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# ESRC sponsored project: The Internet & Everyday Rights in Russia (RES-000-22-4159)

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Co-Investigated with Prof. Sarah Oates,  
Maryland.

# Today's presentation

- A little about my research background
- An overview of the project 'Internet and Everyday rights' I was co-investigator on
- Focus on interviews conducted as part of this project (my role)
- Analysis is ongoing, but key findings about how citizens perceive the role of the internet for citizen engagement/activism on issues important in their daily lives

# My work

- Past 10 years researching women's perceptions of the role that human rights play in their everyday lives in Russia
- Informed development of concepts 'everyday rights' and 'everyday violations' (Turbine, 2007)
  - a focus on the importance of social and economic rights issues for citizens
  - Childcare/care (related to issues of health, education, welfare)
  - Legal entitlements/status esp. in event of family breakdown
- An exploration of the different pathways to accessing human rights that women use in their daily lives
  - Family/networks
  - Legal advice, claims
  - Appeals to authorities
  - Campaigning/grassroots organising
  - **Online variations** of above e.g. social networking forums, online forms, legal advice

# Context to the project

- Building on/expanding my research showing women's discussion of the use of online resources as source of emotional support, advice (incl. legal), sharing advice/problems
- Feeding into a growing body of research on growth of internet penetration and use in Russia
- Assess claims that the internet can open up new spaces of citizen engagement and tools to 'self help' and improve lives
- Be mindful of the pitfalls of over-emphasizing the potential of the internet
  - Access
  - Anonymity, confidentiality, reliability of advice, suspicions, skepticism (scamming, ID theft, trolling and cyber abuse)
  - Centrality of offline relationships and experiences – internet as complementary

# Overview of project aims & objectives

- Funded by UK Economic & Social Research Council (RES-000-22-4159)
  - Running October 2010 - 31 March 2013
  - Co-Investigator with Prof. Sarah Oates, Maryland  
<http://www.merrill.umd.edu/directory/sarah-oates>
- To explore citizens' use of the internet as a resource and tool for rights campaigning
- With a focus on 'everyday rights' e.g. social, economic and broadly defined 'welfare' concerns

# Project methodology 1 – online content

- New approach – rather than target specific platforms e.g. twitter or an organization – focus on broader case studies and online content generated across platforms
  - Why – manage content, but also see spread across the internet and potentially global reach (International, domestic, Russia domains)
- Identified ‘firestorms’ i.e. case studies that related to contentious social and economic rights issues (health, welfare, education, housing, childcare etc.) that would generate online content
  - Code online content from case study websites (e.g. webpages, comments sections, media reports, forums, links, blogposts, social networking sites)
  - and then make a ‘map’ of these linkages i.e. where else online did viewers go?
- What did this tell us?
  - Firestorms do generate interest and in some cases offline action e.g. kidney dialysis or parents with children with Hunters Syndrome (see Oates, 2012)
  - Individual basis/small community basis rather than widespread
  - Fleeting/passing

# Project methodology 2 – offline perceptions & in-depth interviews

- 20 qualitative open ended in-depth interviews (interviews lasting from 1 hour to over 2 hours)
  - Conducted by a local research assistant in the provincial city of Ulyanovsk
  - 10 women and 10 men across age range of 18 -58 years
  - Mix of educational backgrounds, occupations, status
- Asking about general internet use – access, what used for, perceptions of internet as a tool in daily life, any use of internet for resolving social and economic rights issues?

# Key findings

- Who is online?
  - More women than men – men, particularly over 40s and less skilled skeptical about online sphere (suspicious) and about potential role in daily lives (what does it provide access to?)
- What do people use the internet for?
  - As part of their work
  - Personal – socializing, lifestyle, dating, but mainly maintaining existing offline relationships
  - Daily bureaucracy e.g. passport renewals, banking, dr appointments
  - Some local civic engagement e.g. animal rights, environmental campaigns, some discussion of politics
  - Rights activism e.g. petitions, setting up campaigns, sourcing information, contacting authorities

# Key findings

- How do people perceive the online sphere and their activity?
  - Mixed – useful for work, personal and daily bureacracy
  - Valuable source of information (although also ‘too much’)
  - Negative in suspicion – who else is online? What are their intentions? Esp. around consumption, banking (scamming, identity fraud)
  - Broad support for some level of ‘control’ of the ‘negative’ aspects on online

# Key findings

- And for civic activism/rights claims?
  - Again, useful for information and awareness raising of offline campaigns and events
  - Most effective seen as offline/rooted in community – online again a complementary tool
  - Signing online petitions – ‘donate and forget’, not necessarily viewed as ‘real engagement’
  - Engaging with blogs and online campaigns – volume and instant nature, almost ‘instantly forgettable’?

# Conclusions

- Internet is a feature of daily life and is generally valued, particularly for 'daily bureaucracy'
- Ultimately, complimentary to and supporting existing offline relationships and activities, not replacing and not viewed by anyone as a substitute
- Offline activity viewed as key/most effective
- Issues of access, class, gender, education
  - who can get online?
  - Who wants to be online? (and why not – suspicion & skepticism)
  - Who do online campaigns reach/help?