

Chapter 13. The Big Red Button

On February 23, 2014, the day the Sochi Olympics ended, Putin was not entirely happy. One of his guests, a close ally, who was with him at the opening ceremony of the games had gone missing from Sochi. Viktor Yanukovich, the Ukrainian president, had disappeared from his capital, Kiev, a day before. After months of protests against Yanukovich on the Maidan, the central square of Kiev, no one knew where the president had gone. Television broadcasts showed that some government buildings in the capital had been abandoned; the headquarters of the Ukrainian secret police was also empty, and police were nowhere to be seen. Protesters had pulled down a monument to Lenin. The demonstrations and the sudden dissolution of Yanukovich's presidency appeared to Putin to be far more serious than the public uprisings known as "color revolutions" over the previous decade in Ukraine and Georgia, and, beginning in 2010, the Arab Spring; this time it looked more like August of 1991, when the Soviet Union teetered on the abyss. For Putin, the events in Ukraine suggested that the elites of the country had split, and some of them had betrayed Yanukovich, a frightening prospect for the Russian president. Putin had invested his personal prestige in Yanukovich and sent his intelligence officers to Kiev under the guidance of a colonel general of the FSB to show his support. When Yanukovich fled, Putin saw it as proof of a conspiracy by the West to undermine Russia's sphere of influence, which, in his mind, included Ukraine.¹

In a week the Russian military transported Yanukovich to Rostov-on-Don and unmarked Russian troops occupied Crimea, which had been part of Ukraine. On March 1 Putin obtained permission from the cheering Russian parliament to use troops in Ukraine as well.² They unleashed an unprecedented campaign of propaganda, calling the Ukrainian protesters "fascists" and warning that Russians living in eastern Ukraine were threatened.³ This was the start of a major armed conflict that engulfed eastern Ukraine in the months ahead as Russian-backed separatists battled Ukrainian troops for control of several provinces. Thousands

of people were killed and injured in the war, inciting sharp protests and Western sanctions imposed on Russia.

As soon as the crisis began, the Russian authorities tightened control of information online. Since 2012 the Kremlin had been actively building mechanisms and tools of control of the Internet, and now the moment came to test their effectiveness. On March 3 Roskomnadzor rushed to block thirteen pages of groups linked to the Ukrainian protest movement on the Russian-based social network VKontakte.⁴

On March 8 pro-Kremlin activists launched a new website that pointed a finger at “national traitors.” It was established on the domain *predatel.net*, where *predatel* stands for a traitor, and domain extension .net for *nyet*, or no: *no traitors*. It sought to gather the public statements of liberals deemed unpatriotic and then threaten them. The first name on the list was Navalny, and it also included the opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, journalist Sergei Parkhomenko, artists and writers, and some civil activists and journalists who took part in Moscow protests in 2011–2012.

A week later a popular Russian news site, Lenta.ru, suddenly faced the traditional methods of intimidation by the authorities. On the morning of March 12 Roskomnadzor issued the website a warning for publishing material of an “extremist nature,” citing an interview with one of the leaders of the far right Ukrainian party, Pravy Sector. The interview was conducted by Ilya Azar, the reporter who had exposed the carousel voting fraud during the Russian parliamentary elections in December 2012. On the same day as the warning the owner of Lenta.ru, Alexander Mamut, called the editor, Galina Timchenko, and demanded Azar be fired. Timchenko refused, so Mamut immediately fired Timchenko. All thirty-nine journalists of Lenta.ru left the publication in protest, along with Timchenko.⁵

On March 16 a hurried referendum in Crimea resulted in a call to join Russia. Two days later Putin summoned both houses of the Russian parliament to the Kremlin for what was to be one of his most memorable and emotional speeches celebrating the taking of Crimea, with its big Russian-speaking population, from Ukraine. To effusive applause Putin spoke emotionally about the

destiny of Russia. And then, finally, he turned to the West, noting that Russia's actions had already drawn threats of sanctions that might cause disruption inside Russia. He paused and then asked ominously, "I would like to know what it is they have in mind exactly: action by the fifth column, this disparate bunch of 'national traitors,' or are they hoping to put us in a worsening social and economic situation so as to provoke public discontent?" He promised to "respond accordingly."⁶

Earlier, on March 13, Roskomnadzor had blocked three independent opposition news media—Kasparov.ru, Ej.ru, and Grani.ru—along with Navalny's blog on LiveJournal.com.⁷ Maxim Ksenzov from Roskomnadzor was quick to explain that the sites were blocked because of "extremist calls." He added that Navalny was no longer allowed to use communications and post anything on the Internet: "Wherever the materials appear under his name—there will be blocking."⁸

The political commentary site Ej.ru represents *Ezhednevny Journal*, or Daily Journal, and was launched in 2005 in a desperate attempt to save a team of journalists thrown out of *Itogi* magazine during the annihilation of Gusinsky's media empire. With a simple design, it published three stories per day along with some short news items. Along with Grani.ru, it was a platform for prominent liberal commentators in the country, from satirist Viktor Shenderovich, to military experts and political analysts expelled from traditional media in the 2000s. The site enjoyed popularity among the liberal-minded intelligentsia.

Since February Ej.ru had come under fierce attack from Putin's supporters after it had published a column by Shenderovich in which he questioned the whole wave of intense patriotism ignited by the Sochi Olympics.⁹ Despite the attacks, Ej.ru continued functioning, and on this day it had a story that dissected Russian propaganda and the televised euphoria surrounding the annexation of Crimea by Russia. That same day Navalny posted the results of phone polls conducted by his activists about Crimea and Ukraine, revealing that Russians' attitudes were dramatically contrary to the propaganda. Navalny said his surveys showed that 84.5 percent of those asked viewed Ukraine as a friendly country.

From this day onward all three sites and a blog were blocked on Russian soil.

The night of Putin's speech, worried journalists of the liberal and independent media arranged an urgent meeting. They chose to meet at the Sakharov Center, the venue of human rights organizations, named after the Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, on Thursday, March 21. The center occupies two buildings—a two-story mansion and a tiny exposition hall on the embankment of the Moscow River. It was given the premises in the early 1990s by the first Russian government, which felt in some debt to Soviet dissidents, and for years the center was used to host talks and debates on human rights issues.

That evening Sergei Lukashevsky, the thirty-nine-year-old director of the center who had brought his children to the demonstration on Bolotnaya Square in 2012, was waiting for the journalists and bloggers to gather on the second floor of the Sakharov Center, in a room filled with chairs set in a circle. All editors of the blocked websites came to the meeting, including Alexander Ryklin of Ej.ru; Vladimir Korsunsky, editor of Grani.ru, and Kirill Samodurov, editor of Kasparov.ru. Galina Timchenko, a former editor of Lenta .ru, was among the first to arrive. Anton Nossik walked in, followed by Grigory Okhotin from OVD-Info. Olga Romanova, from Russia Behind Bars, who had collected money via Yandex Money for the protests in 2011, also appeared. There was also Nikolai Lyaskin, one of Chief Navalny's lieutenants, and Lena Bereznitskaya-Bruni, the editor of Newsru.com who had helped us withstand FSB pressure in 2002. All in all, dozens of journalists and bloggers came along with some liberal lawyers.

The day they had all feared had finally arrived. Since November 2012 the filtering in Russia expanded to areas way beyond protecting children from harmful content. By March 2014 Russia had four official blacklists of banned websites and pages: the first one to deal with sites deemed extremist; the second to block sites containing child pornography, suicide, and drugs; the third to block sites with copyright problems; and the fourth, the most recent one, created in February 2014, lists the sites blocked—without a court order—because they call for demonstrations that had not been approved by the authorities. There is also an unofficial fifth blacklist aimed not at sites but at hosting companies based abroad

that Roskomnadzor considers to be uncooperative and, thus, need to be blocked.

The fourth blacklist, which included Ej.ru, Kasparov.ru, Grani.ru, and the Navalny blog, exists thanks to the efforts of Andrei Lugovoi, a former KGB officer best known for his involvement in the poisoning of another former Russian security agent, Alexander Litvinenko, who fled to London in 2000 and was assassinated in 2006. The British authorities accused Lugovoi of conducting the poisoning by radioactive polonium, allegations he vehemently denied. Instead, he accused the British intelligence of carrying out the poisoning and got a seat in the Russian parliament. He was made a member of the Security Committee, in charge of writing legislation for the Russian secret services, of the State Duma. Putin approved Lugovoi's blacklist in December 30, 2013, and it came into force on February 1, 2014.

The discussion at the Sakharov Center was emotional. Roskomnadzor's failure to provide any reason for the blocking outraged editors of the blocked sites. In the letters they all received they were simply told, with no explanation, that they would be blocked. Korsunsky remarked darkly, "Websites are blocked just because they are suppressed as enemy information sources. Putin said it openly: 'The enemies.' He's going to fight with this. But legally, there is still a possibility—as long as we breathe, we need to do something. As well as to keep working." But he urged, "We should be ready to work in a state of war."

The editors debated possible legal avenues of resistance and technical solutions that could bypass the blocking. The odds of winning in court seemed slim. Ryklin angrily said that everybody should finally understand that their sites are blocked forever, and even if the lawyers would be able to win in court, the next day the General Prosecutor's Office would find another article to use as pretext for blocking.¹⁰

Olga Pashkova from Ej.ru suggested launching a united platform for all blocked sites. Other journalists thought about posting extracts of the stories on Facebook. Nossik exclaimed, "Forget about Facebook—it would be blocked in a month. We are walking in the direction of North Korea!" Timchenko insisted that the blocked sites should turn to social media, "Launch your campaign in social networks and contact the administrators of large groups, for example in

VKontakte. That's all. This is a very big resource.”

The journalists thought of some joint action they might take, a campaign for the blocked websites, but it was clear this was not a good option. An editor of the Echo Moskvy website, which might have been counted upon to take up the campaign, was at the meeting but was conspicuously silent. Nossik was not discouraged, arguing that they all have an advantage: “We all work with bytes, right? And we can all interact with the same bytes.” He said that they don't need to meet somewhere regularly to coordinate efforts; it's enough to meet on Facebook. And when Facebook would be shut down, somewhere else.

But they all urgently needed to find a way to bypass the blocking. There was a lot of talk about Tor, a circumvention tool in widespread use around the world and essentially a network of virtual tunnels: instead of taking a direct route from source to destination, data packets on the Tor network take a random pathway through several relays that cover a user's tracks so nobody at any single point can tell where the data came from or where it's going. In the case of the blocked sites, it meant that people who came to the blocked sites couldn't be seen as coming from Russia, thus evading Roskomnadzor's blocking. It's easy to use, and the only problem with Tor is that a user must install Tor software on the computer to use its network.

That posed a fundamental problem: How could they teach readers to use circumvention tools? The blocked sites already lost thousands of readers, and although a committed audience would find a way to get to the sites, the question remained: How would they reach the rest?

Nossik came up with the idea to promote Tor and other circumvention tools on his page on LiveJournal.com and called others to follow his example. Some suggested to remember the Soviet dissident practice of disseminating information on carbon-copied typescript known as *samizdat*. Some offered to print leaflets.

One of those at the meeting was Artem Kozlyuk, a thirty-five-year-old born in Cherepovets in central Russia to a military family. He studied at the Cherepovets military school, spent a few years in the army, and soon moved to Moscow, where he joined the Pirate Party in 2011. The idea of Internet censorship shocked him, and the day the blacklist came into force, on November 1, 2012, he

launched a project against filtering. It was called *Roskomsvoboda*, or Freedom from Roskomnadzor, and was also known as Rublacklist.net. On the home page of the website there is a link to the major treasure of the project—the total of how many sites are blocked and a list of sites blocked by mistake.

Ksenzov and Zharov, the brains behind Roskomnadzor, had made the official blacklist secret, ostensibly to avoid promoting the blocked sites and pages. The list is available only to authorized ISPs so they can check the lists daily. Kozlyuk was certain that the primitive system of filtering inevitably led to the blocking of innocent sites that happen to be hosted on the same IP address, so he made his cause to find a way to check the blacklist against the real numbers of blocked sites. Some liberal ISPs shared the data from the blacklists, and Kozlyuk was able to check how many sites are blocked along with the sites targeted by Roskomnadzor. The difference in numbers was astonishing—whereas Roskomnadzor insisted that only a few thousand sites were blocked, Kozlyuk’s figures showed tens of thousands of sites. Kozlyuk knew better than anyone in the room how the filtering was organized, and he was hopeful. He described how one day he wanted to go to a prohibited site, Grani.ru. When he did this, the page was blank—it was blocked. But his home ISP had defiantly put a message on the blank page, saying, “To bypass the censorship, click here.” The link then took the user to a site with a list of circumvention tools. Kozlyuk’s point was that many friendly ISPs might be enlisted to help bypass the censorship. Kozlyuk’s idea drew support, but few in the room believed it would be able to solve the problem of blocking.

But soon a technical solution was found, one that was much more effective at evading the blacklists.

Ruslan Leviev, then twenty-seven years old, is a computer geek and a lawyer by training. Short and thin, with earrings in both of his earlobes and often with a radical haircut, he was born in the Russian Far East, where he worked for an NGO providing poor citizens with legal support in court. In 2009 Leviev

moved to Moscow, and two years later he joined the protests in Moscow against fraud in the parliamentary elections and was detained along with hundreds of outraged Muscovites. He spent two days in prison, and when he left the detention center, he decided to volunteer to help Navalny build his online projects. The first was the online elections watchdog Navalny launched.

When the law on filtering was debated in 2012, Leviev attended the meetings at Roskomnadzor as Navalny's representative, and he got to know Ksenzov. Leviev tried to explain why the filtering was such a bad idea, and he invited Ksenzov to talk to the audience of Habrahabr, the biggest Russian web community of programmers, where Leviev published extracts of Navalny's blog on fighting corruption. On January 4, 2013, Ksenzov started answering the participants' questions and posted his answers for a few days. Leviev thought this was a very good sign—he even asked the audience to be polite with Ksenzov because he could not imagine an official from any other ministry department willing to talk to them.

When Navalny's blog on LiveJournal was blocked on March 18, 2014—the blog on which Leviev had worked so hard—Leviev came to realize that the cooperation with the authorities was pointless. Everything seemed to change so quickly; Ksenzov at once started to attack Leviev, calling him a foreign agent and the fifth column because Leviev had volunteered for Navalny.

Leviev felt desperate, but one day a friend gave him an idea of how to bypass the blocking. When someone visits an Internet site, such as Lenta.ru, the domain name is linked to one or more Internet protocol addresses, which are a set of numbers. Sometimes there can be a whole list of these addresses linked to one domain. By changing the list of the Internet protocol addresses assigned to the domain on the site of domain names registration center, Leviev found that he could trick the blocking—even send it off in another direction entirely. In an experiment he manipulated the numbers so that when Roskomnadzor tried to block Navalny, they instead blocked a pro-Kremlin site called Lifenews.ru. Next he tried redirecting the censorship to block Roskomnadzor's own internal list of sites that were currently blocked, paralyzing Roskomnadzor.¹¹ “It was like the blacklist blocked itself,” Leviev recalled.

It was a bright victory for Leviev's team: the system of technical filtering had gaps, and Leviev thought about how to exploit them, not to harass Roskomnadzor but to keep Navalny's blog online.

They set up a domain, *navalny.us*, with lots of subdomains—the technical mechanism of blocking does not block all subdomains. Leviev called for help: on the site of *navalny.us* he posted instructions on how to make a subdomain, and urged people to make them and send word to Navalny. Over sixty volunteers responded, many with several subdomains, and Leviev got a network of 150 to 200 possible subdomains, ready to go.

The system became known as the “Big Red Button of Navalny”—the user gets to *navalny.us*, sees a big red button, pushes it, and it leads him or her to one of the subdomains. Navalny's blog survives.

Next Leviev went to war against Roskomnadzor's censors. He figured out how to identify who inside the agency was responsible for the search-and-destroy missions against Navalny and others.¹² In April Leviev published a large post with a scheme, logs, and detailed explanations of who was in charge inside of Roskomnadzor for checking the blocked sites.¹³ By exposing them, he made their lives difficult, often trapping them into long, pointless dead ends. When the censors came to work and started to check whether the Navalny blog was working, their screens were filled with images of cats and ponies—a wicked retaliation.

Leviev was pleasantly surprised one day when Roskomnadzor officials acknowledged to the newspaper *Vedomosti* that they saw a cat instead of Navalny's blog.¹⁴ It was a triumph—a rare one—for the digital revolutionaries. Despite all of Roskomnadzor's efforts, Navalny's blog was alive and accessible, and no one needed special software like Tor to access the site.

Leviev was sitting in the offices of TV Dozhd in the Red October compound when he told Irina about his success in evading the censors. Leviev's small company, Newscaster, was broadcasting online from an antiwar street

demonstration in Moscow for TV Dozhd. Newscaster provided the broadcast to TV Dozhd for free because Leviev thought its content was important. The TV Dozhd premises were almost deserted because the channel was on the move after having come under constant pressure. In the patriotic hysterics that were already evident in January 2014, TV Dozhd was accused of being unpatriotic for conducting a controversial online poll that asked viewers whether Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, should have been surrendered to the Nazis in 1941 in order to spare its citizens the mass agony of a brutal nine-hundred-day siege. The poll took place on Sunday, January 26, a day before the seventieth anniversary of the lifting of the siege. Pro-Kremlin bloggers immediately attacked the channel, and in thirty minutes Ilya Klishin, now editor of the channel's site, removed the poll and apologized for the wording. On Monday Putin was in St. Petersburg to take part in official celebrations.¹⁵ He was on his way to the Piskarev cemetery where his brother, who had died during the blockade, is buried, when he was shown the TV Dozhd poll.¹⁶

On January 27 Sindeeva, the founder of TV Dozhd, was sitting in her glass office at Red October. She started getting calls and e-mails from viewers that the channel was going off the air in different regions. A cable operator, who said it was his patriotic duty to throw TV Dozhd off his package, began the attack, and soon others followed.¹⁷ By then TV Dozhd was present in 18 million homes and enjoyed a monthly audience of 12 million viewers. Every day an estimated 1.1 million people watched it. The audience in regions was on the rise, and Sindeeva's contacts told her that the presidential administration was worried about the growth in viewers; TV Dozhd had ceased being just a Moscow hipster's thing. Some operators called Sindeeva and explained that they got phone calls from the Kremlin and could not resist the pressure.¹⁸ "It was a snowball," Sindeeva said. When, on January 29, Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, "TV Dozhd crossed the line of the permissible," all other cable operators followed suit and switched off TV Dozhd.¹⁹ The channel lost millions of viewers—its lifeline.

Sindeeva desperately tried to find a way to get the channel back on cable. The channel held a press conference, and Sindeeva talked about the pressure. She

VKontakte. That's all. This is a very big resource.”

The journalists thought of some joint action they might take, a campaign for the blocked websites, but it was clear this was not a good option. An editor of the Echo Moskvy website, which might have been counted upon to take up the campaign, was at the meeting but was conspicuously silent. Nossik was not discouraged, arguing that they all have an advantage: “We all work with bytes, right? And we can all interact with the same bytes.” He said that they don't need to meet somewhere regularly to coordinate efforts; it's enough to meet on Facebook. And when Facebook would be shut down, somewhere else.

But they all urgently needed to find a way to bypass the blocking. There was a lot of talk about Tor, a circumvention tool in widespread use around the world and essentially a network of virtual tunnels: instead of taking a direct route from source to destination, data packets on the Tor network take a random pathway through several relays that cover a user's tracks so nobody at any single point can tell where the data came from or where it's going. In the case of the blocked sites, it meant that people who came to the blocked sites couldn't be seen as coming from Russia, thus evading Roskomnadzor's blocking. It's easy to use, and the only problem with Tor is that a user must install Tor software on the computer to use its network.

That posed a fundamental problem: How could they teach readers to use circumvention tools? The blocked sites already lost thousands of readers, and although a committed audience would find a way to get to the sites, the question remained: How would they reach the rest?

Nossik came up with the idea to promote Tor and other circumvention tools on his page on LiveJournal.com and called others to follow his example. Some suggested to remember the Soviet dissident practice of disseminating information on carbon-copied typescript known as *samizdat*. Some offered to print leaflets.

One of those at the meeting was Artem Kozlyuk, a thirty-five-year-old born in Cherepovets in central Russia to a military family. He studied at the Cherepovets military school, spent a few years in the army, and soon moved to Moscow, where he joined the Pirate Party in 2011. The idea of Internet censorship shocked him, and the day the blacklist came into force, on November 1, 2012, he

launched a project against filtering. It was called *Roskomsvoboda*, or Freedom from Roskomnadzor, and was also known as Rublacklist.net. On the home page of the website there is a link to the major treasure of the project—the total of how many sites are blocked and a list of sites blocked by mistake.

Ksenzov and Zharov, the brains behind Roskomnadzor, had made the official blacklist secret, ostensibly to avoid promoting the blocked sites and pages. The list is available only to authorized ISPs so they can check the lists daily. Kozlyuk was certain that the primitive system of filtering inevitably led to the blocking of innocent sites that happen to be hosted on the same IP address, so he made his cause to find a way to check the blacklist against the real numbers of blocked sites. Some liberal ISPs shared the data from the blacklists, and Kozlyuk was able to check how many sites are blocked along with the sites targeted by Roskomnadzor. The difference in numbers was astonishing—whereas Roskomnadzor insisted that only a few thousand sites were blocked, Kozlyuk’s figures showed tens of thousands of sites. Kozlyuk knew better than anyone in the room how the filtering was organized, and he was hopeful. He described how one day he wanted to go to a prohibited site, Grani.ru. When he did this, the page was blank—it was blocked. But his home ISP had defiantly put a message on the blank page, saying, “To bypass the censorship, click here.” The link then took the user to a site with a list of circumvention tools. Kozlyuk’s point was that many friendly ISPs might be enlisted to help bypass the censorship. Kozlyuk’s idea drew support, but few in the room believed it would be able to solve the problem of blocking.

But soon a technical solution was found, one that was much more effective at evading the blacklists.

Ruslan Leviev, then twenty-seven years old, is a computer geek and a lawyer by training. Short and thin, with earrings in both of his earlobes and often with a radical haircut, he was born in the Russian Far East, where he worked for an NGO providing poor citizens with legal support in court. In 2009 Leviev

moved to Moscow, and two years later he joined the protests in Moscow against fraud in the parliamentary elections and was detained along with hundreds of outraged Muscovites. He spent two days in prison, and when he left the detention center, he decided to volunteer to help Navalny build his online projects. The first was the online elections watchdog Navalny launched.

When the law on filtering was debated in 2012, Leviev attended the meetings at Roskomnadzor as Navalny's representative, and he got to know Ksenzov. Leviev tried to explain why the filtering was such a bad idea, and he invited Ksenzov to talk to the audience of Habrahabr, the biggest Russian web community of programmers, where Leviev published extracts of Navalny's blog on fighting corruption. On January 4, 2013, Ksenzov started answering the participants' questions and posted his answers for a few days. Leviev thought this was a very good sign—he even asked the audience to be polite with Ksenzov because he could not imagine an official from any other ministry department willing to talk to them.

When Navalny's blog on LiveJournal was blocked on March 18, 2014—the blog on which Leviev had worked so hard—Leviev came to realize that the cooperation with the authorities was pointless. Everything seemed to change so quickly; Ksenzov at once started to attack Leviev, calling him a foreign agent and the fifth column because Leviev had volunteered for Navalny.

Leviev felt desperate, but one day a friend gave him an idea of how to bypass the blocking. When someone visits an Internet site, such as Lenta.ru, the domain name is linked to one or more Internet protocol addresses, which are a set of numbers. Sometimes there can be a whole list of these addresses linked to one domain. By changing the list of the Internet protocol addresses assigned to the domain on the site of domain names registration center, Leviev found that he could trick the blocking—even send it off in another direction entirely. In an experiment he manipulated the numbers so that when Roskomnadzor tried to block Navalny, they instead blocked a pro-Kremlin site called Lifenews.ru. Next he tried redirecting the censorship to block Roskomnadzor's own internal list of sites that were currently blocked, paralyzing Roskomnadzor.¹¹ “It was like the blacklist blocked itself,” Leviev recalled.

It was a bright victory for Leviev's team: the system of technical filtering had gaps, and Leviev thought about how to exploit them, not to harass Roskomnadzor but to keep Navalny's blog online.

They set up a domain, *navalny.us*, with lots of subdomains—the technical mechanism of blocking does not block all subdomains. Leviev called for help: on the site of *navalny.us* he posted instructions on how to make a subdomain, and urged people to make them and send word to Navalny. Over sixty volunteers responded, many with several subdomains, and Leviev got a network of 150 to 200 possible subdomains, ready to go.

The system became known as the “Big Red Button of Navalny”—the user gets to *navalny.us*, sees a big red button, pushes it, and it leads him or her to one of the subdomains. Navalny's blog survives.

Next Leviev went to war against Roskomnadzor's censors. He figured out how to identify who inside the agency was responsible for the search-and-destroy missions against Navalny and others.¹² In April Leviev published a large post with a scheme, logs, and detailed explanations of who was in charge inside of Roskomnadzor for checking the blocked sites.¹³ By exposing them, he made their lives difficult, often trapping them into long, pointless dead ends. When the censors came to work and started to check whether the Navalny blog was working, their screens were filled with images of cats and ponies—a wicked retaliation.

Leviev was pleasantly surprised one day when Roskomnadzor officials acknowledged to the newspaper *Vedomosti* that they saw a cat instead of Navalny's blog.¹⁴ It was a triumph—a rare one—for the digital revolutionaries. Despite all of Roskomnadzor's efforts, Navalny's blog was alive and accessible, and no one needed special software like Tor to access the site.

Leviev was sitting in the offices of TV Dozhd in the Red October compound when he told Irina about his success in evading the censors. Leviev's small company, Newscaster, was broadcasting online from an antiwar street

demonstration in Moscow for TV Dozhd. Newscaster provided the broadcast to TV Dozhd for free because Leviev thought its content was important. The TV Dozhd premises were almost deserted because the channel was on the move after having come under constant pressure. In the patriotic hysterics that were already evident in January 2014, TV Dozhd was accused of being unpatriotic for conducting a controversial online poll that asked viewers whether Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, should have been surrendered to the Nazis in 1941 in order to spare its citizens the mass agony of a brutal nine-hundred-day siege. The poll took place on Sunday, January 26, a day before the seventieth anniversary of the lifting of the siege. Pro-Kremlin bloggers immediately attacked the channel, and in thirty minutes Ilya Klishin, now editor of the channel's site, removed the poll and apologized for the wording. On Monday Putin was in St. Petersburg to take part in official celebrations.¹⁵ He was on his way to the Piskarev cemetery where his brother, who had died during the blockade, is buried, when he was shown the TV Dozhd poll.¹⁶

On January 27 Sindeeva, the founder of TV Dozhd, was sitting in her glass office at Red October. She started getting calls and e-mails from viewers that the channel was going off the air in different regions. A cable operator, who said it was his patriotic duty to throw TV Dozhd off his package, began the attack, and soon others followed.¹⁷ By then TV Dozhd was present in 18 million homes and enjoyed a monthly audience of 12 million viewers. Every day an estimated 1.1 million people watched it. The audience in regions was on the rise, and Sindeeva's contacts told her that the presidential administration was worried about the growth in viewers; TV Dozhd had ceased being just a Moscow hipster's thing. Some operators called Sindeeva and explained that they got phone calls from the Kremlin and could not resist the pressure.¹⁸ "It was a snowball," Sindeeva said. When, on January 29, Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, "TV Dozhd crossed the line of the permissible," all other cable operators followed suit and switched off TV Dozhd.¹⁹ The channel lost millions of viewers—its lifeline.

Sindeeva desperately tried to find a way to get the channel back on cable. The channel held a press conference, and Sindeeva talked about the pressure. She

asked for a personal meeting with Putin and was initially told that Putin agreed. However, Volodin intervened, and the meeting never happened. Journalists of the channel went to Putin's press conferences and asked questions about the fate of TV Dozhd, and on April 17 Putin said something encouraging but it led nowhere.²⁰ In June a TV Dozhd reporter tried again, but the result was the same. Putin simply shrugged, "I don't know who gave the command to switch you off from the cable, I didn't give such a command."²¹ It looked like a déjà vu—his words echoed his meeting with NTV journalists in January 2001.

From this time forward TV Dozhd was available only on the Internet. It lost many advertisers, and Sindeeva was forced to introduce a paid model for TV Dozhd content.

In March TV Dozhd got a letter from its headquarters' landlord: in a few months they were to be expelled from its premises on Red October, the symbol of the modernized hipsters of Medvedev's time. For some months journalists of TV Dozhd had to broadcast from their apartments. But they broadcast nevertheless.²²

On August 2, 2014, Ksenzov's agency, Roskomnadzor, reached a new level, attempting to censor the Internet beyond the Russian borders. The agency sent a request to fourteen websites to block information about an unapproved march in Novosibirsk to support greater autonomy for Siberia from the Moscow central authorities. The march was organized by Artem Loskutov, a twenty-eight-year-old performance artist in Novosibirsk who played out political themes in his art. He wanted to protest Russia's interference in Ukraine by mimicking the Kremlin's rhetoric about "federalization" of Ukraine to justify the separatists' war there.²³ The news of Loskutov's planned demonstration went viral, and the Russian BBC interviewed Loskutov. At once the service received a request from Roskomnadzor to remove the interview from its site. Ksenzov confirmed that the request was valid but declined to explain. In response, the BBC made the request public and refused to remove the interview.²⁴ Roskomnadzor threatened to block the site bbcussian.com on Russian soil, but never followed through.

Most of the fourteen sites complied with Roskomnadzor's request. Among them were Ukrainian websites. One of them was the site TSN.ua, whose editors said they were acting "to maintain accessibility of the entire site for the Russian audience."²⁵ Other sites, like obozrevatel.com, glavcom.ua, and delo.ua, refused to comply, so Roskomnadzor blocked them on Russian soil.

On August 6 the German Internet hosting provider Hetzner Online AG received an e-mail from Roskomnadzor requesting they suspend hosting of the popular Ukrainian news media site glavkom.ua. Hetzner agreed and sent a warning letter to the editors of glavkom.ua. Immediately the letter was posted online, triggering protests—people were outraged that a request from Russia to a firm in Germany could take down a website in Ukraine. Hetzner was forced to apologize.

In December 2014, however, Roskomnadzor sent a warning to the American news site BuzzFeed for posting a video the Russian authorities deemed extremist. The video was removed not by BuzzFeed but by Google, which owns YouTube.²⁶

This was an important victory for Roskomnadzor, marking the first time the agency openly and shamelessly blocked foreign websites for expressing political views regarding Russia.

But in late December 2014 Roskomnadzor made another move, this time against Facebook. On December 19 activists opened an event group on Facebook in support of Alexey Navalny. Navalny, along with his younger brother, was facing trumped-up accusations of fraud. The case was used to keep Navalny under pressure as well as a pretext to keep him under house arrest for months. Prosecutors had asked the court to sentence Navalny to ten years in jail, and the verdict was expected in few days. The event on Facebook was actually an invitation to gather in the center of Moscow to protest against the verdict, as there was no doubt he would be found guilty. The prosecutor's office immediately issued a request to Roskomnadzor to block the event, and Roskomnadzor forwarded the document to Facebook's office in London.²⁷ Facebook complied, blocking the group on December 20.²⁸

The outraged activists launched several new groups, and Leviev, in few hours, added a new "big red button" on the site navalny.us that linked to the

current, unblocked event group on Facebook. Facebook's decision to comply with the Russian censor triggered a great deal of outrage in Moscow and abroad.²⁹ Following the outcry, Facebook and Twitter decided not to block the event groups launched by Navalny's supporters.³⁰

The online protest forced the authorities to change their plans: instead of January 15, the Navalny brothers' verdict was announced on December 30. Alexey Navalny was given three and a half years of suspended sentence, and his younger brother, Oleg Navalny, was sent to prison for three and a half years.³¹ If the authorities had hoped to discourage protesters by shifting the verdict to December 30, the day before New Year's Eve, they miscalculated. That cold night thousands of Muscovites assembled on Tverskaya Street, two hundred meters from the Kremlin, to protest Navalny's verdict. Navalny, who was still under house arrest, made it to Tverskaya but was detained shortly after he appeared along with some of his close supporters.

Almost twenty-five years prior, Relcom and Demos programmers didn't wait for someone to tell them what to do during the putsch. Likewise, in December 2014 activists didn't wait for a leader's decision—in this case, Navalny—to start launching groups to support him on Facebook. It was a horizontal structure, a network, that made all of that possible. It repeated itself time and again.

Although Navalny stood as a symbol of Moscow's protests in December 2011, he was under lock and key most of December. It was activists and journalists who took over organizing protest rallies. Three years later, in December 2014, Navalny was again under lock and key, placed under house arrest, and he couldn't take part in organizing efforts. But again it didn't matter. The group on Facebook was launched first by a Navalny friend, Leonid Volkov, and when this first group was blocked, a dozen new groups were launched, this time by people with no ties to Navalny who were simply outraged by censorship.

The authorities who sought to block, filter, and censor simply did not know