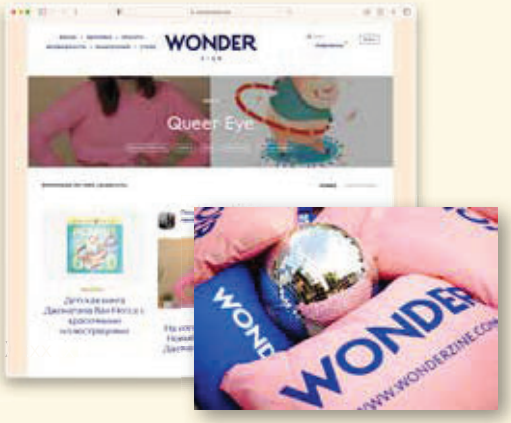
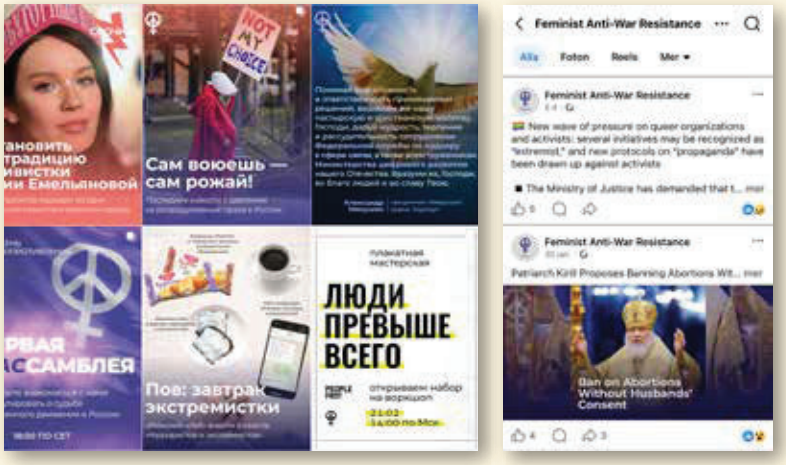
A photo of a banner from a fake image of a protest, and a manipulated photo appearing to show a banner on the Arsenal Tower in the Kremlin are two examples of "Photoshop activism".



The feminist online magazine *Wonderzine* was launched in 2013 and banned in 2022.



The Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) is a digitally-enabled movement founded in response to Russia's war on Ukraine. PHOTO: FAR'S INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK

MEDIA REALISM

Conceptual insights from research on digital feminisms in and beyond Russia

by **Daniil Zhaivoronok**

abstract

This article introduces the concept of *media realism* to theorize the political sensibility that emerges from feminists' engagement with digital media in contemporary Russia and beyond. Drawing on empirical data and insights from the FEMCORUS research project, the article explores how activists and media professionals navigate the contradictory affordances of digital media ecosystems that simultaneously enable oppositional political expression and practices and impose significant structural constraints. In this context, *media realism* refers to the experience of digital media as flawed, yet without alternatives. Thus, the concept captures the affective and ethical (dis)orientation of activists who recognize the problematic underpinnings of existing ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) architectures yet continue to rely on them for visibility, mobilization, and resistance. Through empirical case studies, the article demonstrates how feminist actors adapt their tactical repertoires and renegotiate their ethics due to a media environment shaped by both authoritarian repression and neoliberal media logic. Ultimately, *media realism* offers a grounded, non-reductionist framework for understanding the ambivalences of digital activism under constraints and invites further inquiry into how political subjectivities are shaped by the ICTs infrastructures they inhabit.

KEYWORDS: Media realism, feminism, digital activism, sensibility, Russia.

For over a decade, new media technologies have played a pivotal role in shaping oppositional politics and civil society in Russia.[1] In particular, scholars have noted the significant impact of digital media on the development of feminist activism and culture in the country.[2] Amid ongoing state repression of dissent, a conservative turn, and the systematic erosion of civil rights and liberties – including freedom of speech, assembly, and association – digital media have emerged as vital spaces for activists' connection, dialogue, and organization. Within this context, as Ratilainen et al. argue, digital platforms and cultures contributed to fostering a vibrant and dynamic feminist media ecology in Russia.[3] This ecology has not only enabled the public circulation of feminist discourses but also contributed to the formation of collective feminist identities by providing activists with interpretive frameworks, cognitive maps, networking opportunities, and tools for mobilization.[4]

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the ruling regime intensified its crackdown on political dissent and independent media in Russia. As a result, many journalists and activists were forced into exile, compelled to invent new strategies and tactics to adapt to life in host countries while continuing their resistance to the authoritarian rule back home in a remote mode.[5] In this context, the role of digital media in sustaining oppositional movements and civil society – both within Russia and in exile – has only grown more central.[6] Social media platforms, messaging apps, and other digital tools have become the primary infrastructure for many anti-war movements and activist groups, including the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR).[7] It is no exaggeration to say that contemporary communication technologies now shape not only the organizational forms but also the tactical repertoires of most oppositional political initiatives.

"SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, MESSAGING APPS, AND OTHER DIGITAL TOOLS HAVE BECOME THE PRIMARY INFRASTRUCTURE FOR MANY ANTI-WAR MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVIST GROUPS."

THIS ARTICLE contributes to the growing body of literature on the political implications of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. While much of this scholarship has focused on how digital media enable activists to circumvent censorship, build networks, and amplify dissent, this article introduces a different perspective. Rather than asking how digital media help activists overcome challenges, I focus on how digital media themselves become a source of challenge. Thus, I bring critical reflection into the research on oppositional media-activism in Russia and similar contexts, emphasizing that activists do not simply use digital media but must also contend with their structural limitations, ideological biases, and embedded logics.

I further argue that in this sense ICTs appear in activist experience as deeply ambivalent and contradictory instruments: they empower resistance to authoritarianism while simultaneously introducing new forms of control;[8] they offer alternatives to state censorship while imposing their own algorithmic and commercial constraints on what can be said, seen, and heard;[9] and they facilitate horizontal connections while reproducing new hierarchies and exclusions.[10] These contradictory dynamics are not merely technical or logistical; they are political and affective, shaping how activists think, feel, and act within digital environments.[11]

To conceptualize activists' lived experience of contradictions embedded in digital media systems, this article introduces the concept of *media realism*. I define *media realism* as a mode of political and cultural sensibility shaped by activists' simultaneous awareness of both the possibilities and the limitations of contemporary media infrastructures. This sensibility emerges from practical experiences: activists acutely recognize the structural constraints imposed by platforms' neoliberal rationalities, algorithms, and surveillance architectures, yet they also acknowledge these same platforms as the most accessible and effective tools for communication, mobilization, and resistance to conservative and authoritarian regimes.

MEDIA REALISM, then, as conceptualized in this article, is not a theory of media use or media's representational and epistemic functions,[12] but a grounded account of activists' lived and affective experiences as they navigate the contradictions of the digital terrain under conditions of multiple constraints. It captures a sensibility that is at once pragmatic and critical, hopeful and disillusioned, strategic and, at times, cynical. As such, it offers a valuable lens for understanding the affective and political dynamics of feminist digital activism (and other digitalized activisms as well) in contemporary Russia – and potentially beyond. Thus, the concept allows for a nuanced, non-reductionist analysis of how activists (and media professionals) experience and negotiate complex terrains, where technological architectures and platform logics intersect with ethical imperatives and political commitments.

In elaborating this concept, the article draws on empirical observations from three case studies of mediated feminist activism in Russia, conducted by the author and colleagues as part of the FEMCORUS (Mediated feminism[s] in contemporary Russia) research project. These cases illuminate how *media realism* underpins activists' negotiations with the affordances and limitations of digital media in a context marked by authoritarian governance, conservative cultural politics, and the attention economy, thus also underpinning the operations of global platforms.[13] In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates about the politics of digital media systems[14] and offers new directions for theorizing feminist digital activism under conditions of what might be called "double entanglement"[15] – between state repression and digital media logic.

THIS ARTICLE IS STRUCTURED as follows. First, I outline key theoretical debates within the field of digital media and activist studies, with particular attention to the Russian context and other authoritarian regimes. Then, drawing on both existing literature and insights generated through the FEMCORUS research project, I introduce the concept of *media realism* as a framework for understanding how mediated activism is experienced and lived through. The following sections aim to develop this concept through empirical illustrations, demonstrating how it can be operationalized and applied in research practice. I begin by presenting the specific case studies that inform my conceptualization of *media realism*. Building on these cases, I then explore how the concept can be used to analyze activist experiences of navigating and interacting with digital/hybrid media systems. The first analytical section examines how activists respond to the constraining effects of these systems in relation to organizational practices and strategic planning. The second focuses on how different modalities of cynicism are embedded within a *media realist* sensibility, and how they shape the tactical and moral choices activists make in their engagement within digital/hybrid media systems underlined by an attention economy and a post-truth media regime. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the limitations of this conceptual framework and outlines potential directions for further research.

Digital activism between empowerment and constraint

Far from functioning merely as tools of communication, contemporary ICTs such as social networks, messaging apps, and content-sharing services have reconfigured the practices, imaginaries, and even ontologies of political movements.[16] These transformations have prompted scholars to develop a diverse set of conceptual frameworks – such as connective action,[17] networked activism,[18] slacktivism,[19] hybrid media,[20] mediation opportunity structure,[21] social media logic,[22] surveillance capitalism,[23] and the neoliberal selfie gaze[24] among others – to capture the complex interplay between digital infrastructures and political *bios*.[25]

DESPITE THEIR theoretical differences, most of these approaches nevertheless converge on a shared recognition of the ambivalent role digital media architectures play in contemporary activism. On the one hand, digital platforms are heralded for their capacity to democratize and decentralize discursive production, rendering activism "easier, cheaper, and sometimes even more effective."[26] ICTs, it is said, provide activists with vital tools for networking, mobilization, and visibility; they enable the formation of translocal solidarities, the rapid dissemination of counter-hegemonic narratives, and the articulation of new political subjectivities.[27] Scholars have noted that these affordances are particularly salient in illiberal and authoritarian contexts where oppositional actors' access to traditional media and institutional resources is severely restricted. More specifically, in the context of research on feminist activism in Russia, this position is supported by Solovey, who highlights that digital platforms "have minimal entry requirements, no institutional barriers, and provide access to wide audiences", thus positioning them as "a perfect tool" for grassroots organizing and for amplifying the voices of marginalized communities "who seek to make themselves heard."[28] This view underscores the empowering potential of digital media, especially for those excluded from conventional political arenas.

On the other hand, a growing body of critical scholarship interrogates the structural constraints and ideological entanglements embedded in digital infrastructures. Scholars argue that the affordances of these platforms are deeply intertwined with the attention economy, neoliberal rationality, and the commodification of sociality.[29] As a result, digital activism often (re)produces new forms of inequality within virtual (counter)publics.[30] Moreover, within neoliberal architectures of new media, movements are compelled to compete for visibility, conform to platform-specific norms, and navigate algorithmic constraints that shape what can be said, seen, and valued.[31] In the context of feminism in Russia, researchers have noted that digital infrastructures and cultures facilitate the reproduction of symbolic and economic inequalities among activists, and that the logic of social media is sometimes perceived by activists themselves as incompatible with feminist values and grassroots political ethics.[32] These critiques highlight the paradox of digital activism: the very platforms that enable resistance also impose new forms of discipline and exclusion.

THIS ARTICLE INTRODUCES the concept of *media realism* to theorize the political sensibility that emerges from the experience of these contradictions embedded in the very architecture of contemporary hybrid media systems. To develop this concept, I draw on insights from interviews with feminist activists and media professionals, as well as from netnographic observations.[33] More specifically, my understanding of *media realism* is grounded in an analysis of activists' lived experiences of the contradictory effects of new media, including the organizational, strategic, tactical, moral, and political questions and dilemmas that arise from encounters with hybrid/digital media.

Thus, *media realism* is not primarily concerned with identifying the external or "objective" effects of media architectures. Rather, it seeks to understand the parameters of subjectivities or "structures of feeling"[34] that emerge through engagement with these systems. As I argue, *media realism* captures the affective and pragmatic orientation of activists who approach digital media both as indispensable tools for political expression and as infrastructures that simultaneously create obstacles and constrain the very possibilities of such expression. Thus, the concept foregrounds the affective and subjective consequences of the tension between empowerment and limitation, visibility and erasure, connection and fragmentation that defines the contemporary media-political conjuncture. Rather than framing digital media as inherently emancipatory or oppressive, *media realism* emphasizes the ambivalence and complexity of activists' lived experiences of inhabiting and navigating these systems.

Media realism: a concept in the making

In developing the concept of *media realism*, I draw primarily on two theoretical sources: Mark Fisher's notion of *capitalist realism* and Jilly Boyce Kay's concept of *feminist realism*. Both frameworks offer valuable insights into how ideological structures and cultural technologies shape political imagination and everyday practice, particularly under conditions of systemic constraint.

In his influential book, cultural theorist Mark Fisher[35] argues that following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of celebratory narratives about the "end of history", mainstream culture – particularly in the developed societies – has become incapable of imagining a world beyond or without capitalism. What emerged instead is the dominant sensibility of "capitalist realism", which he defines as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."[36] Crucially, Fisher emphasizes that this emergent sensibility does not prevent people from recognizing the flaws of capitalism; on the contrary, these flaws are often plainly visible and widely acknowledged. However, capitalist realism insists that these flaws must be endured, not overcome – because no alternative is conceivable. This ideological closure, Fisher argues, contributes to widespread political frustration and a cultural atmosphere of depression and resignation across the most developed countries.

PARTIALLY BUILDING on Fisher's insights, feminist media studies scholar Jilly Boyce Kay introduces the concept of "feminist realism" to describe a recent reactionary turn in some online feminist communities.[37] According to Kay, these communities treat patriarchy as a fixed and unchangeable social structure, rooted in biological differences between men and women. Like capitalist realism, this worldview also recognizes the flaws of the existing social structures, but forecloses the possibility of imagining more egalitarian, alternative systems to heteropatriarchy, abandoning "any utopian desires for large-scale social and political transformation."[38] However, this reactionary "anti-hope structure of feeling" does not entail passive acceptance of female subordination. Instead, it encourages women to "realistically" understand the rules of patriarchal society and learn to play by them. Within these discourses, women are prompted to internalize and adapt to the logic of patriarchy, and, rather than "daydreaming" about feminist revolution, to pursue advantages within the patriarchal system by learning how to manipulate men. The goal of this form of feminism is to teach women how to perform a "successful" and "empowered" femininity[39] and develop "practical strategies to increase female power" within the confines of patriarchal norms.[40] As such, feminist realism contains a certain degree of cynicism: a willingness to abandon moral norms and political ideals in favor of maximizing individual advantage within the established structures of power.

THE CONCEPT OF *media realism* draws on insights from both Fisher and Kay to theorize a sensibility – or structure of feeling – that emerges from feminist activists' lived engagement with the contradictions of the contemporary digital media environment. I propose to understand *media realism* as a mode of political and cultural sensibility that is conditioned by activists' simultaneous recognition of the empowering affordances and structural constraints embedded within the contemporary ICTs architecture. This sensibility is shaped by a constitutive tension: on one hand, activists are critically aware of the limitations imposed by digital platforms' neoliberal rationalities, algorithmic governance, and surveillance infrastructures; on the other, they acknowledge that these very platforms remain among the most accessible and effective instruments for communicative action, networked mobilization, and resistance tactics.

Thus, in a manner analogous to Fisher's capitalist realism, *media realism* reflects activists' acute awareness that the architecture of digital media – and social media platforms in particular – has serious flaws and in many respects contradicts feminist politics committed to values of equality, justice, and solidarity. In some cases, activists might even feel that the logic of contemporary hybrid media systems directly contradicts the values at the core of their activism.[41] Yet despite this recognition, they do not feel that it is possible to change or even meaningfully influence these systems.[42] In other words, the digital media environment, like the neoliberal order in Fisher's analysis, is experienced as, at least to some degree, unsatisfactory but without alternative. This sense of inevitability often produces feelings of frustration among activists.[43] However, it does not necessarily lead to political paralysis or the abandonment of digital tools. On the contrary, most respondents in the analyzed case studies continued to use new media in their activism, even while acknowledging their limitations and side effects. *Media realism*, therefore, reflects a pragmatic – and at times cynical, similarly to "feminist realism"[44] – engagement with digital platforms: activists know that these platforms and media system at large are shaped by the imperatives of social and symbolic capital accumulation, as well as by competition between both individual and collective actors,[45] yet they continue to rely on them because there are few, if any, alternatives that offer comparable reach, immediacy, or visibility.

Thus, *media realism* is not a passive acceptance of the status quo. Rather, it is a form of strategic adaptation – a way of navi-

"DIGITAL MEDIA CONTINUE TO PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN OPPOSITIONAL POLITICS IN RUSSIA, OFFERING PRECARIOUS YET VITAL SPACES FOR FEMINIST DISCOURSE, ANTI-WAR ACTIVISM, AND GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION."

gating a media environment that is simultaneously enabling and constraining. Activists may tailor their organizational strategies, communication flows, and protest tactics to fit platform norms or audience and media-professionals' expectations, or engage in self-branding to gain visibility.[46] These tactics reflect a deep and practical understanding of how media systems work, but might also entail a sense of exhaustion or burnout when it comes to the feeling of impossibility of radically changing the ICTs' infrastructures and infracultures.[47]

Importantly, *media realism*, as conceptualized here, is shaped by the geopolitical and technological specificity of the Russian context, even if it is not entirely unique to it. This context is defined by a particular media landscape: on the one hand, it is dominated by global ICT giants such as Google, Meta, Tik Tok, Telegram and X; on the other, it is marked by state control over traditional media, increasing surveillance, restrictions on digital platforms, and the systematic deployment of information manipulation tactics.[48] Within these constraints, digital media continue to play a central role in oppositional politics in Russia, offering precarious yet vital spaces for feminist discourse, anti-war activism, and grassroots mobilization. However, the legitimacy of using these platforms is often grounded not in their neutrality or democratic potential, but in their capacity to resist a more immediate and overwhelming threat: an authoritarian, militarized, repressive, and ideologically conservative regime. In this sense, *media realism* in the Russian context is not merely a response to technological affordances but a result of a strategic adaptation to a broader hostile political environment.

Ultimately, I argue that *media realism* grasps the affective modality through which activists experience and engage with digital technologies, and which simultaneously shapes how they think, act, and imagine the future. The concept seeks to open new perspectives for both academics and activists, inviting them to critically examine not only the outputs of media activism but also the infrastructures, practices, affects, and cultures that make it possible, and to ask what forms of resistance, solidarity, and imagination might emerge from within – and perhaps beyond – these entangled systems.

Methodological note and case studies

The insights and arguments in the present article are largely informed by observations and findings about the Russian feminist media ecology from the FEMCORUS collective research project, as presented in the collective monograph[49] and other publications.[50] Moreover, the current conceptualization of *media realism* is based on the author's longitudinal involvement in researching the impact of digital media and online cultures on the development of feminist discourse and political imagination in Russia during an authoritarian and conservative shift. However, this article primarily draws on data and analysis from three case studies, conducted by the author, which are detailed below.

The central case is the study of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR), a digitally enabled social movement founded by Russian feminists in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Over time, FAR has evolved into a transnational movement with local chapters across multiple countries.[51] As part of this research, research assistant Alisa Virtanen and I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with FAR activists to explore the role of media tools in shaping the movement's organizational practices, communication strategies, and tactical decisions. The interviews were conducted in two rounds: 16 between September 2022 and March 2023, followed by 6 follow-ups in February–March 2024. Respondents were based in multiple locations, predominantly in Europe, and occupied varied roles within FAR – from members of local chapters to international coordinators.[52] They ranged in age from 22 to 39, and their professional backgrounds included artists, students, academics, musicians, and practitioners in the creative industries. In addition to interviews, I collected supplementary materials, including FAR's own publications and media coverage of its activities. Research publications based on these data address a wide spectrum of questions – from how digital media influence the development of feminist identity to the tensions between media logics and the logics of political action.[53]

The Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) is a digitally enabled social movement founded by Russian feminists in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. PHOTO: TELEGRAM

The second case focuses on the online feminist lifestyle outlet *Wonderzine*, launched in 2013. The outlet played a significant role in normalizing and disseminating feminist discourse in Russia. The research included four interviews (May–June 2024) with four media-professionals, who collaborated with *Wonderzine* in different capacities (editorial team, freelance contributors), an archive analysis of its publications, and netnographic observations. The study examined how feminism was integrated into the outlet's brand identity and the cultural and political effects of its media strategies.[54]

The third case examines the so-called "Photoshop activism" protest,[55] orchestrated by a group of feminists in 2017. This protest action was hybrid in character, combining elements of the traditional repertoire of political contention (solo pickets, street performances) with a digital repertoire. As part of the latter, the activists created a fake photograph depicting feminists atop one of the Kremlin towers with a banner and riot flames, and disseminated it to various news outlets, including opposition media. Once the image was revealed to be fabricated, a public debate unfolded across news media and social platforms, prompting reflection within the feminist community on the ethics and politics of media activism. This case study is based on media and social media netnography and investigates how supporters and critics legitimized or delegitimized the use of fakes in feminist activism, situating the debate within the broader context of post-truth politics.[56]

TOGETHER, THESE CASES span different time periods – both before and after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. They also represent diverse organizational formats (e.g., grassroots activist collectives and professional media) and types of activities in temporal terms (e.g., Photoshop feminism is a one-time event, while FAR and *Wonderzine* are long-term projects) and typological terms (e.g., political and business-oriented). I argue that this heterogeneity of cases helps to illustrate that the *media realist* sensibility is not confined to particular cases, but rather encompasses various types of mediated action and time periods. Crucially, it also demonstrates that, despite the profound transformations in Russia since 2022, many trends in media activism and professional media practices have not fundamentally changed. Rather than introducing entirely new trajectories, these transformations have intensified pre-existing dynamics. Notably, the Russian authoritarian regime had already been targeting activists, including feminists, prior to the war. Similarly, the architecture of major new media platforms and the logic of the Russian authoritarian media system have remained largely intact, even as specific parameters have been reshuffled.[57]

"THE MAJORITY OF OUR INFORMANTS BELONGED TO THE CREATIVE OR MIDDLE CLASSES, INCLUDING ARTISTS, CULTURAL WORKERS, NGO EMPLOYEES, STUDENTS AT WESTERN UNIVERSITIES, AND FREELANCE DESIGNERS."

The digital gap and reproduction of inequalities in activists' organizing and media strategies

As was mentioned before, the digital turn in activism has been widely celebrated in the literature for its potential to democratize participation, reduce organizational costs, and empower marginalized voices. Scholars such as Bennett and Segerberg,[58] Castells,[59] and Earl and Kimport[60] have argued that digital media enable more flexible, horizontal, and inclusive forms of political engagement. Sometimes it's also argued that digital activism, due to its networked structure and individuals' opportunity to shape their stories alone, is "discouraging hierarchy".[61] According to this view, the internet lowers the entry barriers for political participation, allowing individuals to contribute to collective action without the need for formal organizational structures or significant material resources. This shift is often framed as a move from "collective" to "connective" action, where individuals mobilize through personalized content and decentralized networks. In sum, these perspectives emphasize the potential of digital media to disrupt entrenched hierarchies and foster more inclusive forms of activism.

However, this optimistic discourse has been increasingly challenged by empirical research that highlights the persistence – and in some cases, the intensification – of social inequalities in digital activism.[62] One of the most compelling critiques comes from Jen Schradie,[63] who introduces the concept of the "digital activism gap." Drawing on extensive multisite fieldwork, Schradie demonstrates that digital activism is not equally accessible to all social groups. In fact, her research reveals a pronounced social class divide: individuals and organizations from middle- and upper-class backgrounds are significantly more likely to engage in digital activism than their working-class counterparts.[64]

This gap is not simply a matter of access to technology, but reflects deeper structural inequalities related to education, income, cultural capital, and time. Middle-class activists often enter the digital sphere already equipped with the necessary skills, resources, and confidence to navigate complex media environments; they possess "organizational resources and individual access, skills, time, and the entitlement"[65] that enable them to dominate digital spaces. In contrast, working-class individuals frequently lack these advantages and may feel alienated or excluded from digital activism. Moreover, because middle-class actors often set the norms and standards for what constitutes effective digital engagement, working-class participants may internalize a sense of inadequacy or inauthenticity, further discouraging their participation.[66]

THIS CONSTRAINING and exclusionary dynamic is not limited to class. Aristea Fotopoulou[67] has identified a parallel age-based divide in digital activism. Her research on feminist NGOs and political collectives reveals that more senior women often feel less confident using digital tools and online media. Compared to younger activists, older generations typically possess fewer digital skills and less experience with new media technologies. Thus, rather than lowering barriers to participation, digitalization can actually exacerbate exclusion for older generations, making it more difficult for them to engage meaningfully in online activ-

The online feminist lifestyle outlet *Wonderzine* launched in 2013. In April 2022, *Wonderzine* was banned by the Russian government primarily because of its support for the LGBTQIA+ community. The outlet played a significant role in normalizing and disseminating feminist discourse in Russia, but has been criticized for prioritizing marketability and aesthetic appeal over political content. PHOTO: WONDERZINE'S FACEBOOK PAGE

ism.[68] This generational gap is compounded by broader societal narratives that associate digital fluency with youth, thereby marginalizing older individuals and reinforcing their exclusion from digital spaces.

These class and generational gaps were clearly observable in the profiles of activists from FAR who were interviewed as part of the FEMCORUS research project. Among the respondents, as the description in the previous section indicates, there were no representatives from the older generation; the oldest respondent was 39 years old. Similarly, our sample lacked participants from industrial or service-sector working-class backgrounds. Instead, the majority of our informants belonged to the creative or middle classes, including artists, cultural workers, NGO employees, students at Western universities, and freelance designers. While our snowball sampling method does not allow for a fully representative analysis, the absence of working-class and older-generation activists in our sample suggests that these groups are underrepresented in FAR. This underrepresentation is likely grounded in the above-mentioned structural barriers around class and generation that digital activism poses for individuals from these demographics.

While the most structurally vulnerable groups were absent from the sample, the interviewed activists nonetheless represented a range of social positions, resources, and digital competencies. Several participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the social and symbolic inequalities that persist within FAR. They acknowledged that informal hierarchies are often reproduced internally and linked these dynamics directly to the logic of contemporary media systems.[69] As I have argued elsewhere,[70] some FAR activists observed that their capacity to participate in online activities – such as engaging in discussions, responding to messages, and contributing to digital organizing – significantly shaped their visibility and influence within the movement. Those with greater availability and digital fluency were better positioned to cultivate strong intra-movement networks and exert influence over collective decision-making processes.[71]

THE DISTRIBUTION of free time available for digital engagement, in turn, was closely tied to activists' material conditions. As one respondent, Pala, explained:

> **There are very different activists [...] everyone has a very different social situation, yes, some can afford not to work [...] they have a scholarship, or they have a husband, or, I don't know, they own apartments in Moscow that they rent out and live in Yerevan with that money. Some people don't have such resources, some have to work, so they invest different amounts of resources [into FAR activities], and [...] In fact, in my opinion, what happens is that those who can invest more resources [into FAR activities] have more influence on decisions.**

This quote encapsulates the intersection of economic inequality and digital participation. Activists with greater financial stability are able to devote more time and energy to online organizing, thereby gaining more visibility and influence within the move-

ment. Conversely, those who must work full-time or manage other responsibilities are less able to participate, leading to a stratification of influence that mirrors broader social inequalities. The digital sphere, far from being a neutral or egalitarian space, thus becomes a site where existing hierarchies are reproduced and reinforced.

HOWEVER, DESPITE recognizing that existing media systems and practices reproduce inequalities and contribute to the emergence of informal hierarchies within the movement, many activists were willing to tolerate this state of affairs precisely because they saw no viable way to change the system. For example, when asked about the role of media in FAR, one activist (Lana, October 2022) initially listed several negative effects – such as the reinforcement of social inequalities – and then concluded, "Unfortunately, it is something we have to accept, like the absurdity of capitalism". Other activists, though not all, similarly acknowledged the detrimental effects of media infrastructures, viewing them as structural conditions that must be endured rather than transformed. In their view, the logic of contemporary digital media systems is so deeply entrenched that it leaves little room for meaningful change.

This position exactly reflects what I propose to understand as a *media realist* sensibility: a recognition among activists that digital media both enable and constrain political participation, and, simultaneously, that this situation cannot be changed. Many FAR activists were acutely aware that digital communication channels and the broader media system perpetuate inequalities and informal hierarchies. However, given the central role of the media in organizing and sustaining FAR's activities, respondents were willing to tolerate the negative effects of the media system in order to continue their resistance against the war and the authoritarian regime.

THIS PRAGMATIC acceptance of media constraints was also evident in the case study of the feminist lifestyle outlet *Wonderzine*. Two journalists who participated in the interviews and discussed the media strategy of the feminist webzine offered critical assessments of *Wonderzine*'s publication strategies. One described the outlet as an example of "neoliberal feminism", more interested in commodifying feminism as a brand than in promoting feminist values. According to this critique, *Wonderzine*'s editorial strategy prioritized marketability and aesthetic appeal over political content, thereby diluting and commodifying the subversive potential of feminism. The second journalist echoed this critique, arguing that *Wonderzine* created a commercialized and glamorized version of feminism that often failed to address the real needs of women in Russia. She noted that the webzine primarily catered to the interests of "wealthy Muscovites", leaving other groups – particularly those from peripheral regions, and the working class – underrepresented.[72] Moreover, as netnographic observations demonstrated, the readers of the magazine often used comment functions to complain about its Moscow-centric and upper-middle class outlook, which made many women feel excluded and marginalized within *Wonderzine*'s version of feminism and empowerment.[73]

Despite these critiques, both journalists acknowledged that *Wonderzine* had made a positive contribution to the development of public feminist discourse in Russia. In their view, the liberalization and glamorization of feminism represented a strategic adaptation to the existing media environment. By aligning feminist content with the aesthetic and commercial norms of Russian hipster media, *Wonderzine* was able to reach a broader audience and normalize feminist discourse in a conservative political climate. This strategy, while not without its drawbacks, was seen by respondents as a necessary trade-off in the struggle for feminism's visibility and legitimacy.

"ACTIVISTS' AWARENESS OF THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF ICTS OFTEN RESULTED IN A PRAGMATICAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE EXISTING 'RULES OF THE GAME.'"

THIS PERSPECTIVE further illustrates the *media realist* sensibility shared by many feminist activists and media professionals. It involves a dual awareness: on the one hand, a critical understanding of how media systems reproduce inequality and shape discourse in exclusionary ways; on the other hand, a pragmatic willingness to work within these constraints to achieve strategic goals. In the case of *Wonderzine*, this meant accepting the limitations of commercial media in order to insert feminist narratives into the public sphere. For FAR activists, it meant navigating the digital divide while continuing to build solidarity and resistance in the face of authoritarian repression.

"All Is Fair in War"? Media tactics between strong and weak cynicisms

As demonstrated in the previous section, at the organizational level, activists' awareness of the negative effects of ICTs often resulted in a pragmatical acceptance of the existing "rules of the game."[74] However, at the level of planning specific actions, this awareness opened up space for strategic maneuvering and the expansion of possible tactical repertoires. It also introduced a new dimension of "effectiveness" in evaluating media practices. Yet, because the rules dictated by digital media systems do not always align with – and at times directly contradict – feminist values and political commitments, the development of tactics adapted to these systems often gave rise to new moral dilemmas, shifting regimes of legitimation and producing affective tensions.

In navigating these contradictions, activists cultivated what I, following Peter Sloterdijk, refer to as a *cynical sensibility*. Sloterdijk describes modern cynicism as an "enlightened false consciousness"[75] – a mode of action in which the agents are fully aware that they are acting against normative ideals, yet proceed "without illusions", having been "dragged down by the power of

things." However, unlike Sloterdijk, who focuses on cynical "reason", I prefer to speak about "sensibility", in order to emphasize the affective and moral dimensions of activists' experiences. Rather than a purely intellectual stance, *media realist* sensibility in this context is lived and felt – it is a response to the ethical discomfort of acting within systems one does not fully endorse.

Within this framework, I distinguish between strong and weak forms of cynical sensibility, both of which emerge as expressions of *media realism*. These modalities reflect different ways in which activists reconcile their political commitments with the structural constraints and contradictions of the media systems they must navigate. While strong cynicism entails a more radical instrumentalism, weak cynicism is marked by ambivalence, ethical hesitation, and a desire to remain accountable to feminist values even while operating within the demands of media logic.

Strong cynical sensibility

The most explicit and strong manifestation of the cynicism inherent in *media realism* among all three case studies can be found in the case of "Photoshop activism" – a feminist protest action that took place in Moscow in 2017.[76] As part of this protest, feminist activists created and distributed a fake photograph, which they deliberately sent to allied journalists invited to cover the event. Alongside this, they published a "Manifesto of Photoshop Activism",[77] in which the organizers explained and justified the use of fake images in feminist protest. As I argue, the logic behind this action closely aligns with the contours of the *media realist* sensibility as outlined in this article.

The "Photoshop activists" had a clear understanding of the negative aspects of the Russian post-truth media regime, which they described as a propaganda tool designed to manipulate public opinion. At the same time, they considered this media regime to be unchangeable "reality" – a structure so deeply entrenched that it could not be transformed. Therefore, instead of developing a critical approach towards the existing media regime, activists opted to embrace its logic.

Within a *media realist* sensibility, actors perceive media systems as largely unchangeable, meaning the only viable strategy for them is to adapt: to accept the existing rules of the game and attempt to pragmatically use them to their advantage. In a post-truth media environment where effectiveness is measured not by informational objectivity or ethical consistency, but by visibility and virality, the content producers, including activists, are incentivized to prioritize attention over accuracy. In this logic, if a fake image can generate more media coverage and social media engagement than a real one, then its use becomes not only acceptable but strategically justified.[78] And this logic was fully embraced by the protest organizers, who defended the use of the fabricated image by referring to the media and public attention it generated: "We did a great job! Whether the context [of public discussion] is positive or negative doesn't matter – the word 'feminists' is now on everyone's lips".[79]

What makes the case of the Photoshop activists an example of strong cynicism is the fully conscious and unapologetic nature

Easter-themed cards with anti-war messages that FAR encouraged supporters to circulate. Left: "This Easter, no matter how you howl, no matter how you cry, there is only one problem: God's Son has risen, but yours will never rise again". Right: "Enough war".

Left: "Happy Holy Resurrection Day! Happy Ascension Day! Wishes for warmth, happiness, joy, goodness, so that there is no war on the mind of my country, Peace in the heart, peace in the house, there is enough grief, there is enough blood, it is not for this that Christ was taken down from the cross for us!"

Right: "Christ is risen and the angels rejoice, And they kiss the brightened faces, And they close the eyes of all the dead, But the dead will not recognize this... War on Easter! The blood of living people! What has become of us, with my homeland? Christ is risen, oh miracle of miracles... But what did he see when he rose again?" PHOTO: TELEGRAM

FAR activists spray-painted "You didn't give birth for war" under the windows of maternity hospitals in four Russian cities in August 2022. The action generated significant attention, but also provoked a wave of criticism: the activists were accused of blaming mothers for the war, and of lacking empathy toward women who had just given birth.

PHOTO: FEMAGAINSTWAR

of their approach. The organizers and supporters of the protest actively sought to legitimize their tactics, either by outright denying or significantly downplaying the potential negative consequences of deceiving media and manipulating the public.[80] In this regard, the protest organizers reproduced a "global cynical sensibility that takes for granted the belief that all public discourse is fake, that words do not match actions, and specifically that self-interest is behind all claims to [...] objectivity."[81] In their view, their tactic[82] was legitimate precisely because it succeeded in attracting substantial media and social media attention. Thus, the pragmatic dimension of the protest entirely displaced any normative concerns over moral or ethical value of objective information and public trust. The case of Photoshop activism illustrates that, at its extreme, a *media realist* sensibility risks uncritical accommodation to dominant media logic, thereby subordinating or even displacing other political commitments and concerns.

Weak cynical sensibility

Unlike the "Photoshop activists", FAR has consistently positioned itself in direct opposition to the *modus operandi* of Russian state propaganda. One of the movement's central goals is to deliver accurate and truthful information about the war in Ukraine to Russian audiences.[83] Nearly all FAR activists interviewed emphasized both the ethical and political importance of factual, objective information. Several explicitly stated that they considered the use of fakes in activist strategies unacceptable – even if such tactics might be effective in attracting attention or discrediting the Putin regime. In this sense, the instrumental and cynical approach to media that defines "Photoshop activism" is not a core feature of FAR's media strategy.

Nevertheless, a weak form of cynical sensibility toward media practices was present in the narratives of at least some FAR activists. One such narrative emerged during a conversation with Lana, who discussed FAR's efforts to reach broader working-class audiences in Russia – beyond the more familiar circles of feminist and anti-war activists, whom she described somewhat ironically as the "hipster latte crowd" ("хипста латэ тусовочка"). FAR's tactics aimed at engaging new audiences involved producing content that aesthetically mimicked popular digital media formats – such as holiday greeting cards for WhatsApp chats and the social network Odnoklassniki [Classmates], memes, GIFs, and even prayers[84] – while embedding anti-war messages within them.

FOR INSTANCE, among the Easter-themed cards that FAR encouraged supporters to circulate were messages ranging from the straightforward "Enough War" to the more macabre and affectively charged "God's son has risen, but yours never will."[85] These provocative juxtapositions were designed to emulate working-class aesthetics of digital communication and thus reach wider audiences who might otherwise be unreceptive to overtly oppositional content. Moreover, as one anonymous reviewer of this article rightly pointed out, such messaging offers a fascinating example of how Russian feminists are recontextualizing conservative religious discourse in order to generate a subversive populist aesthetics.[86] At the same time, at least some activists saw this approach as problematic from the standpoint of progressive feminist ethics. For example, reflecting on these tactics, Lana offered a critical yet ambivalent assessment:

> **It's brutal, in the sense that you're assuming a certain group of people is incapable of understanding your sophisticated, rational discourse, and so you decide to send them a postcard with Jason Statham and a wolf.**[87]

She continued, "From the perspective of 21st-century activism, this is really not okay." Yet despite her ethical and theoretical reservations, Lana ultimately endorsed the strategy on pragmatic grounds, stating, "In war, all means are fair." In her view, when "bombs are falling nonstop", moral concerns can be temporarily set aside in favor of the effectiveness of anti-war activism. She

concluded the discussion of the Easter-themed digital greeting cards with a telling remark: "If you interview me after the war, I'll probably say different things – I'll say it was wrong, that it caused harm, and so on."

This moment of reflection captures the internal tension at the heart of *media realism*. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgement of the importance of ethical principles in activist communication. On the other hand, there is a recognition that effective digital communication requires means that contradict these principles. While the use of popular memes may yield some results by appealing to a broader audience, such tactics imply the reproduction of social and symbolic hierarchies in which middle-class, digitally savvy activists occupy a higher position than common people. However, Lana made it clear that she considered such tactics to be legitimate only in the context of the urgency and brutality of war – conditions which demand tactical flexibility, even if that means compromising on ethics. In that case, the partial suspension of feminist values is not dictated by the outright cynical modality and a wholesale embrace of manipulation, but by a context-driven adaptation to the constraints of the media environment and the pressure of the political situation.

ANOTHER FAR ACTIVIST, Zhenya, shared during our interview her reflections on the protest action "You didn't give birth for war" (Ты родила не для войны).[88] As part of this campaign, FAR activists spray-painted this slogan under the windows of maternity hospitals in four Russian cities. According to Zhenya, the action generated significant attention and was widely discussed on social media, but it also provoked a wave of criticism: the activists were accused of blaming mothers for the war, and of lacking empathy toward women who had just given birth.

In response to this backlash, FAR organized an internal online meeting to reflect on the feedback and the outcomes of the action. As Zhenya recalled:

> **We discussed it and came to the conclusion that, in general, our actions should be exactly like this – they should generate hype. They shouldn't be soft, white, and fluffy. That's the point.**

Thus, Zhenya acknowledged that "softer" actions tend to receive far less media attention and public engagement than those that provoke controversy or strong emotional reactions. In her view – and seemingly in the view of other activists – this justified the use of more confrontational tactics in the movement's communication strategy. What we see here is another instance of *media realism*: Zhenya accepts the existing logic of media attention as a given, a reality that cannot be changed. Rather than resisting it, she adapts to it, seeking to maximize the visibility of anti-war messages by working within the rules of the current media system.

At the same time, Zhenya was careful to emphasize that, despite the negative feedback, she considered the action ethically sound. The ethical legitimacy of the protest, she argued, was grounded in the identity of the activist who conceived it:

> **The person who came up with the idea [of this protest] is a mother of several children, so it's absolutely ethical, yes.**

This justification suggests that for Zhenya, and likely for other FAR activists, the acceptability of provocative tactics depends not only on their strategic effectiveness but also on whether they remain within certain ethical boundaries. These boundaries are not fixed or universal but are negotiated collectively within the movement, often in relation to the identities and lived experiences of those involved.

"BOTH ACTIVISTS DEMONSTRATE A CLEAR AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEMATIC LOGIC THAT GOVERNS CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ATTENTION, AND BOTH ARE WILLING TO ENGAGE WITH THIS LOGIC TO AMPLIFY ANTI-WAR MESSAGES."

Taken together, the cases of Lana and Zhenya illustrate the complex and often contradictory ways in which FAR activists navigate the media environment through what I describe as a weak cynical sensibility. Both activists demonstrate a clear awareness of the problematic logic that governs contemporary media attention, and both are willing to engage with this logic to amplify anti-war messages. However, their approaches differ in tone and emphasis. Lana expressed a more self-critical and ambivalent stance, openly acknowledging the ethical discomfort of simplifying messages for broader audiences, even as she defended the tactic as legitimate under wartime conditions. Zhenya, by contrast, embraces a more assertive pragmatism, justifying provocative actions not only through their effectiveness but also by anchoring them in a certain understanding of identity politics and its ethics. What unites both cases is a shared tension between ethical commitment and strategic adaptation – a recognition that in a media landscape shaped by spectacle and polarization, visibility often comes at the cost of moral clarity. Rather than fully rejecting or embracing this reality, FAR activists negotiate it cautiously, seeking to balance integrity with impact in a context where neither can be taken for granted. This example further illustrates how *media realism* operates not as a fixed doctrine but as a flexible sensibility – one that allows activists to navigate the tensions between ethics and effectiveness, visibility and responsibility, provocation and care. It also shows how feminist activists in Russia are constantly negotiating the boundaries of what is acceptable, effective, and justifiable in a media landscape shaped by repressions and propaganda.

By distinguishing between strong and weak cynicism as expressions of *media realism*, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the ethical and strategic dilemmas faced by feminist activists. Rather than evaluating their choices through a binary lens of right or wrong, *media realism* invites us to consider the situated judgments activists make under pressure, and the ways in which these judgments reflect broader tensions between ethical and tactical/strategical concerns.

Media realism, as a broader framework, encompasses both cynical modalities. It captures the shared recognition among activists that political communication today requires constant negotiation between ideals and constraints, between what is desirable and what is possible. In the context of Russian feminist activism – marked by war, a conservative political turn, repression, and exile – these tensions are especially acute. Activists must navigate a media landscape that is both a tool of state repression and control and a potential site of resistance. As a critical concept, *media realism* does not resolve these contradictions, but it helps us understand how activists live and act within them.

Conclusions

This article has introduced the concept of *media realism* as a framework for understanding the political sensibilities that emerge from activists' engagement with digital media under constraining circumstances. Grounded in empirical research with Russian feminist activists, *media realism* captures the affective, ethical, and strategic tensions that define contemporary digital activism in authoritarian contexts. It foregrounds the ways in which activists experience ambivalences and contradictions within digital infrastructures. However, the conceptual framework of *media realism*, as elaborated in this article, has its limitations. First, while it offers a valuable lens for interpreting activist experiences and tactical choices, it risks overemphasizing adaptation at the expense of resistance. By focusing on how activists work within existing media logics, *media realism* may inadvertently obscure moments of rupture, refusal, or experimentation that challenge dominant ICTs infrastructures.

Second, the concept is currently grounded in a specific geopolitical and cultural context – Russia under authoritarian rule and a conservative turn. While this specificity is a strength, future research could explore how *media realism* applies across different regimes, movements, and media ecologies. Comparative studies could help assess whether similar sensibilities emerge in other illiberal or hybrid regimes, or even in liberal democracies whose networked publics are shaped by platform capitalism. Moreover, longitudinal designs could follow how *media realism* changes across protest phases and in relation to activists' evolving experiences.

Third, *media realism* primarily captures the perspectives of activists who are already digitally literate and actively engaged with media systems. As the article notes, working-class and older activists are often underrepresented in digital movements, and their experiences may not align with the sensibilities described here. Future research should therefore attend more closely to the exclusions and silences within activists narratives, and explore how digital inequalities shape not just access to political movements but also political imagination.

Moreover, in this article, *media realism* is elaborated through the experiences of activists using digital media in political practice. Extending the concept's reach to other actor groups – influencers, semi-professional creators, brand managers, and everyday social media users – would test its analytical elasticity by examining how digital media pressures and incentives are experienced beyond activist milieus.

FINALLY, WHILE *media realism* helps us understand how activists navigate ethical dilemmas, it does not offer any normative guidance on how to resolve them. This is both a strength and a limitation. As an analytical framework, *media realism* resists moralizing judgments. Yet, as scholars and activists, we might also ask: What kinds of media practices are not only effective, but just? What forms of networked resistance can challenge not only authoritarian regimes but also the logics of the platforms themselves? In this sense, *media realism* is not an endpoint but rather an invitation – to think critically, and to imagine alternatives.

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47 Ratilainen et al., *Contesting Feminism and Media Culture in Contemporary Russia*, chap. 8.

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51 Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok, "Feministinen sodanvastainen liike ja mediavälittyneisyyden mahdollisuusrakenne"; Vlada Baranova, "Transformations in Russian Activism: Navigating Identity and Solidarity in Russia's Anti-War Movement," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (2025): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2025.2667392.

52 For more details on FAR's organizational format, see Zhaivoronok, "The Birth of Collective Action Out of Influencer Culture?," 6–7.

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68 See also Pruchniewska, "'A Group That's Just Women for Women.'"

69 See Ratilainen et al., *Contesting Feminism and Media Culture in Contemporary Russia*, chap. 8.

70 Zhaivoronok, "The Birth of Collective Action Out of Influencer Culture?"

71 On the "strong connections" between FAR activists, see Henry, Sperling, and Sundstrom, "Movement of Movements."

72 In this regard it's relevant to mention the digital divide between different regions in Russia. See Anna Gladkova, Elena Vartanova, and Massimo Ragnedda, "Digital Divide and Digital Capital in Multiethnic Russian Society," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* vol. 15, no. 2 (2020): 126–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2020.1745212.

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74 Smrdelj and Pajnik, "Enhancing the Hybrid Media System Model."

75 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 5.

76 Perheentupa, *Feminist Politics in Neoconservative Russia*, 141.

77 Kostyuchenko, "«Нужно заставить ФСО оправдываться»."

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80 Perheentupa, *Feminist Politics in Neoconservative Russia*, 141–45.

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86 One can recall the similar discursive operation within Pussy Riot's performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in February 2012. See Sergei Prozorov, "Pussy Riot and the Politics of Profanation: Parody, Performativity, Veridiction," *Political Studies* vol. 62, no. 4 (2014): 766–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12047.

87 In this context, "a postcard with Jason Statham and a wolf" evokes a well-known meme genre - images of the actor and/or lone wolves that index hegemonic masculinity and aspirational toughness; when circulated non-ironically, such memes are commonly read as kitsch and markers of "backward" taste in the Russian digital vernacular.

88 https://t.me/femagainstwar/4477.