most legitimate one.[11]

In the context of contemporary communication systems, where information is a prime commodity and source of value, the 'reality' of a situation is established via the availability and ubiquity of information, not via universal truths. Consider, for instance, how the concepts of 'free expression' and 'collective self-determination' are wielded in debates over internet governance.[12] While no entity would deny the value of either, these two concepts are represented very differently by different interlocutors (e.g., states, corporations, NGOs) and in different spatiotemporal and geopolitical contexts (e.g., the United States, Russia, the internet). The very open-endedness of these two core national values, free expression and collective self-determination, is what renders them so central to the global internet governance debate among nation states. This debate is often described as a struggle between advocates of internet freedom and defenders of internet sovereignty.

In the next section, we draw on the internet governance strategies of three nation states (Estonia, Russia and the United States) to demonstrate how states deploy the same values for very different ends as part of their nation's 'brand.' Not surprisingly, the United States dominates internet affairs. After officially pronouncing internet freedom its 'national brand' in 2010,[13] the United States has promoted this foreign policy agenda through formal and informal international platforms. The Estonian and Russian cases present two radically different responses to the U.S.-led project. Estonia, renowned for its integration of the internet into domestic politics and society, actively partakes in the rhetoric and institutions supporting internet freedom. Russia, on the other hand, lobbies for internet sovereignty, a strategy that attempts to change the power balance of internet geopolitics by decreasing American influence and increasing the role of countries with differing socio-political agendas.

Nation states adopt internet governance policies for reasons partly strategic and partly practical. Strategically, the ability to promote an

internet policy discourse (whether couched in terms of 'freedom' or 'sovereignty') is vital to a nation state's domestic and international legitimacy. As the internet cuts across spheres of commerce, communication/information and citizenship, it becomes ever more vital for national governments to take steps that demonstrate their awareness of the particular impacts of internet regulation on their populations. In other words, to articulate a concerted strategy for dealing with the internet, one that reflects the jurisdiction's national values and attitudes, is itself a form of political legitimacy, whether or not the strategy is in fact enacted.

More practically, the rise of cyber-partnership statements and internet sovereignty manifestos reflects the very real relationship between territorial governance and cybergovernance (see Kohl's Chapter). Geopolitical power dynamics are as relevant on the internet as they are offline; and like offline international politics, they include a wide range of actors, institutions and intermediaries beyond governments.[14] Power struggles over internet regulation are clearly not only about legal or technocratic exchange but also about social, political and economic considerations, because changing the technology's architecture changes the politics it constructs and creates possibilities for different forms of exchange.[15]

Freedom versus Sovereignty: Internet Governance Contests

'The contest for internet governance has become a quasi-Olympic sport',[16] and the two strongest competitors are the ideologies of 'internet freedom' and 'internet sovereignty.'[17] The United States is the leading proponent of the freedom agenda; China and Russia are the most influential champions of the sovereignty paradigm. Below, we outline the normative claims of both narratives.

The internet freedom agenda posits that borderless access to the internet is fundamental to the spread of individual rights and liberties, and that government-imposed restrictions to the free flow of information online are violations of such rights. Proponents of internet freedom base the legitimacy of their position, first, on the notion of universal human rights,[18] and second, on the alleged inherent values of internet technology, such as openness and globality.[19] The human rights argument draws on a longer history of civil liberties of individual choice, freedom of expression and access to information. This logic sees the internet as inherently uncontrollable and therefore the perfect embodiment of liberal democratic values; so much so that, in 2011, the United Nations

Report on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression proclaimed access to the internet a human right in and of itself.[20]

Other proponents of an internet freedom framework refer to the internet's origins, with its 'early promise of unfettered and borderless global communication'.[21] The internet was originally built by the engineering community and based mainly in U.S. university laboratories around the ethos of openness (i.e. willing to accept almost any kind of computer or network), minimalism (i.e. required very little of the computers wanting to join), and neutrality (i.e. treated any type of early application the same) – without physical geography in mind.[22] The rampant commercialisation of cyberspace from the mid-1990s and deeper government involvement as of the early 2000s have altered the fundamental workings of this space. Then as now, the narrative of the internet's essential and natural values is misleading. As with any technology, the internet is a social construct, the architecture and values of which change over time[23] – partly as a result of the actions of governments who claim to defend unrestricted flows of information online. National governments persist, however, in promoting an internet freedom agenda on the basis of the internet's mythic origins, an argument made even weaker by the impact of the dramatic changes this technology has undergone in the past twenty to thirty years, such as the online controls and surveillance built into security governance regimes.[24]

Internet freedom advocates propose a multi-stakeholder governance model: 'participation in intergovernmental policy deliberations by representatives of NGOs, businesses, and other interested parties alongside governments – sometimes as peers of governmental representatives, but more often in consultative or advisory roles'[25] (see Scholte's chapter). While presented as democratic and inclusive by its proponents, some see multi-stakeholderism as 'the façade of an apolitical negotiation' benefiting established actors, such as the United States, who already control internet infrastructure and host the world's most powerful digital companies.[26] The United States and other major Western powers support the multi-stakeholder model to uphold their leading roles in shaping global Information and Comminications Technology [ICT] norms and policies.

Unlike the internet freedom narrative, which prioritises human rights over national security concerns, the internet sovereignty discourse places questions of information protection, cultural autonomy, and national security at the forefront of its political program.[27] The International Code of Conduct for Information Security, proposed in 2015 to the United Nations by the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

(China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), can be viewed as a manifesto for the internet sovereignty agenda.[28] In opposition to the multi-stakeholder model, the document articulates the primacy of national governments, international law, and international multilateral organisations, such as the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in designing internet governance policies.

Because '[d]eliberations about internet governance controversies are often exercises in framing the construction of language',[29] it is important to consider the politics of the terminology employed by proponents and detractors of these two approaches. For instance, the internet sovereignty camp's support for the *internationalisation* or *decentralisation* of internet governance architecture – an effort to decrease U.S. governmental and corporate influence through an increased role for nation states and established international organisations such as ITU – is labelled *Balkanisation* or *fragmentation* by its opponents. These opponents invoke a threat to the global internet's interoperability by alluding to historic precedents of ethnic violence, a general culture of conflict, and a profound lack of cooperation (see Berger's chapter). Another prominent example arises from the framing of security issues. Whereas internet freedom proponents refer to *cybersecurity*, internet sovereignty adherents make claims around *information security*. The latter implies protection against threats not only the country's physical infrastructure or economic resources, but also their domestic information space and their ability to control communication with their citizens within their physical borders.

We turn now to specific cases to illustrate how different countries adopt one or the other internet governance platform as part of their national brand. We begin by reviewing the branding efforts by the United States, the global internet hegemon and leading internet freedom promoter. We then look at the case of Estonia, a small European nation using internet governance narratives to emulate Western liberal democratic models. Finally, we examine the Russian case. In recent years Russia has emerged as one of the most powerful advocates for internet sovereignty, partly in an attempt to situate its political and cultural system in opposition to the West.

The United States: Spearheading the 'Western Consensus'

The United States is the primary enforcer of the freedom/sovereignty binary in the context of internet governance. Aiming to delegitimise

concerns by non-Western countries over security and cultural autonomy, the United States tends to characterise internet sovereignty as an authoritarian approach led by China and Russia. Other Western countries perpetuate this freedom/sovereignty divide, casting China and Russia as '[clear] cyber-reactionaries preferring a hierarchical and national-level approach to internet governance'.[30] It is true that the sovereignty model is predominantly supported by countries with questionable human rights records and limited freedom of expression, including Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the UAE, and Uzbekistan – all signatories to 'cyber sovereignty' documents and initiatives at various times.[31] However, it is important to understand how the United States frames its narrative in order to gain a clearer picture of its motives.

The United States and countries of the 'Western consensus'[32] spearhead the internet freedom agenda. The U.S. Department of State considers internet freedom one of the country's top foreign policy priorities, an extension of 'long-standing values of openness and human rights in a networked world' as well as a boon for economic growth, innovation, and freedom of expression (U.S. Department of State). The United States relies on the support of other developed nations to uphold the internet freedom narrative globally. This support is ensured by, among other international decisions, the Act on Digital Economy Policy by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), which calls for the 'free flow of information and knowledge, the freedom of expression, association and assembly, [and] the protection of individual liberties, as critical components of a democratic society and cultural diversity'.[33]

In a 2010 speech at the Newseum in Washington, DC, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called internet freedom 'our national brand'.[34] The speech is considered the starting point of the United States's global engagement with internet governance and the first time this position was linked to the country's national values. Clinton's successor, John Kerry, perpetuated the freedom versus sovereignty narrative in a 2014 video address to the participants of the Freedom Online Coalition[35] conference in Estonia:

> We believe in an open and inclusive internet with input from all and equal access to all . . . and in giving people a voice from the bottom up. The authoritarian vision sees a free, open, inclusive ~~government~~ as a threat to state power. . . . For them, it's about creating a fragmented internet that divides us rather than unites us, that minimises the voice of people and maximises their ability to cloud the truth.[36]

After WikiLeaks and the Snowden revelations, however, it became clear that a double standard was in place. The reputation of the United States as a realm of open cyberborders was severely compromised. But the notion of internet freedom espoused by the United States was already paradoxical prior to the scandals, as critics like Evgeny Morozov have noted:

> The reality is that even before WikiLeaks, the focus of the domestic internet [in the United States] was all about demanding more control of it – whether it's to track internet pirates or cyber-terrorists or cyber-bullies. However, in the context of foreign policy, the debate is somehow always about 'internet freedom' and opposing the greater internet control by the likes of China and Iran – all of it as if these other countries are somehow doing something that America itself is not doing in the domestic context.[37]

While the United States, like all countries, exercises sovereignty over its domestic cyberspace to correspond to its laws and norms, such domestic restrictions are not framed in terms of sovereignty. Moreover, the United States downplays these restrictions in international debates, partly to emphasise the contrast between national sovereignty and internet freedom. A second contradiction is that while U.S. policymakers evince concern for universal access to information and other civil liberties stemming from uncensored access to the internet, their argument implicitly equates existing internet architecture with (U.S.) liberal democratic values; then goes on to propose that the current internet system be locked in order to reinforce the global spread of such values. This strategic narrative naturalises existing (U.S.-controlled) technology while downgrading alternatives.[38]

Many transitional countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, have in fact readily accepted the U.S. liberal democratic model of open markets and open information flows. Estonia has emerged as one of the region's most prominent adepts of this political project. To signal its 'return to the West' following five decades under Soviet rule, the country's leadership made internet technologies and liberal internet governance one of the central pillars of independent Estonia's brand.

Estonia: 'Wi-Fi in the Forest'

Despite its population of only 1.3 million people and limited geopolitical influence, Estonia has positioned itself as a digital powerhouse and staunch advocate of online freedom. Estonia's internet governance

strategy relies on using a specifically Western rhetoric of internet freedom, both to protect itself from Russian incursions and to align itself with the United States. For its part, the United States sees Estonia as a necessary ally in internet governance debates. The U.S. State Department calls Estonia 'a cradle for e-business and e-governance innovation,' and argues, 'Estonia demonstrates to the world how internet openness and democratic governance can lead to stability, innovation, and economic growth'.[39] International media have been similarly mesmerised by Estonia's digital image. Feature stories characterise the country as an 'internet titan' and suggest that the internet is 'tightly entwined with Estonia's identity'.[40]

The image of Estonia as a global digital champion is the result of careful crafting over the past two decades and especially since the early 2000s. The country's record of technological prowess, such as near-total Wi-Fi coverage of the country's territory, national e-government services, and the invention of the internet telephony protocol Skype, is not to be disparaged. But it is the meticulously orchestrated global communication and mythologising of 'E-stonia' that has elevated the small nation to its current status. The international diffusion of this narrative requires historical ground.

For half of the twentieth century, from 1940 until 1991, Estonia was *de jure* one of the Soviet republics. Independent for the first time between the two world wars after the collapse of Czarist Russia, Estonia was forcibly incorporated twenty years later into the USSR along with its neighbours, Latvia and Lithuania. This took place under the secret provisions of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, an agreement between Hitler's and Stalin's regimes on the eve of World War II. De facto, however, few international actors recognised the Soviet rule over the Baltics. Most of the world's states as well as major international organisations and arguably Estonia's own national elites – certainly those exiled abroad – continued to identify Estonia with the West. It is at least partly for this reason that Estonia's post-1991 independence was framed in terms of legal and cultural continuity from their period of interwar independence. The Baltic States hailed their post-Soviet status not as a new historical condition but as a return to Europe and to the Western world more broadly. As did many post-communist leaders of Central and Eastern Europe in an era of transition, the new Baltic governments sought legitimisation within the elite community of liberal and market-oriented democracies.[41] In addition to redesigning the polity to emulate the Western model, Baltic leaders sought to communicate their sense of Western belonging to the international community.

Nation branding, in the eyes of the Baltic policymakers, provided a timely and apt methodology to strategically convey a message of belonging and foster Estonia's global recognition, both normative and ontological. To varying degrees, all three Baltic States have engaged with nation branding since the early 2000s;[42] but Estonia's dedication to the practice is unmatched. Estonia was the first country to wholeheartedly embrace nation branding as a formal and official strategy. Working with the British multinational consultancy Interbrand, the national investment promotion agency Enterprise Estonia (a division of the Ministry of Economic Affairs) developed a comprehensive image management strategy in 2001. Under the slogan 'Positively Transforming,' the branding program was designed to set the small country in the sights of investors, exporters and tourists across Europe and beyond, attracting the kind of financial and symbolic capital that would 'reposition' the country as a Western nation as well as solidify its membership applications to NATO and the EU.[43]

From early on, Estonia's branding strategy has been to model itself as an 'e-nation,' whereby national identity is linked to digital enterprise and electronic security. School curricula, social services and business transactions are networked and managed online, and these achievements are publicised as progressive and liberating. The government prides itself on its lack of digital borders and promotes its openness to international investment, banking, and trade. The country recently introduced e-Residency, a government-issued digital identity available to anyone in the world. Narratives of the digital sublime[44] permeate Estonia's nation branding discourse. In a video address on Estonia.eu, the country's international web portal for visitors, foreign students and investors, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves sombrely claims: 'We have reason to be proud of our highly developed telecommunications network. Estonia is a place you can take your laptop into the deepest forest and still hook up to the internet.'[45] Another official promotional video features skyscrapers, touch screens, robotics, data centres, laboratories and Segways, set to an electronic music soundtrack, while buzzwords like 'Flexible perspectives' or 'Fast to adapt' shoot across the screen.[46] The cover of Estonia's tourism brochure, *Where Medieval Meets Modern*, depicts a knight in shining armour behind a laptop. This is the E-stonia brand, a strategic narrative meant to promote the country's unique territorial identity while clearly underlining its commitment to Western ideals.

Estonia's brand as a harbinger of internet freedom has been institutionalised in several sites. In 2002, the government of Estonia opened

an e-Governance Academy with support from the Open Society Foun-
dation (founded by George Soros) and the United Nations Development
Programme. The Academy offers training workshops and courses on
e-governance and ICT policy to neighbouring countries, furthering
Estonia's image as a national hub of technological expertise (e-GA).
In 2008, Estonia's capital city, Tallinn, hosted the NATO Cooperative
Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, a research and training facility
that produces working papers, training events and consultations in
different areas of cyber-research. In 2013, Estonia and the United States
formalised their cyber alliance with the signing of 'cyber-partnership
statements' to cooperate on projects of internet governance, state com-
munications, and global policy. In 2014, it hosted the annual Freedom
Online Coalition conference.

Just as the United States embodies contradictions in its internet free-
dom narrative, so too does Estonia. Its eager embrace of a post-national,
electronically borderless world is rooted, inter alia, in its longstanding
assertion of national sovereignty against the country's long history of
subjugation by major powers. At the same time, Estonia's desire for
recognition in the West as an equal member of the modern community
of sovereign nation-states causes its leaders to emulate the U.S. paradigm,
even if this isomorphism is also a strategy to protect the country from
recent incursions by Russia.

Estonia's conduct in relation to internet policy and regulation differs
dramatically from Russia's. Whereas the former is a paradigmatic rep-
resentative of the internet freedom camp, the latter has emerged as one
of the leading voices in support of the internet sovereignty agenda. Until
2012, the Kremlin did not have substantive influence on the online
public sphere, choosing to exercise its power over traditional media.
Since Vladimir Putin's return to power in 2012, however, the general
turn towards increased governmental control over political life has made
the internet one of the Kremlin's top priorities, both domestically and
internationally.

Russia: 'Worldwide Champion of Conservative Values'

A *New York Times* report on Putin's 'bloggers law,' a ~~newly established~~
law requiring popular online writers to register with the government,
called Russia 'the worldwide champion of conservative values'.[47]
According to the Berkman Centre for Internet & Society at Harvard
University, the bloggers law is representative of sweeping legislative

changes in internet regulation in Russia between 2012 and 2014; changes that have become progressively more restrictive and more controversial in the eyes of the international community.[48] While these strict regulatory initiatives represent a transformation from a prior state of relative online freedom in Russia, a review of Russia's branding strategy over the past twenty-five years helps put this transformation into perspective.

In the early 1990s, following the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia zealously welcomed support from the West, whether in the form of political and economic expertise, injections of financial capital, or developmental models. The country's desire for domestic reform was matched by its desire to reform its international policy as well. Russian leadership was enchanted by pervasive 'end of history' arguments.[49] As the country's 1993 foreign policy statement suggests: 'The struggle of ideologies has come to an end. Now we have to take care to meet Russia's needs through economic, diplomatic, military, and other means.'[50] At the same time, as the decades-long Soviet social, economic and political order collapsed, the country and its people were plunged into 'an acute crisis of identity on both the international arena and in the sphere of its national interests'.[51] The notion of a properly Soviet identity, formerly maintained by the communist propaganda apparatus, gave way in the emerging context of privately owned media. In the absence of a coherent top-down nation-building project, media privatisation accelerated the erosion of citizenship, loyalty and sovereignty,[52] further diluting Russia's search for a post-communist identity.

It was only in the late 1990s that the state attempted once again to position itself as a primary source of cultural identity. This time it sought a more explicit means of communications management through the articulation of media and information policy. In 1998, Russia produced two strategic documents, one domestic and one international, that portray its protectionist stance on information policy and the perceived relationship of the policy to national identity and sovereignty. The State Information Policy Concept, while predominantly technocratic in nature, recommends that a measured and long-term information policy can 'prevent the erosion of Russia's cultural and historic traditions [and] minimise the invasion of Western mass culture values and mentality'.[53] The same year, Russia became the first country to raise the issue of information security at the United Nations by introducing a resolution on 'Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security,' hinting at its future role as leading lobbyist for a national security framework of internet governance.

These may be taken as some of the first signs of the Kremlin's growing 'interest in defining, dividing, and controlling a corner of Russian cyber-space',[54] though it would not be until the early 2010s that the government would begin to forcefully act upon it.

Following Putin's rise to the presidency in 1999–2000, a discourse of security, sovereignty and national identity took centre stage in Russia's information policy. The 2000 Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation, one of Putin's earliest strategic documents as head of state, was also the country's first major policy document to explicitly delineate national identity through mass media regulation.[55] The Doctrine highlights the link between information and what it terms 'the sphere of spiritual life,' claiming that information security aims to protect

> the cultural wealth of all of Russia's peoples and with the *realisation of constitutional restrictions on human and civil rights and freedoms* in the interests of keeping up and strengthening the moral values of society, the traditions of patriotism and humanism.[56]

The Doctrine resolutely brings the state back into the media and information realm as a producer of social knowledge and protector of social values. It was evident that Putin's political project included the restoration of state control over communication, alongside the centralisation of state power, the formulation (and formalisation) of a practical ideology, and the restructuring of political competition.[57]

Throughout the 2000s, 'sovereignty' – a notoriously malleable state-centred concept that adapts to various goals and visions[58] – became Russia's brand. In the mid-2000s, Kremlin ideologues even invented a new name for this governance construct: sovereign democracy, meant to refer to 'the primacy of sovereignty over democracy and a sovereign Russian democratic institutional development which does not correspond to Western standards'.[59] These basic principles laid the foundation for Russia's media policies, including further domestic control over the mediated public sphere and a new system of international broadcasting for global self-promotion.

Beginning in 2004, Russia undertook institutional initiatives to communicate its new national and international information paradigm. The ailing news agency RIAN, the Soviet Union's main international broadcaster prior to 1991, was resurrected with new management, increased funding, and an ideological mission: to tell the world about the 'new and improved' Russia. The Kremlin also hired the U.S. public relations and marketing agency Ketchum to lobby Western countries on its behalf.

Other soft power manoeuvres included the launch of the Russia Today television channel, now viewed by some as 'the Russian government's main weapon in an intensifying information war with the West';[60] the creation of a dedicated federal public diplomacy agency; the establishment of the Valdai International Discussion Club – an annual Russia-based expert forum, with Putin always in attendance; the creation of the Russian World foundation with cultural centres around the world; and successful bids to host the Sochi 2014 Olympic Games and the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

While Russian leaders initially distinguished 'traditional' from online media, focusing on the former as a matter of national identity and sovereignty and remaining silent on the latter,[61] between 2012 and 2014 Russia increased its internet regulation faster than any other country in the world.[62] The country's path towards growing internet restrictions was laid by a series of mass opposition rallies in the winter and spring of 2011–2012 against parliamentary elections fraud and Putin's return to the presidency, for which the internet served as an important platform for protest organisation and coordination.[63] In response to the protests, the Kremlin's general indifference towards the domestic networked public turned into 'evolving cyberphobia'. Over the next two years, the government passed a blitzkrieg of restrictive laws aimed at expanding official controls over the media and online space.[64] On the world stage, Moscow intensified its push for a multilateral (i.e. state-based) model of global internet governance through forums such as the UN International Tele-communication Union, the Internet Governance Forum, and NetMundial. It remains to be seen whether and how such models would operate (for alternative democratic models, see Scholte's chapter).

As with the change in communication policies after Putin's election in 2000, the Kremlin's post-2012 reassertion of internet sovereignty is part of a broader political project. Ideationally, the new brand is fundamentally in line with the political matrix set in motion in 2000. Since 2012, however, this political brand has been linked to the national and cultural brands to an extent not previously seen in Putin's Russia.[65] In his 2013 Valdai speech devoted to Russian national identity, for instance, Putin clearly expressed his contempt for an open governance model:

> [W]e see attempts to somehow revive a standardised model of a unipolar world and to blur the institutions of international law and national sovereignty. Such a unipolar, standardised world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals. In a historical sense this amounts to a rejection of one's own identity, of the God-given diversity of the world.[66]

In Putin's vision, national identity politics directly influence internet governance. Cultural values underlie the normative concept of national sovereignty, which in turn frames the country's policymaking arena of international law and governance. In pursuit of its national internet project, Russia has undertaken a raft of initiatives, including a strategy of IT import substitution involving the development of a state-sponsored internet browser. Russia has also proposed the development of an alternative operating system together with countries of the BRICS alliance consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. These initiatives are meant to contribute to the Russian brand of sovereignty and offer a powerful counter-narrative to the open internet. Yet even Russia's sovereignty narrative is contradictory. The country is not immune to the seductive appeal of a shared internet – as long as the sharing takes place on its terms and among countries with which it is allied.

Conclusion: Competing Narratives of Internet Governance

Nation branding involves the strategic use, by state elites and decision-makers, of national identity and values to advance national interests in an international context. It is a way to make the nation – and its representatives – *matter* in a global context of media and information, marketisation, and political integration. Whether or not one agrees with the underlying premises of nation branding, the forms of expertise it generates, or the uses to which it is put,[67] its rapid expansion and transformation over the past fifteen years underscores an ongoing desire by citizens and their representatives to maintain the territorial, political and cultural boundaries of the nation for particular purposes.

As we have argued, the framework of nation branding also lends itself to emerging global debates over internet governance architecture, because governance agendas are rooted in nationally specific considerations. Building 'strategic architectures of media and information systems'[68] requires institutions that promote national ideologies and national interests. Internet governance is not merely a policy problem, a regulatory problem or a globalisation problem. It is equally a problem of communication. To the extent that the 'ultimate contestation [for legitimacy among stakeholders] involves narratives and their incorporation in strategies of power'[69] nation states develop and market their brand of internet governance, seeking the support of other nations, international organisations and users while delegitimising competing visions.

In this chapter we proposed understanding internet governance as a strategic discourse engaged in by many parties with divergent interests and goals. As with the branding of a country's investment or tourism opportunities, branding a nation's approach to the internet is meant to enhance the country's geopolitical status and by extension its economic and political capital. Whether framed in terms of freedom or sovereignty, the articulation by national leaders of their vision for the internet represents an attempt to relate to their people and to the world.

As we have seen, the dominant strategic internet governance narratives wielded by nation states are not monolithic arguments for either state sovereignty or global information freedom. At times, the policy discourses among 'internet freedom' and 'internet sovereignty' advocates are remarkably similar, reflecting the overlaps, inconsistencies, and indeed mutual constitution of these two positions. In some cases, national governments advocate for systems that benefit their politics and citizens, but they also promote internet policies that transcend borders. This may indicate a desire to create a 'coalition brand' rather than merely a national brand.[70]

However, it is crucial to bring the limits of nation branding to bear on these discussions. Narratives of legitimacy are, at their core, attempts by their protagonists to curry favour and collect allies while accumulating power. As such, they are often compelling and persuasive, but they are rarely complex. At times they commit errors of omission, highlighting areas of consensus while downplaying contentious underlying issues such as human rights violations, the marginalisation of minority views, or government surveillance. In other instances, they commit errors of over-simplification, making implicit exceptions to boldly proposed courses of action.

Accordingly, the proposition of freedom versus sovereignty is a false binary. The model of internet freedom does not translate in any practical sense to absolute freedom of expression, as we have seen. Neither would a rhetoric of internet sovereignty translate into a goal of total closure to global flows of information capital. No national leader would deny the positive valences of both freedom *and* sovereignty in different contexts, online or offline. As Calhoun writes, 'In many settings, the economistic/technological imaginary of modernist globalisation is embraced at the same time and by the same political leaders as nationalist, religious, or other imaginaries emphasising inherited cultural identity. The contradiction is avoided by assigning these to separate spheres.'[71] The key, therefore, is to attend to the discursive structures put into place to make arguments that construct one side as preferable to the other.

Like every media technology, the internet is a socially imagined space: its technical and governance characteristics are predicated upon normative visions for cyberspace held by populations and policymakers.[72] It is for this reason that the 'global war for internet governance'[73] should be understood at least partly in terms of a struggle to communicate, as competing interests battle to shape the dominant imaginary of the internet in their favour.

Debates over internet governance are fuelled by grander visions of how we ought to live in relation to one another, and how societies ought to be organised.[74] Such visions are never 'views from nowhere', but are rather inherently cultural and territorial, reflecting their speaker's origins and systems of belief. In scholarly and expert communities, this often manifests itself in equating nation state with society and using the nation state in an objectifying normative sense. While such methodological nationalism warrants critical attention, it also demonstrates that many of those speakers, like the citizens they represent, still claim the nation state as their most deeply felt loyalty. This loyalty is reflected in our social and political institutions and continues to inform democratic participation. However problematic, the nation state cannot be ignored. The mutual influence of the internet and the nation state will remain for some time to come.

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