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Interlopers by choice, or interlopers by circumstance? Alexey Navalny and alternative journalistic projects in contemporary autocratic Russia

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Abstract

In February 2024, Russian opposition activist Alexey Navalny died in a Western Siberian prison aged just 47. Known as a vocal opposition leader in Russia in the 2010s, he was regularly trying to be elected but also organised the largest mass anti-establishment and anti-corruption protests in Russia before his untimely death. Deprived of access and coverage in the Russian mainstream media, Navalny and his associates established their own media channels, including personal YouTube channels and online media outlets such as *Navalny LIVE* to avoid censorship and expose the corruption and abuses of power of high-ranking officials in Russia. However, at the same time, Navalny and his colleagues cannot be labelled as 'journalists' in a normative sense. They were not professional journalists and had not gone through the processes of journalistic socialisation, but rather 'tried on' journalistic roles and investigative journalism practices to expose corrupt elites. In this sense, Navalny and his team can be called (explicit) interlopers who adopt journalistic identities and force a reconsideration of what journalists are and journalism is. In this study, we look at the case of Navalny and his team and their investigative documentaries on YouTube. We relate his practice to the journalistic concept of (explicit) interlopers, analyse how their unique and alternative journalistic project has diversified a

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largely monopolised and authoritarian Russian public sphere, and propose extending the notion of interlopers by differentiating between *interlopers by choice*, and *interlopers by circumstance*.

Keywords
Boundary work, field theory, interlopers, journalistic roles, peripheral actors, Navalny, Russian journalism, YouTube

Introduction

On 16 February 2024, the Russian prison service announced that one of Russia's most prolific opposition leaders, Alexey Navalny, had died aged 47. Just half a year earlier, in August 2023, a Russian court sentenced him to 19 years in prison for extremism-related charges. This came on top of the 2 years that Navalny had already served in prison since 2021 and is one of the harshest political sentences in modern Russian history. While Navalny was unable to get elected in Russia due to deliberate obstacles put in place by the Russian regime, he and his colleagues organised the largest anti-regime protests in Russia in 2011, 2017, and 2019, thus consistently contesting the monopoly of Putin's elite in power. From 2015 onwards, he and his team published a series of YouTube documentaries exposing the corruption of high-ranking officials through journalistic practices. Such inquiries are important and rare media artefacts in Russian journalism, as they challenge the mainstream pro-government media discourse in authoritarian Russia but also helped trigger mass protests gathering thousands of citizens dissatisfied with the Kremlin's politics. In this sense, Navalny and some of his associates "tried on" different political communication roles such as those of a politician, a journalist, a blogger, and an activist (Glazunova, 2022) to be able to navigate and survive in an autocratic political environment.

Yet, during his imprisonment and subsequent death, Navalny's movement had been in serious decline for a while. In 2020, Navalny was poisoned, evacuated to Germany, and, upon arrival, arrested and imprisoned. Following his arrest, several 'Free Navalny' protests were organised by his associates in 2021, who were demanding his immediate release – but these protests were short-lived, and quickly suppressed by the regime. Navalny's movement was declared as 'extremist' by law enforcement, and his colleagues were either arrested, imprisoned, or fled the country fearing criminal prosecution. Following such suppression, his colleagues and other anti-regime actors were forced to cease their activities in Russia, not least because the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has only further sped up the gradual disintegration of their movement. Navalny was unable to function as an opposition leader from prison, and his colleagues were struggling to revive the movement from abroad (Glazunova, 2022).

Importantly, the political value and importance of his movement in Russian politics cannot be measured in terms of policy success: neither his documentaries, nor his protests have led to any substantial reforms or high-profile resignations. This is understandable, however, as scholars including Repnikova (2020) and Stetka and Örnebring (2013) point out that in authoritarian regimes, policy changes as a result of journalistic investigations are difficult to instigate due to weak political institutions and restrictions on freedom of speech. Instead, it is specifically his influence on investigative journalism in Russia in the last decade that cannot be denied and should be reflected upon. Not a journalist by education or profession, he and his colleagues managed to create influential, alternative journalistic projects on YouTube – using both his personal and the *Navalny LIVE* channels – that shed light on Russia's widespread corruption issues. We label his journalistic project 'alternative' by aligning ourselves with Litvinenko's (2021) definition of "alternative television" in Russia's "largely state-controlled media landscape … which makes it a demonstrative example for studying political communication on YouTube in an authoritarian context" (p. 4). His outlets joined a choir of other professional outlets (e.g., *Novaya Gazeta*, *Proyekt*, *Meduza*) and journalistic Internet projects (e.g., *Mediazona*) whose investigations into the wrongdoings of the Russian elite went viral thanks to the affordances of digital and social media. However, unlike professional journalistic outlets, Navalny and his colleagues were *adopting* journalistic practice and *sourcing their legitimacy* as a media outlet from elsewhere, which affords them the label of (explicit) interlopers (Eldridge II, 2019).

Our study looks at the case of Navalny, his team, and their investigative documentaries on YouTube in the late 2010s and early 2020s. We relate their practice to the journalistic concept of (explicit) interlopers and ask how Navalny and his team were adopting journalistic practice in their online documentaries, as well as *where* and *how* they sourced the legitimacy of a journalistic media outlet to challenge official and mainstream media discourses in Russia. The latter helps us extend the notion of an 'interloper' (Eldridge, 2014) by analysing a unique case study of an alternative Internet project in an authoritarian context – one that seeks to validate its credibility in the audiences' eyes as a legitimate investigative outlet through both content and practice. In many ways, Navalny's journalistic practice can be seen as a source of contestation of authoritarianism on a national scale and can serve as a demonstrative example of how interlopers operate in authoritarian contexts.[1]

Literature review

Journalistic boundaries and peripheral actors

In the 2000s, Navalny's first foray into blogging came in the form of his *LiveJournal* platform, which contained parts of broader investigations of widespread corruption in Russia. Later in the 2010s, and deprived of access and coverage in the Russian mainstream media, Navalny and his associates established their own media channels, including personal YouTube channels and online media outlets such as *Navalny LIVE* to avoid censorship and expose the corruption and abuses of power of high-ranking officials in

Russia. Navalny's media belongs to a group of Internet watchdogs (Glazunova, 2022) and forms part of a wider movement of outlets having emerged in the 2010s. Among these are journalist-YouTubers like Yury Dud' and Irina Shikhman who conducted journalistic investigations independent from the government and disseminated them online. That said, Navalny and his team cannot be labelled as 'journalists' from a purely normative perspective. They were not professional journalists (instead, mostly lawyers) and have not gone through the processes of journalistic socialisation, i.e., the adoption of "the institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs" (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017: p. 125) that takes place in professional communities sharing their practices. Instead, Navalny and his colleagues rather "tried on" journalistic roles and investigative journalism practices to expose corrupt elites, discredit the establishment, and mobilise supporters (Glazunova, 2022). As such, their practice can be best characterised as sitting on the intersection between *practising* digital activism whilst *using* investigative journalism as their technique. Alternative journalistic projects such as Navalny's, which also involve elements of advocacy (Glazunova, 2020), helped inform Russian society about pressing political issues in their country and call people to action.

Here, one can draw parallels to the emergence of *WikiLeaks*: while certainly not a 'traditional' journalistic actor, the platform has for years claimed to perform journalism's watchdog and investigative role (Eldridge, 2014). And once the 'social news' (Hurcombe et al., 2019) website *BuzzFeed* launched its investigative arm *BuzzFeed News*, it became an accepted player in the field (Tandoc, 2018). What unites these – admittedly very distinct – examples is that they challenge established, normative conventions of *who* or *what* can be subsumed as operating under the umbrella term 'journalism', be it in their outward positioning towards the public or their actual practice. Instead, they are known as peripheral actors acting on the margins of journalism and thus challenging conventional understandings of who can claim membership to the journalistic field. This is where the study of journalistic boundaries, which has a rich history dating back several decades, comes into play (see Schapals, 2024).

The study of boundaries is frequently associated with sociologist Thomas Gieryn, who, in 1983, published his influential article "Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science". While Gieryn's work wasn't originally focused on journalism studies, it is relevant to the field because it explores who holds the authority to speak on certain topics—and who does not. According to Gieryn (1983), these tensions can be viewed as arenas of conflict where different actors vie for that authority. It is crucial to examine why these struggles arise, particularly in journalism, for three main reasons: the absence of formal qualifications required to enter the field, the lack of clear boundaries separating journalism from non-journalism, and journalism's constantly evolving nature as both an industry and a profession.

Yet, the concept not only explains how boundaries are established but also how they are reinforced or contested when exposed to internal or external pressures. As a result, boundaries are flexible and can change over time: current actors may be pushed out of the journalistic field; or new actors may enter, expanding the scope of journalism.

To date, much of the research has focused on the expulsion of actors (Carlson, 2019). Expulsion happens when actions are deemed unethical by those within the journalistic

field. However, the field can also expand with the introduction of new actors. However, in authoritarian contexts such as Russia's, the boundaries of what counts as 'journalism' in the country are largely determined by political elites (that is, the Presidential Administration, the censorship body *Roskomnadzor*, law enforcement, and self-censorship measures imposed by newspaper editors). In this realm, Lowrey and Erzikova (2013) label the Russian journalistic professional community as disjointed due to varying organisational goals, lacking autonomy due to government dependence, fierce competition over resources, generational differences, and a non-existent shared occupational ideology (p. 641). Similarly, Bodrunova et al. (2021) describe journalism culture in Russia as fragmented: on one hand, still linked to Soviet patterns (including journalists' self-restraint for ideological reasons); on the other, partially accepting of Western journalism ideals (including journalistic autonomy and freedom of speech). Interestingly, they point to two disparate reasons for journalistic self-restraint and censorship: one is positive (including source protection and avoidance of harm), the other is negative (including avoidance of risks to themselves). Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2016) label this intrinsic value as *adekvatnost* (appropriateness), described as a journalistic self-understanding of what rules of the game they ought to play by, which of course harks back to Bourdieu's influential field theory. In a similar vein, in the *Worlds of Journalism* study, Russian journalists admit that they feel the pressure of political influence in their work and are forced into a collaborative role with the state. Moreover, they mostly perform an accommodative role to Russian audiences by providing information that most appeals to them (Hanusch et al., 2019). As a whole, this might explain why alternative and independent journalistic projects which deviate from those norms rarely emerge, and when they do, they can barely survive due to deliberate obstacles put in place by the regime. These outlets face administrative, financial, and other risks; due to this, they take on different formats and adopt journalistic practices to survive in tough conditions. As such, they can be seen as operating on the periphery of journalism.

As mentioned earlier, Navalny can be classified as an *interloper*. Such actors, according to Eldridge (2014), strongly embrace journalistic ideals such as an adversarial role, and criticise legacy journalists for failing to adhere to this role, or believe they are offering something that is functionally equivalent to journalism. In further fine-tuning this framework, Navalny fits the *explicit interloper* classification proposed by Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018), described as "non-traditional journalism actors who may not necessarily be welcomed or defined as journalists and work on the periphery of the profession while directly contributing content or products to the creation and distribution of news" (p. 73). Classifications such as these help further our understanding of peripheral actors in journalism.

Journalistic roles

As mentioned, while Navalny's actual practice closely resembles journalism, it cannot be defined as journalism as traditionally conceived – for one, his activist rhetoric clearly runs counter to professional journalistic standards, such as the objectivity paradigm. Still, Navalny's practice does inhabit roles journalism scholarship has for decades found

amongst journalists working for mainstream media. In the literature, this group has been prioritised in studying how journalists understand their roles. One notable exception is a study by Lichtenstein et al. (2021), who investigated the role understandings of newly emergent players on YouTube producing journalistic content. According to them, this group belongs "to a growing number of new digital actors who use, support, and challenge journalistic practices within and without mass media organisations. … Although not always defining themselves as journalists and often being dismissed as not belonging to the journalistic field, new digital actors contribute to journalistic functions in society" (p. 1104). Research investigating the role conceptions of non-traditional actors operating in the journalistic space remains sparse, however, as does research on journalistic roles happening outside the bounds of a predominantly Western understanding of what journalism can do for democracy and the roles journalists play in that process.

When it comes to studying journalistic role conceptions, the *Worlds of Journalism* study led by Thomas Hanitzsch, which publishes research on journalistic roles in regular intervals since 2007, is especially influential in this space. Importantly, the most recent wave of the study (2012-2016) explicitly states its emphasis on *professional journalists* as study subjects, and that "respondents other than professional journalists should not be included in the data set" (Worlds of Journalism, 2023). For the purpose of this study however, the framework still presents the most extensive portrait of journalistic roles around the globe, which is why we argue that it can be applied to the study of non-traditional, journalistic actors, too. In the study, Hanitzsch and colleagues classify journalists working in several countries based on the extent to which they are interventionist in their role, to what degree they hold powerful individuals accountable, and the degree to which they are oriented towards the market, that is, serving their audience (Hanitzsch, 2007). This model was then further finetuned by Claudia Mellado, who classified journalists based on six roles they fulfil, namely: interventionist, watchdog, supporters, service providers, infotainment, as well as civic roles (Mellado, 2014). In a later, seminal study by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), important distinctions were made between roles journalists fulfil in political versus everyday life. Most recently, this framework was further developed in a study by Standaert et al. (2021) in which they take this differentiation as a starting point to offer an elaborate model of journalistic roles. This includes six roles: the informational/instructive role (journalists providing citizens with relevant information to enable them to participate in political life), the analytical/deliberative role (journalists directly intervening in the political discourse, e.g., through news commentary), the critical/monitorial role (journalists acting as a "fourth estate," a role most pronounced in Western contexts), the advocative/radical role (journalists taking a stance in political matters and having that stance reflected in media coverage), the developmental/educative role (journalists' profoundly interventionist role, actively promoting change and contributing to public education), and the collaborative/facilitative role (journalists acting as constructive government partners).

Based on these descriptors, the critical/monitorial role as well as the developmental/educative role are somewhat suited to Navalny, while the advocative/radical role is especially well suited. This role has clear elements of advocacy inherent to it. Such actors,

who operate in the advocacy realm, "pursue stories that reject the agenda of the elite and include and promote the rights of the marginalised. […] It is a journalism that calls for and expects change" (Charles, 2019). We will pick up on these roles in the Findings section.

Journalistic authority and legitimacy

In his practice, albeit not a 'traditional' journalistic actor, Navalny explicitly deploys journalistic practices to legitimise his work and to act as an authoritative voice in the field. Not only does he do this through his creative communication tools, such as his often-viral videos appearing on the *Navalny LIVE* channel, but also his effective, populist rhetoric to challenge the hegemony of those in power (Glazunova, 2020). When considering journalistic authority and legitimacy, it once again becomes clear why the study of journalistic boundaries – that is, *who* or *what* can be considered as a journalist – matters: namely, because boundaries are not static, immovable objects, but dynamic – subject to change whenever their legitimacy is put into question, often through external forces.

There are several ways in which established and emergent journalistic actors attempt to bolster their authority and legitimacy. Unless subjected to direct attacks by external forces, established media carry with them a certain level of prestige: this prestige can express itself through external institutional validation, such as the granting of a press pass allowing journalists access to otherwise closed spaces, commercial and professional success, and senior job titles (Vos and Thomas, 2018). This is what Örnebring et al. (2018) refer to as 'journalistic capital': the accumulation of cultural and social capital – or 'clout' – that makes mainstream media attain (perceived) superiority over other players in the journalistic field. And, as Vos and Thomas (2018) point out, "when quasi-journalistic actors – particularly bloggers – came on the scene around the turn of the century, they had none of these symbols of authority, and journalists were quick to point this out" (p. 2005). The same goes for the more recent rise of peripheral actors, who have none of these symbols of authority. Unlike established actors, such prestige is not *handed* to them – to the contrary, it has to be *earned*. In the space of alternative media, research has shown that legitimacy is primarily established through emphasising (existing forms) of journalistic practice, that is, journalists referring "to well-established practices in the journalistic field to claim belonging despite their liminal position" (Medeiros and Badr, 2022: p. 1351). Other (previously) emerging outlets such as *BuzzFeed*, for example, were shown to garner their legitimacy through partaking in investigative journalism, specifically, through the establishment of *BuzzFeed News* and its now-infamous publication of the Trump dossier. Other, and perhaps more nefarious ways of achieving this, are evident at the far-right US-based website *Breitbart*, which has been shown to derive its legitimacy by critiquing the norms and values of mainstream media outlets. They also do this by demarcating 'their good' journalism from 'other bad' journalism (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). This critique is also evident in the works of Navalny, who regularly calls out state-owned Russian mainstream media for either ignoring or falsely portraying those in ruling power.

Method

In this study, we explore the YouTube communication of Alexey Navalny's most prolific investigations on his personal channel over a 7-year time span (2016-2023). Our dataset builds on previous work, consisting of 77 collected text transcripts (in Russian) of YouTube videos published on Navalny's personal YouTube channel. The cumulative length of these videos was 10 h, 43 min, and 7 s. The transcripts were randomly selected out of 150 videos Navalny posted from 13 December 2016 until 5 May 2018 (Glazunova, 2020). These 2 years cover Navalny's campaign for the 2018 Presidential Elections during which he published his most resonant documentaries about then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, "Don't call him Dimon" (Navalny, 2017), the video, "Yachts, oligarchs, girls: The hunt for a briber" that shed light on corruption schemes of the businessmen Oleg Deripaska and then-Deputy PM Sergey Prihodko (Navalny, 2018), and other videos and documentaries. Additionally, we extracted the text transcripts of the most resonant documentaries that were published on his channel between 2020 and 2023 (in anticipation of his arrest in 2021 and after his imprisonment; the videos after his imprisonment only feature his colleagues). These are:

- 'The case is solved: I know who wanted to kill me' (Navalny, 2020a) – a 51:40-min documentary into Navalny's poisoning in 2020.
- "I called my killer: He admitted his crime" (Navalny, 2020b) – a 33:20-min documentary and investigation into his poisoning in 2020, where Navalny calls the alleged perpetrator of his poisoning and further uncovers other alleged perpetrators of the crime.

Some other videos were explored, too. We used a combination of manual content analysis and textual analysis to find references to the journalistic practices used by Navalny and his colleagues in their documentaries. Based on the evidence from our transcripts, we then inductively draw conclusions about the source of legitimacy in Navalny's journalism. In some instances, we analysed additional secondary sources, such as visual screenshots of Navalny's 77 videos, news articles, organisations' websites and other textual elements to strengthen our argument. Overall, our rich dataset and longitudinal analysis offer a birds-eye-view of Navalny's communication and documentaries over the past 7 years.

Against this methodological backdrop, in this study, we concentrate on two separate, but interlinked questions: first, how Navalny's practice resembles established journalistic techniques, backed up with examples from his extensive, investigative YouTube documentaries; and second, how he attempted to establish an authoritative voice in his investigations. As such, we asked the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do Navalny and his team adopt journalistic practices and roles in their YouTube communications?

RQ2: How do Navalny and his team source legitimacy in the audience's eyes?

Findings

As mentioned, unlike professional media outlets that specialise in major investigations, Navalny and his team did not have the material resources or capital to conduct major investigations (see Örnebring et al., 2018); moreover, they lacked the prestige and reputation of mainstream media and investigative journalists that would furnish them with a degree of legitimacy. In order to earn the audiences' trust and call them to action, to be perceived as a reputable 'institution' on its own, Navalny and his team sourced journalistic legitimacy through multiple ways, related to the roles they were "trying on" (Glazunova, 2022) as explicit interlopers. We turn to these roles in the following section. Each paragraph is subdivided into the sections journalistic *content* and *style* (to address RQ1) as well as journalistic *techniques* and *collaborations* (to address RQ2). Following this structure, we first outline *how journalistic practices were adopted* (RQ1), and secondly, *how Navalny and his team sourced legitimacy* (RQ2) in the audience's eyes. In instances where Navalny played the role of a politician, a blogger, or an activist – as opposed to a journalist – adopting practices were not explored.

RQ1 asked how Navalny and his team adopt journalistic practices and roles in their YouTube communications, and we argue that they do so through both content and style. In terms of *content*, Navalny and his team frequently discursively demarcated their practice from mainstream, pro-Kremlin journalism in Russia. In these instances, they were sourcing their legitimacy by 'othering' traditional forms of journalism, highlighting 'their good' work compared to 'other bad' work (see Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). In his videos, Navalny would always portray himself as the sole bearer of truth in Russia, as opposed to a biased, pro-Kremlin mainstream media. He would often finish his videos with his signature phrase, "We tell the truth here". A notable example is a video portraying Vladimir Solovyev, a Russian TV presenter and commentator on *Russia-1*. The video is called "Apartments, summer houses, and the Italian villa of Vladimir Solovyev". He starts the video by denigrating mainstream journalists in Russia, and asks: "How much can you earn from lying? Today, we ask Vladimir Solovyov, one of the most disgusting television liars and propagandists. He answers us by his own example: very, very much. … In a normal system, they would be third-rate presenters with low salaries. In Russia, they are swimming in money" (Navalny, 2018).

In another video, he accuses Margarita Simonyan, the Editor-in-Chief of *Russia Today*, and her husband, Tigran Keosayan, a film director and TV presenter, of being "parasites" and deceitfully spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda. Severe media criticism is a common thread amongst many of Navalny's investigations. This fits the notion of 'interlopers' developed by Eldridge (2014) particularly well: indeed, they strongly embrace journalistic ideals such as the adversarial role and criticise legacy journalists for failing to adhere to this role, or believe they are offering something that is functionally equivalent to journalism. Here, the sub-category of 'explicit interlopers' (Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018) is especially fitting: these are non-traditional actors who challenge journalistic authority and compete with news organisations for the audience's attention. Another example is the infamous *WikiLeaks* platform, which became known for leaking vast swaths of confidential government information on their website, thereby claiming to

perform journalism's watchdog and investigative role (Eldridge, 2014). But while *WikiLeaks* "adheres to journalistic values of being a watchdog of those in power and disclosing their findings to the public … the platform also "violates [several other] elements of the professional journalistic paradigm" (Coddington, 2012: p. 383), such as objectivity, source-based reporting routines, and institutionality (Hanusch and Löhmann, 2022: p. 8).

In terms of Navalny's content, we also see a strong overlap with certain journalistic roles discussed earlier, especially the advocative/radical role. Actors who embody this role are not neutral or objective observers, but participants in political life (notably, Navalny himself was a politician participating in elections) who bring a certain ideological bias to their reporting – as adversaries of the powerful or as advocates of particular values and groups (Standaert et al., 2021). Breaking down the advocative/radical role further, Navalny suits three subcategories especially well: that of an advocate (being a spokesperson for the socially disadvantaged, and actively promoting a social cause), that of a missionary (acting out of personal motivation), as well as that of an adversary (deliberately positioning himself as a countervailing force to the state and political authority, that is, "being a thorn in power's eyes", Standaert et al., 2021: p. 930).

In terms of *style*, a lot of thought has also gone into how Navalny is visually depicted as a journalist and staged in his studio set-up, thus adopting journalistic style and presentation (Glazunova, 2022). In many of his videos, he filmed several pieces-to-camera in the style of a news presenter, imitating the "intimacy at a distance" principle common for television journalism (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Within this principle, he imitates face-to-face interaction with the audience, while he himself is located remotely in a studio. His formal clothing (usually a collared shirt and tie, occasionally also a full suit), the studio set-up (a table in front of the camera and a neutral background), and his manner of speaking to the audience (as a piece-to-camera) all resemble typical journalistic television work. In so doing, he aims at legitimising alternative television journalism with its adapted aesthetics (Glazunova, 2022).

RQ2 asked how Navalny and his team source their legitimacy in the audience's eyes, and we argue that they do so by closely following journalistic research techniques as well as engaging in high-profile collaborations with major journalistic players. In terms of *techniques*, Navalny and his team regularly used advanced journalistic methods of investigation and presented their obtained evidence. This includes the use of drone footage, social media data analysis, and interviews with informants (Glazunova, 2022). The former is especially notable in the context of Navalny's practice: the depiction of previously unknown officials' properties had a sensational and triggering effect on most Russians living in poverty. Navalny and his team used drone footage in most of their resonant enquiries, particularly in the "Don't call him Dimon" video, which showed luxurious estates and wineries allegedly belonging to the former PM Medvedev. As such, the use of drone footage had become a powerful tool for expanding the boundaries of what is 'visible' in authoritarian regimes, and Navalny and his team skilfully used this method of obtaining evidence to their advantage, which, amongst other effects, further drove the sensational nature of his videos. Not only has this method of enquiry proven its benefits to the practice of investigative journalism before, but it is also clear that it constitutes one of

the most effortless and least resource-consuming paths of investigation (Vobic, 2019). Apart from drone footage, Navalny and his team also mostly relied on publicly available databases and other means of open-source intelligence, which has become a critical toolkit amongst professional journalists as of late.

In contrast to investigative outlets such as the Russian-language *Meduza* which conduct interviews with informants 'close to the administration of the Kremlin' that can confirm or refute their findings, Navalny and his team do not have access to such sources. Interviews have especially high value in the hierarchies of evidence model in investigative journalism proposed by Ettema and Glasser (1984), although it is of course worth noting that the digital age has brought with it new sources of evidence not captured in the original model, including the rise of data journalism and related cross-country collaborations, as was the case with the large-scale Panama Papers investigation in 2016. Interviews, however, increase the 'weight' of the investigation, and with it, its quality and trustworthiness in the eyes of the audience. In the case of Navalny, however, that quality can suffer due to the absence of access to government-affiliated sources that can speak on the basis of anonymity. Navalny, as the figurehead of opposition towards the government, cannot a priori communicate with them, even on condition of anonymity. This means that Navalny and his team demonstrate their legitimacy as an investigative outlet by showing audiences that they can work with advanced methods of investigation, such as drone journalism, data journalism, or open-source intelligence.

In so doing, Navalny's techniques also speak to the critical/monitorial role in Standaert et al.'s (2021) framework. Actors in this category pursue the ideal of journalism as a Fourth Estate relentlessly; they are outspoken critics and hold power to account. Through the advanced methods of investigation, Navalny and his team engage in, he especially fits the two sub-categories of the investigator (journalists who pursue relentless research and investigative reporting) and the revealer (the practice of disclosing information and uncovering the truth). Effective as they are, on their own, these methods are insufficient; therefore, Navalny and his team further seek legitimacy elsewhere.

In saying that, Navalny and his team also frequently engage in journalistic *collaborations* with other reputable news organisations to benefit from their authority. Importantly, Navalny's YouTube channel is not registered as a news media outlet by the Russian censorship body *Roskomnadzor*, is not recognised in any way by the Russian authorities, and often lacks the resources and tools to conduct full-scale, lengthy investigations; as such, it constantly risks being perceived as an amateur Internet project operating on the fringes of journalism. To counter this perception, Navalny and his team cooperate with credible, investigative media outlets, banking on their legitimacy. A standout example here is the collaboration with *Bellingcat, CNN, Der Spiegel,* and *The Insider* looking into the poisoning of Navalny in 2020. The product of these joint investigations were published on Navalny's YouTube channel in 2021, resulting in two videos: 'The case is solved: I know who wanted to kill me', and 'I called my killer: He admitted his crime'. In the first video, Navalny starts with his opening remarks, saying: "This is not our investigation. We only got involved in the final part. Most of it was done by the investigative groups *Bellingcat* and *The Insider*, especially their cool colleague Christo Grozev from Bulgaria", whom he is sitting next to in the video and whom he credits with

uncovering who was behind his failed assassination attempt. He also credits *Bellingcat* and its success at large-scale investigations. While he does not mention *CNN* or *Der Spiegel* specifically, a lengthy *Bellingcat* account of how the investigation was conducted was published on its website (Bellingcat, 2020). According to this report, the following investigative journalism practices were used: analysing call metadata for telephone numbers; analysing "leaked databases … giving us a large number of data points to cross-reference and verify any new data that we acquire"; and analysing flight data (that is, flights departing at the same time as Navalny's when he was poisoned).

Such innovative collaborations in journalism, often involving partners only adjacent to or outside of the bounds of journalism, have been found to serve the needs of marginalised groups – beyond a mere *informational* approach, but towards an *educational* approach aimed at effecting change (Walters, 2023). In adopting this approach, here, we see Navalny putting the developmental/educative role in Standaert et al.'s (2021) framework into action: actors in this category are profoundly interventionist in their practice. This role has two subcategories that can be ascribed to Navalny: the educator (journalists raising public awareness about social issues), and the change agent (journalists acting as catalysts for social change). Overall, Navalny's journalistic collaborations are also seen as sources of legitimacy that Navalny's outlet is seeking to add credibility to his investigations.

While not the main focus of the paper, we note that Navalny also sources his outlet's legitimacy beyond journalistic techniques and collaborations. These sources are connected to the additional, journalist-adjacent roles that he "tried on", such as that of an activist, a politician, and a blogger (Glazunova, 2022). Following a major crackdown of the Navalny movement, in their role as *activists*, who advocate against corruption in Russia through anti-corruption projects, documentaries and protests, Navalny and his team started to appeal to international audiences, thus granting them legitimacy beyond the Russian public sphere. Put differently, they started to globalise local struggle (Yli-Kaitala, 2014) by first turning their Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) into an international organisation, and then starting to publish their documentaries using English-language titles, descriptions, and subtitles on YouTube. While they were delegitimised and discredited by Russian authorities, elsewhere, they were still perceived as major fighters against corruption on a global scale.

As *a politician*, Navalny can draw on his political capital as an established opposition leader, who regularly tried to be elected to further enhance the authority, credibility, and legitimacy of his outlet. His charisma and political image sat at the heart of his brand, and his physical presence in his investigations was crucial for the videos' popularity and virality. Thus, whenever Navalny was physically absent and instead replaced by less popular hosts, this potentially risked alienating audiences and reduced the number of views to his channel. As *a blogger*, Navalny drew credibility from YouTube as an "alternative news medium" (Sumiala and Tikka, 2013) in Russia. In the 2010s, YouTube gave voice to grassroots journalists as well as individual and alternative voices that were opposing the mainstream pro-Kremlin news agenda on Russian television – as opposed to YouTube's domestic counterparts such as RuTube and other Russia-based platforms, including VK (former VKontakte). As such, Navalny and his team were drawing on

YouTube's legitimacy and popularity in the Russian audiences' eyes and relied on the cultures of use of this platform in the country.

Overall, while this study analyses Navalny's techniques that resemble journalistic practice, it is just as important to ask if and when he *contradicts* journalistic practice. Another important distinction so far overlooked in literature is to probe whether or not actors actually *want* to be interlopers, or whether the socio-political circumstances they find themselves in rather *force* them to adopt this role. We will return to both questions in our concluding section.

Conclusion

Following his untimely death in February 2024, the political future of Navalny's movement now looks especially gloomy. Crippled by the repressions during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they find little support outside and inside of Russia. The Ukrainian resistance widely criticises the Russian opposition and Navalny per se for their inaction, denial of responsibility to end the invasion, lack of tangible impact, and perpetuation of the regime's imperial ideas. Thus, his associates cannot currently influence domestic politics and challenge the incumbent political elite. While new investigations continue to be published on his YouTube channel by his colleagues, they fail to garner the same popularity and virality as before. In 2023, *The Kiyv Post* suggested that texts Navalny had allegedly posted on his social media account after his imprisonment were most possibly written by a ghostwriter (Borovsky, 2023).

However, as explicit interlopers on the margins of journalism, Navalny and his colleagues are a case in point of how such alternative journalist projects can emerge and function in largely authoritarian societies. Therefore, the value of Navalny's journalistic work should not be discounted long-term. In filling a void others have been unable to fill, Navalny has crossed numerous red lines that journalists in Russia cannot cross – while interlopers can. By adopting this status, he works as a symbolic juxtaposition to the prevailing journalism culture in Russia.

Compared to Western contexts, where interlopers challenge normative understandings of journalism but can largely exist and function under a democratic umbrella (excluding the Assange and Snowden cases, who were in direct conflict with government), Navalny's journalistic phenomenon in the context of limited Internet, press and political freedoms seem like a forced measure. Here, we would like to return to a question we posed earlier: namely, whether or not actors like Navalny actually *want* to be interlopers, or whether their environments rather *force* them to adopt this role. In the case of Navalny, we lean towards the latter. Probing this line of enquiry further leads us to extending the notion of interlopers: namely, by considering the socio-political contexts under which they operate, we propose differentiating between *interlopers by choice*, and *interlopers by circumstance*. When politicians or activists are deprived of access to the mainstream media, and practising objective journalism is almost impossible in the country, they have to step into 'journalists' shoes' adopting their practices and seeking journalism legitimacy from various sources.

While this study has extensively highlighted events when Navalny and his team have adopted journalistic practice, it is just as important to ask if and when they contradict

established conventions of journalism. Examples for this include subjective reporting with a strong ideological slant (a marker of the advocative/radical role), extensive critique of mainstream journalism (a marker of the critical/monitorial role), and the use of deceptive methods to obtain information, among others. On the latter, however, it is worth noting that over a quarter of surveyed journalists in the 2016 *Worlds of Journalism* study agreed that "it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it" (Worlds of Journalism, 2023). As this study has highlighted, Navalny and his team have adopted several strategies to bolster their legitimacy.

Whether these legitimacy sources helped Navalny's team to establish themselves as a trusted alternative media in Russia is a question still subject to debate. Some of their sources, such as their collaboration with Western media, their reorientation towards international audiences, and their emphasis on Navalny's political capital to attract bigger audiences, potentially alienated their audiences from the media outlet for not being sufficiently Russia-oriented. The major role in this was of course played by Russian law enforcement, which, apart from direct and year-long suppression of the movement, tried to portray Navalny and his movement as being associated with the West – and it largely succeeded in its mission. However, even following his passing, Navalny's documentaries on the issues of corruption and abuses of power are still accessible on YouTube and continue to form part of an anti-corruption and anti-regime public discourse further maintained and preserved by the affordances of social media (Boyd, 2011). While major societal shifts are required to trigger pro-democratic changes in Russia (Glazunova, 2022), such media artefacts can further inform Russian citizens and broader audiences about the deep structural and political issues the Russian political regime is built on.

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Note

1. It is worth pointing out that scholarship on characterising Russia as an autocratic or authoritarian is divided. Some call Russia a new democracy (Huntington, 1993), a hybrid regime (Diamond, 2002), a country of a 'grey zone' (Carothers, 2002) defined by electoral authoritarianism (Golosov, 2011) or 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way, 2010). In 2017, the US-based project Polity IV/V referred to Russia as an 'anocracy', i.e., not as a full autocracy, but with elements of semi-authoritarianism inherent to it (Center for Systemic Peace, 2021).

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