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Beware an Isolated Russia's 'Splinternet'

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The free and open World Wide Web has for years been moving toward becoming a patchwork of information siloes, divided by national borders. That shift towards a so-called splinternet(1) accelerated over the weekend, when Russian officials announced they were limiting access to Facebook products, arguing that Meta Platforms Inc. had blocked access to Russian media outlets.

Big Tech is walking a tightrope here. While it makes geopolitical sense for the financial sector to sting the Kremlin with sanctions, blocking information tools hurts Russian citizens who have long suffered from a diet of pro-Kremlin propaganda. It makes the chance of a popular pushback against Vladimir Putin even more remote.

Russia has excelled for years at “dezinformatsiya” and its citizens are subjected to it day in and day out. While it was encouraging to see protests in St. Petersburg against the invasion of Ukraine, many more Russians believe their military is carrying out a “peace-keeping mission” to defend ethnic Russians. Russian TV rarely reports on Ukrainian resistance and says the mission is being carried out with few casualties. Russians are told that Putin is fighting human-rights abuses, or that Ukraine is preparing a “dirty bomb.” On the popular Russian messaging app Telegram, viral memes have spread the narrative that the U.S., not Russia, is orchestrating the crisis.

For all its faults, Facebook is still one of the few platforms where Russians can get an outside view of the war and where what remains of civil society can try and organize. Russian search engine Yandex and social network Vkontakte have more market share than Google and Facebook, but the U.S. sites are still available to Russian users. Apple has operations in the country too.

Some commentators, like political strategist Rick Wilson, have said that Meta should cut off Russian access to Facebook and Instagram, echoing a call from Ukrainian officials who have asked Apple to ban Russian access to its App Store. But losing access to app stores, Facebook or Twitter would only strengthen the bubble of propaganda that surrounds Russian citizens.

That may be why online platforms are simply cutting the advertising pipes for now. Alphabet Inc.'s Google, Twitter Inc. and Facebook have all announced that they are suspending Russian

state media accounts from advertising. Financially, that won't do very much. The most popular state channels in Russia, including RT and Sputnik, don't spend a great deal on Facebook advertising, and millions of people visit their pages anyway.

Late Monday, Facebook said it would restrict access to RT and Sputnik across the European Union. But that comes with blowback. RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan played the censorship card on Sunday after the EU enacted its own regional ban: "They wanted to close us for some time. Now a convenient excuse appeared," she said in a broadcast. "The people of the EU will see how much the lauded talk of freedom of speech costs."

Russia's illegal invasion has underscored social media's long-standing paradox in helping causes like the Arab Spring while also being exploited as a tool for disinformation. Facebook and Twitter can at once be critical windows to truth for Russian citizens and platforms for propaganda.

That quandary is getting worse as regulation ratchets up across the globe, and tech firms find themselves subject to a growing array of national laws aimed at taming their content. Government requests for Google to take down content have increased by 500% since 2015 while authorities in nearly 50 countries last year pursued new rules for tech companies, according to a report in the Wall Street Journal. That included Russia, which has threatened Google and Facebook with multi-million dollar fines for failing to delete content the Kremlin deems illegal. The vast majority of demands to take down YouTube content in 2019 came from Russia, according to a report from Google.

As Putin's information war intensifies, it will get harder for online firms to decide how to manage the information flow. But leaving Russia altogether would be a grave mistake.

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(1) The term splinternet was coined by the Cato Institute in 2001 and has largely been discussed in the context of China's Great Firewall. In 2019, Russia also introduced a sovereign Internet law which tightened Moscow's control over the nation's web infrastructure and provided a means to disconnect its networks from the rest of the world.

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