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Analysis

The RuNet – Lost in Translation

By Karina Alexanyan, Palo Alto[1]

Abstract

This article argues for a socio-cultural analysis of the Russian Internet and social media landscape. I contend that the Russian Internet and social media landscape is unique, with features that are specific to Russia and distinct from their counterparts in the US or elsewhere. Russian Internet and social media use needs to be understood from within its own socio-cultural context – Western understandings of Internet use and social media categories do not necessarily translate to Russia. This article discusses some of the key variables – such as level and degree of penetration, style of use, areas of attention and social media categories – which are necessary for a nuanced understanding of the Russian Internet.

Specifics of the Russian Internet

"The Internet" is not a universal, monolithic entity, but rather a combination of elements and features – a landscape whose topology is as unique as the country in which it evolves. Russia is no exception. This article discusses some of the key variables – such as level and degree of penetration, style of use, areas of attention and social media categories – which are necessary for a nuanced understanding of the Russian Internet.

First, the RuNet remains an elite and stratified medium, dominated by urban and educated users. National Internet penetration is growing rapidly, but remains at about one third of the population. Second, those who do use the Internet, do so relatively frequently and, most significantly, pay attention to different sources of information than their less-wired peers. Finally, the categories of social media – personal, public, blog, online journal, social networking site, community, friend, reader etc. – have emerged with distinct and different definitions, features and parameters in Russia. These categories are a result of social, historical, technological and cultural elements that are specific to Russia. Researchers, analysts and readers must keep this in mind, and be wary of allowing their own assumptions about these media to influence their understanding of Russia.

RuNet is an Elite, Stratified Medium, Dominated by the Urban and Educated

The simple term "Internet user" has multiple layers. One aspect is Internet penetration – what percentage of the population goes online. Another aspect is frequency of use – both among the general populace, and among Internet users themselves. In Russia, the figures are telling: while Internet penetration is not deep (approximately 33% of the population) – those who do go online, do so relatively frequently – a large majority (80%) of Russia's Internet users are online at least once per week, and a smaller majority – 55% – go online daily. And the numbers in Moscow far exceed the national average – highlighting a common error – extrapolating from Moscow to "all of Russia."

While a national Internet penetration of about one third may not seem impressive, the rate of growth in the Russian Federation has been steady and exponential, especially in areas outside Moscow. During the years between 2002 and 2009, the percentage of Internet users increased almost six fold, from around 5% to around 30%. In Moscow the pace was a bit slower, but still impressive, with penetration more than doubling, rising from 27% to 60%.

At the national level, Russia's current Internet penetration of 33% can be compared to Brazil's, for instance, which is at around 29%. In contrast, Internet penetration in Moscow is currently at European levels (approximately 60%) and slightly below that of the U.S., which is above 70%, according to a 2009 Russian Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) survey. In fact, while Moscow has only 8% of the country's adults, it has 14% of its average Internet users and a full one fifth – 20% – of its daily users.

Socio-economic demographics paint a similar picture, influencing popular perceptions of "Internet boom" versus "Internet hype." In Russia, as elsewhere in the world, the higher the income and education, the higher the rate of Internet access and use. For example, while only 17% of Russia's total population has advanced degrees, a majority of these people, almost 65%, are Internet users. Moscow, of course, is more educated

1 The Russian Analytical Digest is proud to welcome Karina Alexanyan as a special guest editor for this issue on Russian blogging. The three articles published here build on the discussion started in RAD 50 (November 18, 2008) by Floriana Fossato's contribution "The Web That Failed: How the Russian State Co-opted a Growing Internet Opposition Movement."

than the rest of Russia – a full 43% of Muscovites have advanced degrees – and 78% of those people are online. For roughly 70% of the population, those with a secondary education and a high school diploma, Internet penetration is below the national average – from 30% to 22%. And of the remaining 12% who have not completed high school, only 5% are Internet users.

In other words, for the urban educated elite, it may seem that virtually everyone they know is online, and virtually all the time; however, for many others, the Internet is categorized as a "luxury item," or even something that has no significant relevance to daily life.

Internet Users & Non-Users Pay Attention to Different Sources of Information

In terms of sources of information they accessed, daily Internet users differed dramatically from non-Internet users, and even from average urban residents, according to a nationwide poll that FOM conducted in Spring 2009.

FOM pollsters asked two questions: "Where do you most often find interesting information?" and "Which source do you trust the most?" Respondents chose from six sources – television, Internet, books, print, radio and relatives/friends. Figures 1 on p. 5 and 2 on p. 6 compare the responses in terms of three groups – "urban residents", "Internet users" and "non Internet users."

Based on these charts, two facts stand out:

1. For all three groups, television is the leading source of interesting and trusted information.
2. For the daily Internet user, the Internet is rapidly gaining as the most trusted source of information, and already exceeds television as a source of interesting information.

The portrait of the average urban resident and the "non Internet user" are not very different. Both (potentially overlapping) groups find interesting information primarily on television. Print is a source of interesting information at about half, or less than half, the rate of television. The main difference is unsurprising – for urban residents, the Internet and relatives/friends vie for third place, while for "non Internet users", the Internet, obviously, is not a source. For both of these groups, television is by far the most trusted source of information, with all the other sources trailing far behind. Even for the urban resident, the Internet is "the most trusted source" less frequently than relatives and friends, and less than 10% of the time.

The active or daily Internet user has a very different profile. The Internet exceeds, by a small percentage, television as a source of interesting information – and television is less dominant as a source in general. Other sources – print, relatives, are also cited less frequently. The daily Internet user is more literate than the other groups, however, and books are cited as sources a bit more often than for others. And, while the daily Internet user also chooses television as his or her most trusted source – the frequency is far lower, less than 30%. The Internet is the most trusted source almost as often, with the rest of the sources trailing far behind. Again, the daily Internet user chooses books as the most trusted source more frequently than the other groups.

In other words, in Russia, the Internet competes with television as a source of information only for frequent (daily) users. That select group, however, chooses to access and trust a set of different sources of information than the rest of the population.

The Russian Webscape is Uniquely Russian

For those 35 million people across the vast expanse of the Russian Federation who access the Internet at least once a month, the various features of social media – private, public, blogs, online journals, social networking sites, friends, readers and communities – overlap and converge in different ways than they do elsewhere.

In the U.S., for instance, blogs can be divided into public and private groupings, with a distinction based on content, focus and intended audience. Public blogs are usually topical, and aimed at a wide audience. Private blogs are more like online journals, with a personal focus and a narrower group of viewers or readers. American blogs have a certain typical structure, with a static blogroll of links identifying what or whom the blogger reads, and a dynamic series of posts and comments. In this context, the distinction between blogs and social networking sites is relatively clear: one group is for spreading information, whether private or public, and the other is for connecting with friends and communities of like-minded thinkers.

The Russian landscape is quite different, and the categories have different connotations. Due to specific social, historical and technical factors, Russian blogs blur the line between public and private, and between blogging and social networking platforms.

A case in point: in the detailed quarterly reports on the Russian blogosphere that Yandex has been issuing since 2006, the terms "blog" and "online journal" are entirely synonymous (ie there is no sense of blogs that are NOT journals), "friends" are interchangeable with "readers," and "communities" are included in the total blog count.

One reason for this merging of public and private, blogging and social networking platforms can be found in the history and evolution of the Russian blogosphere. Russian "blogging" began in the early 2000s with LiveJournal (LJ), a site which continues to dominate the Russian blogosphere. LiveJournal does not follow the traditional blogging model, but is rather a social media hybrid that combines features of both blogs and social networking sites such as personal diary entries, blog posts, comments, communities and friendship networks.

In its early days, most journals on LJ were like the public blogs in the U.S., kept by a veritable "Who's Who" of literati, with friends lists that often numbered over 1,000. These lists represented subscribers, or regular readers, rather than friends, creating a virtual listing of the blogger's "fanbase." Although in more recent years this scenario has changed, and the average number of "friends" has dropped considerably, the central assumption still exists that in the Russian blogosphere, "friends" are readers, not friends; hence the interchangeability of the terms "friend" and "reader" in Yandex's most recent, Spring 2009 Blogosphere Report*:* "The average personal blog is read by 18 people and the average community has 112 bloggers. Only 2% of bloggers have over 100 friends, and 0.2% more than 500."

Russia's top four "blogging platforms" (LiveInternet, Ya.ru, Blog.Mail.ru and LiveJournal) host nearly 70% of all blogs, and all emulate the hybrid LiveJournal model. Acting like social networks, they all provide "friend lists" and the option to join communities/groups and share images, video and audio. According to Yandex, these groups and communities are also included in the "blog" category. So for instance, in its Spring 2009 Report, Yandex claims that the Russian blogosphere contains 7.4 million blogs, comprised of 6.9 personal journals and over 500,000 communities.

Pure social networking platforms emerged more recently, in about 2006, and were essentially modeled on their U.S. counterparts, namely Classmates and Facebook. These differ from the blogging platforms in that, by not catering to extended blog/diary posts, they focus primarily only on locating, reconnecting with, and compiling lists of (actual) friends, participating in groups and communities, and sharing images, video, audio. In the case of these social networking sites, "friends" are indeed friends, and not simply readers of one's posts and diary entries.

Monthly audience numbers also reflect Russia's unique blend of social networking and blogging, as the list of top social media sites in Russia contains both social networking and blogging platforms. The social networking service Vkontakte, modeled on Facebook, is by far the most popular, attracting almost half of Russia's Internet users. Mail.ru offers social networking and blogging as separate but interconnected services, and while separately their audience numbers are low, when combined, the audience of both those services makes up roughly one third of Russia's monthly Internet users. LiveJournal is next, attracting more than a quarter of Russia's Internet users, followed by the social networking site Odnoklassniki, modeled on Classmates, with almost a quarter of the users.

Conclusion

While Russian Internet penetration is relatively low – only one third of the population – those that do go online, do so relatively frequently, and with a passion for social media. Daily Internet users in Russia are primarily educated and urban, and differ from the rest of the population in their sources of attention and trust – with the Internet gaining on, and in some cases, exceeding television as a reliable source of "interesting information". It is important to note here, however, that "interesting information" does not necessarily mean that it is relevant, or even informative in any meaningful or political sense. The "interesting information" that users find online can take many forms, most often appearing in the content of blogs or social networking sites. While "pure" social networking sites may not, yet, be as predominant as elsewhere, social media use – through both blog/social networking hybrids and "pure" social networking sites – is considerable, especially among active Internet users. In fact, if the statistics are to be trusted, the percentage of active Internet users that blog and use social networking sites is consistently higher in Russia than in the US and those who do use social networking sites are "engaged" to an above average degree.

About the Author:
Karina Alexanyan is a Ph.D. candidate in Communications at Columbia University. Her doctoral research explores the Russian-language social media landscape.

Further Reading:

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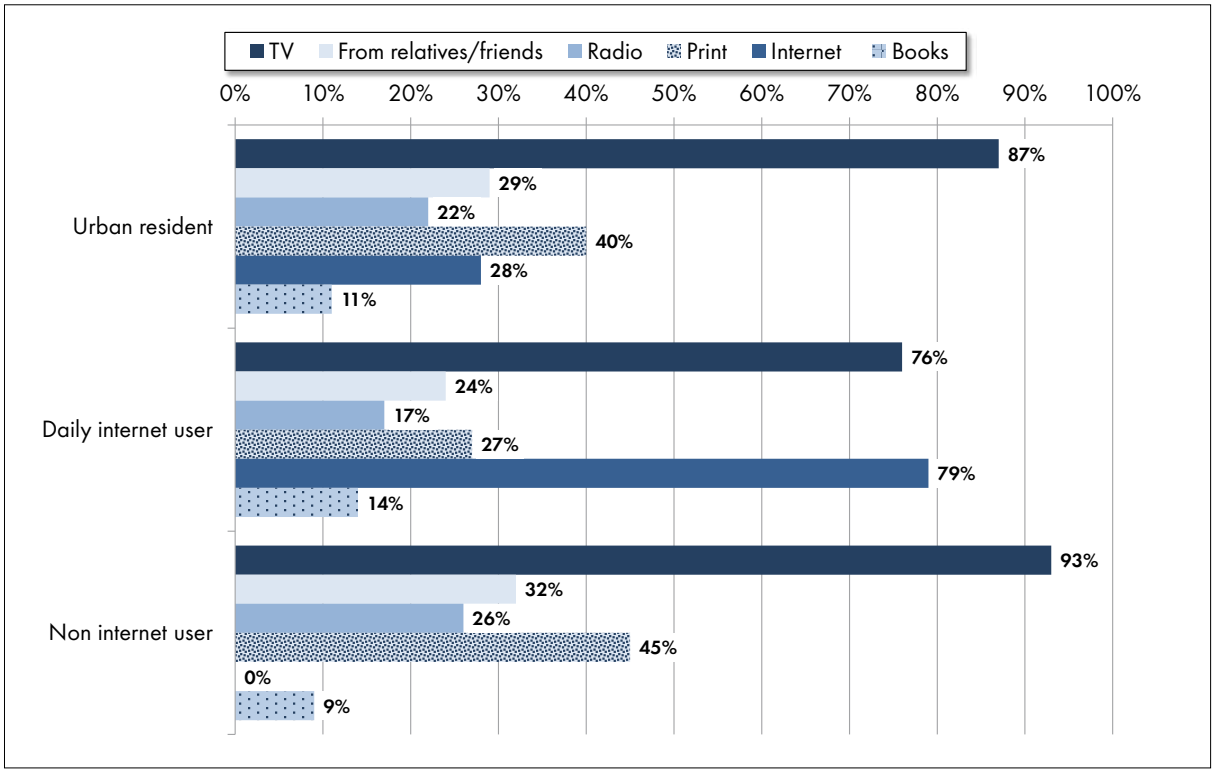
- Yandex "Trends in the Blogosphere," http://download.yandex.ru/company/yandex_on_blogosphere_spring_2009.pdf, Spring 2009.

Tables and Diagrams

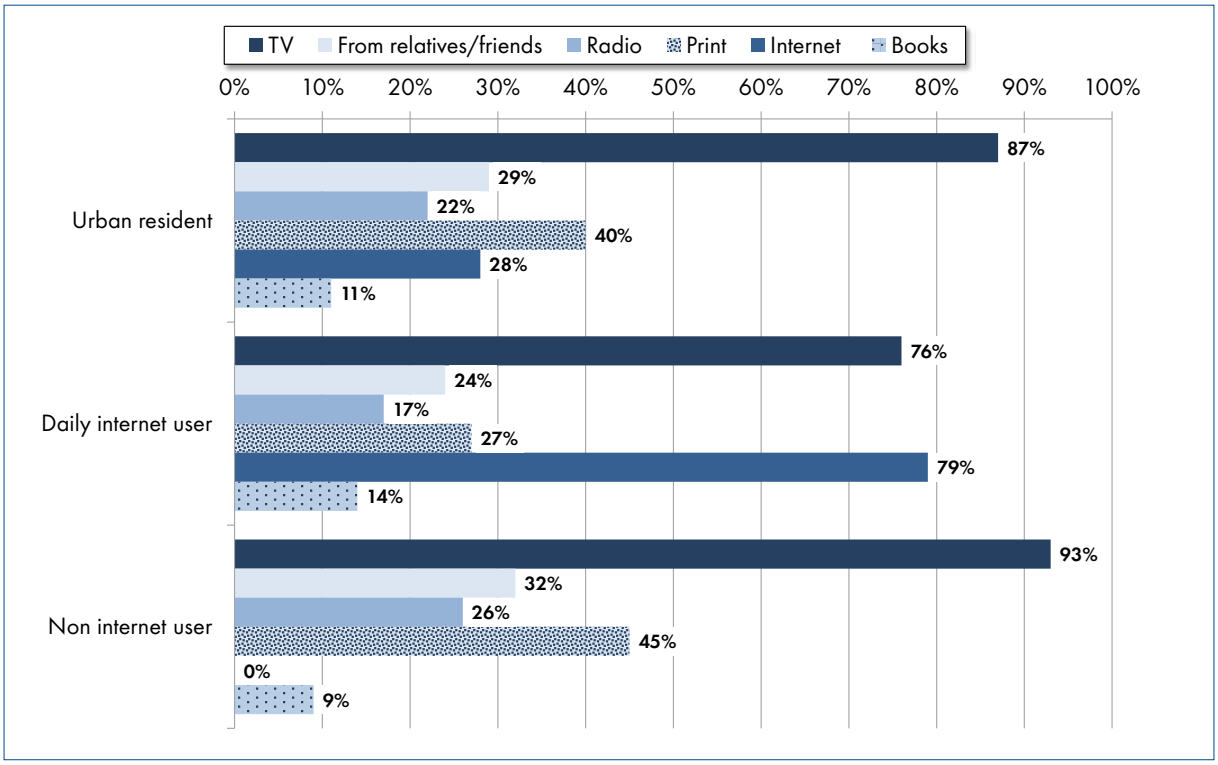
The Internet as a Source for Information; Internet Frequency and Use

Figure 1: Where Do You Most Often Find Interesting Information?



Source: Mediinye predpochteniya naseleniya: internet tesnit televidenie 23 April 2009, http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d16lp.pdf

Figure 2: Which Source Do You Trust the Most?



Source: Mediinye predpochteniya naseleniya: internet tesnit televidenie 23 April 2009, http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d16lp.pdf

Table 1: Internet Use & Frequency – Russia versus Moscow

	Number of adults – Russia	% of Russia's adult population	% of Russia's Internet users	Number of adults – Moscow	% of Moscow's adult pop.	% of Moscow's Internet Users
Total pop	112.5 mil			8. 8 mil		
General users – Over 18, Go online at least once						
In six months	37.5 mil	33%	100%	5.3 mil	60%	100%
In a month	Almost 35 mil	31%	93%	5.1 mil	58%	96%
Active Users – Over 18, Go online at least once						
Per week	30.4 mil	27%	81%	4.9 mil	56%	92%
Per day	20.6 mil	18%	55%	4.2 mil	48%	80%

Source: FOM, Internet in Russia, Special Report, Spring 2009, http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/smi/smi_int/d091617

Table 2: Education & Internet Penetration, Russia & Moscow

Education	Russia	Moscow	Percent of [level of education] that go online at least once per month – Russia	Percent of [level of education] that are monthly Internet users – Moscow
Advanced degree	17%	43%	63%	76%
Secondary education	39%	31%	30%	48%
High School Education	32%	21%	22%	41%
Less than High School	12%	6%	5%	12%

Source: FOM, Internet in Russia, Special Report, Spring 2009, http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/smi/smi_int/d091617

Table 3: Blog/Social Networking Sites & Audience Numbers

Blog Hosting & Social Networking Sites	Monthly audience	Percentage of Russia's monthly users (32– 35 million)
1. Vkontakte.ru	14.3 million	40–45%
2. *Live Journal*	*8.7 million*	*25–27%*
3. Odnoklassniki.ru	7.8 million	22–24%
4. Mail. Ru – My World	6.3 million	18–20%
5. *Live Internet*	*5.6 million*	*16–17.5%*
6. *Blogs.Mail.ru*	*4.7 million*	*13–14%*
7. *Ya. Ru*	*Under 3 million*	*Under 9%*

Key: Social networking sites in black. *Blog hosting sites in red italics.*

Source: Comscore "Russia Has World's Most Engaged Social Networking Audience," http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2009/7/Russia_has_World_s_Most_Engaged_Social_Networking_Audience, *July 2, 2009 and Yandex "Trends in the Blogosphere,"* http://download.yandex.ru/company/yandex_on_blogosphere_spring_2009.pdf, *Spring 2009.*

Analysis

Understanding the Real Impact of Russian Blogs

By Eugene Gorny, New York

Abstract

Previous Western efforts to understand the impact of the Russian blogosphere on the Russian political system have taken a limited approach and come to the conclusion that the blogosphere has little political impact. In undemocratic countries like Russia, political discourse becomes diffuse since virtually any topic may acquire political connotations and political activity tends to take oblique, indirect and symbolic forms, which may seem non-political or quasi-political to outsiders. In fact, the Russian blogosphere reproduces the fundamental structural features of Russian society, such as social atomization, negative attitudes to official institutions (and, more generally, to any "Other") and a strong dependence on personal networks as a source of information, opinions and support. Informality, symbolic action and laughter as the key features of the Russian blogosphere make it closer to popular laughter culture than to the public sphere.

The Size of the Blogosphere

The blogosphere can be defined as the totality of all blogs and their interconnections. It is not homogeneous but consists of distinct networks shaped by users with common or intersecting interests who interact with each other and the world by writing, linking and commenting. The resulting networked space reflects political, social and cultural patterns and processes in a society. Blogs are probably the most democratic and popular form of sharing information and opinions. The study of the blogosphere (and its constituting networks) is a way to understand "what people really think".

The Russian blogosphere is big and growing. According to Yandex (2009), in the spring of 2009, it included 7.4 million blogs. By the end of November this figure exceeded 11 million. A million posts and comments are produced daily. The scale and variety of the Russian blogosphere presents a methodological challenge to researchers seeking to understand it on both qualitative and quantitative levels since it is difficult to embrace it in its totality and interpret perceived regularities correctly.

Of the 7.4 million blogs in the spring of 2009, only 12 percent were active in some way (had at least 5 entries and had been updated at least once in the past 3 months) and only 5 percent (370,000) were super active (updated at least weekly). This active and productive segment constitutes the Russian blogosphere in a proper sense and it should be distinguished from dead or junk blogs. Of the million entries produced daily, a third qualify as spam.

Global and Local Aspects

The Russian blogosphere is a structural and meaningful formation within the global blogosphere. It has its specific topology, discussion topics, attentive clusters and patterns of user behavior. It is both global and local. It is global because it facilitates the flow of information and uncensored discussion irrespective of state borders; unites members of Metropolis and Diaspora (about 20 per cent of Russian bloggers live abroad); provides links to information resources worldwide and serves as a tool of social mobilization (grassroots movements, organization and coverage of protest actions, charity fundraising, etc.).

At the same time, the Russian blogosphere shows strong localizing (or glocalizing) tendencies: it is to a large degree self-contained (isolated from the rest of the Internet); has relatively few "bridge bloggers" writing about other countries and cultures in Russian or about Russian affairs in other languages; the dialogues of Russian bloggers with foreign bloggers are rare and mostly of mock or destructive nature. In brief, in the blogosphere, Russians tend to communicate with Russians in Russian about Russia-related topics.

The case of the Russian blogosphere clearly shows that the global communication technology is not necessarily used for the dissemination of global content or discussion of global issues. The Russian blogosphere is, for the most part, an inwardly focused social network more interested in what is going on in the country rather than in the world.

The Blogosphere's Political Potential

The Russian blogosphere's political significance is uncertain. On one hand, blogs are extensively used for documenting corruption and social injustice, uncensored discussion of current events and the viral spread of information. On the other hand, although the level of discontent with the political regime is high, it most-

ly finds expression in resentment, cynicism and humor rather than in organized political action. Potentially, the Russian blogosphere (especially its "discussion core") is a powerful agent for social change. However, this potential is still far from being fully realized.

Unlike most of the Russian media which are directly or indirectly controlled by the state, the Russian blogosphere remains a place of free speech and uncensored discussion. This makes it an invaluable source of knowledge about the sentiments, opinions and attitudes of the population. The study of *vox bloggeri* has tremendous significance as it can help to understand the current situation in Russia and potentially predict the country's future.

Anglo-American scholarship tends to approach the Russian blogosphere from a political science perspective. Unfortunately, this approach has revealed serious limitations and its validity is questionable.

The application of political science's normative framework to the Russian Internet (as well as to the Russian society in general) invariably leads to the conclusion that they do not conform to the ideal model and can be only described in terms of deviation, defectiveness and fallacy. The Western concepts of participatory democracy and civil liberties may work well in societies with developed democracies but they have a different meaning (if any) in undemocratic countries like Russia. The scholars who suggest that the main function of blogs is political discussion (or any serious discussion of any serious issues) which should result in political action and then blame the Russian blogosphere (because they find little politics and seriousness in it) are victims of their own a priori assumptions.

Thus, a recent study by Fossato, Lloyd and Verkhovsky (2008) begins with the assumption that the Internet in Russia has been perceived as an "an antidote to state dominance… a liberator, a tool whose possession, or ability to access, allows individuals, oppositional parties and NGOs to escape the control the state can exercise over TV and radio channels, and the press." The study attempted "to gauge how far that is true in Russia" and came to a rather pessimistic conclusion that "the power and potential of the Russian Internet is very limited" and that the Russian web has failed to fulfill the promise of individual and social liberalization. Fossato (2009) goes even further and advances a hypothesis that the Russian blogosphere serves in fact as a means of people's adaptation to the regime rather than an instrument of social change. Both conclusions are questionable as they are based on just a few case studies and do not take into account the specifics of blog discourse. Probably what has failed is not the Russian web but a biased research strategy.

The initial assumptions on which the quoted research is based are in fact a projection of the researchers' own political beliefs and expectations and they are not supported by documentary evidence. My analysis of the early reception of the LiveJournal blogging platform in the Russian media (Gorny, 2004b) demonstrated that the emergent blogosphere was interpreted in terms of "one's own circle", personal self-expression or interpersonal play rather than in terms of "an antidote to state dominance", "political liberation" or "opposition". The development of political discussion and activism in blogs is a relatively late phenomenon. It was difficult to find examples of online activism in 2004–2005. Even now, when political issues are discussed or political actions are performed, they often take unserious, playful, mock and grotesque forms. However, it does not mean that these forms of resistance are insignificant and have no impact upon either public opinion or the political situation in Russia.

Is the Russian Blogosphere the Public Sphere?

The concept of the public sphere (including a derivative concept of the "networked public sphere") should be used with care with regard to the Russian blogosphere.

The public sphere is defined as "an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action." The public sphere is understood as a mediator between the "private sphere" (individual citizens) and the "Sphere of Public Authority" (the state authority, the ruling class) (Habermas, 1962/1989). The study of the public sphere centers on the idea of *participatory democracy*, and how public opinion becomes *political action*. The basic belief in public sphere theory is that political action is steered by the public sphere, and that *the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere* (Benhabib, 1992). "Democratic governance rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate" (Hauser, 1999).

In authoritarian regimes there is not much opportunity for participatory democracy and the conversion of public opinion to political action. The government is alienated from the people, it serves its own interest and it has little interest in dialogue. In this sense, it is not legitimate (from the viewpoint of democracy theory).

In undemocratic societies, such as Russia, where the official institutions are used to defend the private ends

of the ruling elite rather than to serve the public good; where the state routinely uses brute force to suppress any hint of opposition and dissent; where public social institutes are underdeveloped and too weak to be able to bridge the gap between citizens and the government, the opportunities for meaningful political action (be it organized political opposition or grassroots movements) are very limited. In this situation, political discourse becomes diffuse (virtually any topic may acquire political connotations) and political activity tends to take oblique, indirect and symbolic forms (which may seem not political or quasi-political to outsiders).

It is true that the blogosphere in Russia is a *substitute for the public sphere* — much the same as literature in the 19th century and the independent media in the 1990s. But is *not* the public sphere in the proper sense of the word. Unlike the public sphere, which is rational, serious and which follows the rules of public discussion, the Russian blogosphere is full of emotions, mockery and highly informal speech including jargon and *mat* (profanity, swearing).

Recent research on the connection between the Internet and democracy has found that this connection is not straightforward. Thus, Kalathil and Boas (2003) argue that while certain types of Internet use do pose political challenges to authoritarian governments and may lead to political change, other uses of the Internet can actually reinforce authoritarian rule. Faris and Etling (2008) come to the similar conclusion that the Internet is just a tool, which can be used for different purposes, and that "the impact of digital networks in promoting political change unquestionably depends on the context". However, it is not enough to state that the context defines the purpose the Internet is used *for*. It is much more challenging to understand *how* it is used for the same purpose in different contexts. Democracy theory should be supplemented by an anthropology of undemocratic society. And this is an important topic for further research.

The Russian Blogosphere and Russian Society

If even networking and informal exchange are anthropological universals, their functions and implications are very different in different regimes (Ledeneva, 2008). The defects of the authoritarian regime in Russia are compensated for by informal personal networks: a low level of trust in formal institutions (from the parliament and NGOs to the police and courts) places emphasis on interpersonal trust. The blogosphere (and other computer-mediated networks) in Russia provide a specific example of a more general principle – a case of informal personal networks compensating for and replacing ineffective formal and impersonal institutions.

The Russian blogosphere reproduces fundamental structural features of the Russian society such as social atomization, negative attitudes to official institutions (and, more generally, to any "Other") and a strong dependence on personal networks as a source of information, opinions and support. This opposition towards the "official" applies to the Russian Internet generally, especially to its early stage of development, before commercialization and state intervention. As Rohozinski (1999) noted ten years ago, "The informal social networks, or *blat*, which pervaded Russian society and facilitated day-to-day decisions in an ossified system, formed the basis for constructing Russian cyberspace". However, *blat* is just one manifestation of the Russian culture of informality (Ledeneva 1998, 2006, 2009). The Soviet legacy of kitchen-table talks and *samizdat* (Gorny, 2007) and jokes culture (Gorny, 2008) is no less important for understanding the reality of the Russian Internet.

Probably the most striking feature of the Russian blogosphere is a paradoxical mixture of the public and the private. Most blogs are publicly accessible but very few follow the norms of public discourse; the dominant mode is informal in-group communication. The triumph of informality in Russian blogs has deep sociocultural reasons and far-reaching consequences. Informality, symbolic action and laughter are the key aspects of the Russian blogosphere. Perhaps, Bakhtin's (1941/1993) theory of popular laughter culture rather than Habermas' (1962/1989) concept of the public sphere can provide an adequate theoretical framework to understand "how the Russian blogosphere really works" and to reveal the unwritten rules by which it is governed.

About the Author:
Eugene Gorny is a postdoctoral fellow at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, the author of "A Creative History of the Russian Internet" and an active blogger since 2001.

(Suggestions for further reading overleaf)

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Analysis

News in the Russian Internet: The Growing Indifference of a Closing Society

By Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk, Moscow

Abstract
Although Russian news sources often are limited to presentations of the official perspective, many Russian young people, and even editors and journalists are not seeking out alternative points of view on the Internet. The way most Russians use the Internet reflects their lack of interest in political topics. Instead, they prefer to go online as a way of connecting with friends and finding out information from them.

The Internet Replaces Television for Some People

- "I haven't watched TV for a year now. My mind has cleared."
- "We don't watch TV, we don't even have it at home; we browse the Internet and learn everything we want to learn from it."
- "Mailing lists and blogs are everything I need to be connected to the world I am interested in"

Such statements are common from Russian university students and professors, according to my research on how Russian citizens use the Internet.

Russian TV once played a crucial role in uniting post-Soviet society. However, in recent years, it has been consistently losing its audience due to its absolutely uniform support of the Russian authorities.

At the same time, the speed and accessibility of the Internet has made it a mass medium in Russia. Twenty-two percent of the Russian population (people older than 18) have access to the Internet at home, and 28 percent can be called Internet users (including those who browse the net at work or Internet-cafes), according to recent Levada-Center data.

It seems Russia differs little from the West in the way that its citizens use the Internet: In Russia, the net society links all parts of the country, from the European area west of the Urals through Siberia and the Far East. It functions effectively, forming numerous horizontal connections that make it possible to work around vertically-organized official society.

Nevertheless, the question remains: does the Russian Internet really provide a diversity of information to citizens who feel that official sources (TV mostly) do not provide them what they are looking for?

According to media statistics, even the best of which are not very reliable, more than 80 percent of the population in Russia still watches TV and news programs retain their traditionally high ratings. Nevertheless, the most active and youngest part of the population (people aged 18–35 years old) watch TV the least (a situation that holds not only in Russia but in all countries with a developed media system). These people claim that they get their news from the Internet, though it is quite difficult to measure the popularity of Runet news resources using the numerous on-line rating systems. Some of them place news and analytical resources near the top, on in the third or the fourth positions; others do not list news anywhere in the Top 100.

It is difficult to say how many Russians have given up TV for the Internet. According to my research in 2008 (limited to interviews with students and teachers at one Moscow university) half of the former TV viewers partly or fully switched to the Internet in search of "objective" news. People who are older than 40 and teenagers still watch TV actively, but the young people prefer entertainment to the news. Their older compatriots though are active news watchers, which is partly a function of the media habits they developed in the Soviet era.

"Fashionable" Net for "Indifferent" Users?

There is a great difference between the Russian television of the late 1980s – early 1990s and today's broadcasts. As the Soviet Union was collapsing and the new Russia emerging, Russian television was only partly controlled, included live programs, provided direct broadcasts of official political events and cultivated such outspoken and opinionated TV news stars as Leonid Parfenov, Yevgeny Kiselev and Svetlana Sorokina. Even though it often lacked professionalism, it was interesting to watch. By contrast, the television of the 2000s, with its state ownership, strong system of self-censorship among reporters and editors, ban on live broadcasts, and the evident dominance of the First Channel and Russia TV channel, means that viewers have little choice beyond the official line and entertainment programs.

The news on Russian television no longer works to shape public opinion. News programs cover a well

known list of people and evaluate them as either positive or negative. TV news today, in both its format and content, does not support any form of public discussion: its broadcasts include no opposition figures or opinions; such people and ideas simply do not exist in the world portrayed by TV news. At the same time, TV news shows actively promote the idea that political news is boring. There are a lot of "other news" programs: local news, household news, gardening news, etc. The motto of such programs is: "There are much more interesting things in the world than politics." Thus, the official media widely disseminates the idea that politics is not the people's business and that they should grow gardens and repair flats instead.

In contrast, the Internet is the only mass medium which presents different voices – including the political opposition, subcultures, and various counter-cultures – and uses different social languages as well as provides resources in different languages. Runet is still largely uncontrolled by the Russian state. Since counter-cultural modes of expression and behavior in everyday life still provoke suspicion and hostility, Runet helps members of different communities, societies, professional associations and fan-clubs unite and express themselves. It is also the best communication tool for diasporas, as well as the last medium for Russia's miniscule political opposition. The Internet serves this purpose not only in Russia, but also Belarus and other countries of the post-Soviet space. Accordingly, one would expect the Internet to be needed and extremely popular in Russia, where the means of expression in the other parts of society are closing down.

In fact, however, the Internet is often a trendy fashion accessory rather than a tool for acquiring information that is not available from official sources. The relative novelty of the Internet in Russia gives the use of this mass medium distinct connotations. New media in Russia were assimilated later than in the US and Western Europe, but the process, at least in some social groups, goes faster. Accordingly, the idea of the Internet as technical miracle, "Western" fashion and a tool facilitating everyday activities co-exist in the popular conception of new media in Russia. The majority of people are quite emotional towards them, but do not use even half of their capabilities.

While society may worship or curse the Internet, most users approach it very directly and unsubtly. In fact, many people only go on-line to check their e-mail. The situation is similar with mobile phones: many see them as jewelry rather than as a communication tool: it is habitual to change phones monthly in an effort to display the newest and the most expensive model, but often the owners of these phones do not know how to use their new brand devices, e. g. how to take photos or send text messages. New media in Russia are in the sphere of prestige consumption and everyday necessity at the same time. The Web is "fashionable", the words associated with the Internet and names of some online resources are popular, and they have become a part of popular culture now in soaps, pop songs and films. One recent hit song, for example, talks about a girl who spends all her time, day and night, on *Odnoklassniki*, a popular website that allows Russians to connect with former school chums.

Although the Internet provides access to a diversity of views, critical journalism, and news in foreign languages, in reality there are few users who are interested in gaining political information from outside official channels. This specificity of new media use is reflected in the content of the Russian Internet. The huge range of new medium possibilities in Russia have yet to be exploited. If we speak about the "mass user" and the "mass of users" they mostly know how to perform only simple functions in the Internet, such as using one of the most popular search engines. So, those who know more, e.g. how to blog, make a personal page in social networks or even watch YouTube, gain a great informational and communicational advantage. Many have recognized the informational capability of the Internet, but few have actually applied it yet.

Information Is Not (In) Communication

The notion of "information" is discussed widely among journalists and scholars in Russia in spite of almost one hundred years of media theory and its recent conclusions on the irrelevance of the notion itself and the desirability of replacing the word *information* with the word *communication* in the majority of media situations. So, using the word *information* today means not *objectivity* but *diversity*, not *information* per se but the availability of *different agendas* and the possibility to choose among them. So, in speaking about the news, I refer not, for example, to Niklas Luhmann's definition of it as "programs that spread ignorance in the form of facts," but Jurgen Habermas's understanding of the ideal of an informational environment as a space for public discussion. Of course we should have in mind that Habermas also sees the contemporary media as one of the main reasons for the decay of the public sphere.

The crucial question is whether we can diagnose and describe any specific feature of Internet use in Russia which is determined by the "post-Soviet" social, political and cultural environment.

In exploring this question through my research, I have relied on sociological methodology in spite of its evident limitations. The question of what methodology is the most useful in studying the Internet is still highly problematic. Many advocate the use of a visual studies methodology or a linguistic approach. Formalist research seems to be more productive than sociological efforts: form does not lie, but interviewed people often do. Nevertheless, when we speak about such an ever-changing form as the Web, even people's opinions seem stable.

In 2006 –2008 I carried out several small research projects in Moscow and Moscow region. Overall, I conducted about one hundred interviews with editors of Russian TV news programs and Runet news sites (10 interviews), university teachers (20 interviews) and students (62 interviews). The interviewed people were mostly females (about 80 percent of the interviewees).

The following are some of my research results, revealing why my conclusions on RuNet's public information role are quite pessimistic:

The students, journalists and editors I interviewed claim that to learn "the real" situation in Russia and the world, they download news from the Internet. But among the most popular sources of news they listed are mail servers such as Mail.ru and Yandex.ru. Such admissions were remarkable because Mail.ru news, for example, is among the worst examples of web journalism, providing yellow journalism reports mixed with official news that panders to the authorities**.** The popularity of these sites suggests that, despite their claims, my respondents did not invest any effort into searching for information on the Web.

Among the other often mentioned Russian-language Internet information resources were the Russian Version of the BBC and the sites of off-line newspapers, such as *Izvestia* and *Vedomosti* (mentioned mostly by professors, but also by students and journalists). Made-in-Russia Internet news and sites which seek to define alternative political agendas, such as *polit.ru*, *gazeta.ru* and even *grani.ru,* do not attract significant attention. The movement away from these sites is a major change from the results of surveys I conducted in 2004 when these resources were mentioned frequently.

To my surprise, *LiveJounal* and other blogging sites were not mentioned often either. The lack of interest contradicts current market conditions since bloggers are now even more welcomed at public events than traditional journalists and their activities are more profitable for advertisers.

Among the most popular sites described as "informational resources" were the social networks such as *Odnoklassniki.ru* and *Vkontakte.ru*. Some respondents considered these sources as too low-brow ("*popsovye*") and my respondents mentioned *Facebook* as an alternative social network for intelligent people. But this preference for Facebook does not change the general situation, which reveals the spreading desire to learn the news from other people in the flow of gossip, social commentaries, and other forms of communication.

Conclusion

Thus, the answer to the question posed above is negative: There is nothing specifically post-Soviet about the use of the Internet in Russia. According to my research, the Internet is not informing a virtual public sphere in Russia, which can compensate people for the lack of information that they experience. If we follow Raymond Williams' understanding of mass media as not only technology but also a cultural form, it could be argued that Runet reflects the situation of indifference in contemporary Russian society. The typical Russian Internet user is not interested in discussion and accepts media content uncritically. The users are dependent on it and have great antipathy toward it at the same time.

Of course, another explanation which focuses on Internet technology may be correct as well. This point of view suggests that the Internet provides new ways of interacting, which are more popular than the old ones and political news is universally becoming extinct.

About the Author:
Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk is an Associate Professor in the History and Theory of Culture Department of the Russian State University for the Humanities.

Suggested reading:
Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk. (2009) Politika i mediareal'nost': formirovanie obshchestvennogo mneniya o poslednej kavkazskoj vojne, in: Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya. No. 1.
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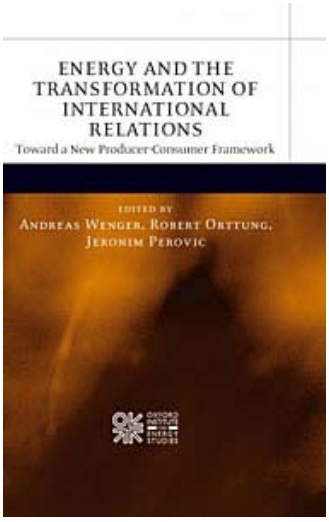
Reading Tip

Energy and the Transformation of International Relations
Toward a New Producer-Consumer Framework



Edited by Andreas Wenger, Robert W. Orttung and Jeronim Perovic

With energy security at the top of the global agenda, Energy and the Transformation of International Relations examines the development of a new producer-consumer framework. As the era of cheap energy comes to an end, Asia's demand for energy grows, and concerns over climate change increase, it is clear that the old framework is no longer sustainable in this new era. This book examines the evolving relations between the key producers (Middle East, Russia, Latin America and Africa), traditional consumers (the US and Europe), and new consumers (China and India) as they adjust to the changing marketplace and political realities. At the center of the book is the key question of how dynamics in the global energy market affect the nature of international relations. The authors argue that while conflict over resources is possible, there are many opportunities for international cooperation regarding energy resources.

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About the Russian Analytical Digest

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich). It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russlandanalysen (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.res.ethz.ch), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to socialist and post-socialist cultural and societal developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist countries, since January 2007 a group of international research institutes is participating in a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history", which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

In the area of post-socialist societies, extensive research projects have been conducted in recent years with emphasis on political decision-making processes, economic culture and the integration of post-socialist countries into EU governance. One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular email services with nearly 20,000 subscribers in politics, economics and the media.

With a collection of publications on Eastern Europe unique in Germany, the Research Centre is also a contact point for researchers as well as the interested public. The Research Centre has approximately 300 periodicals from Russia alone, which are available in the institute's library. News reports as well as academic literature is systematically processed and analyzed in data bases.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a Swiss academic center of competence that specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international and Swiss security studies. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public. The CSS is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners. The Center's research focus is on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, area studies, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.

In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) in public policy degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS); offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students; and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.

The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Crisis and Risk Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Publications Department • Klagenfurter Str. 3 • 28359 Bremen • Germany
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