Orange Revolution without the Net?

The Internet was not a medium of the protesting Ukrainians

Not only the real world, but also the virtual Internet community discovered the Ukraine in the course of the "Orange Revolution" last fall. During the oligarchic nineties, only few people outside of the country had been interested in it, but 12 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the campsites on Independence Square in Kiev suddenly turned into more than just marginal news. Comparing how often certain terms appeared in newsgroups registered by Google Groups, shows that the upsurge of attention was especially high in the German-speaking online community. However, posts often reflected opinions opposed to the protestors in the square. Instead, many chose Usenet in order to communicate standpoints that disagreed with mainstream public opinion, thereby bypassing the editorial selection process of the mass media.

Regional differences in number of postings

After the Ukrainian election commission had accepted the obviously fraudulent initial election results and the people started to take the streets, the German media discovered the Ukraine as a valid news topic. More than 90% of all reporting on the Ukraine as an area of reference appeared in the leading German media during the last two months of the year. The newsgroups display a similar tendency. For the first half of 2004, a search in Google Groups resulted in 718 postings mention-

ing the Ukraine. For the second half the figure was already at 3200. The increase of postings by more than the factor four was less pronounced than that of the editorial media. But compared internationally, it was particularly strong in Germany.
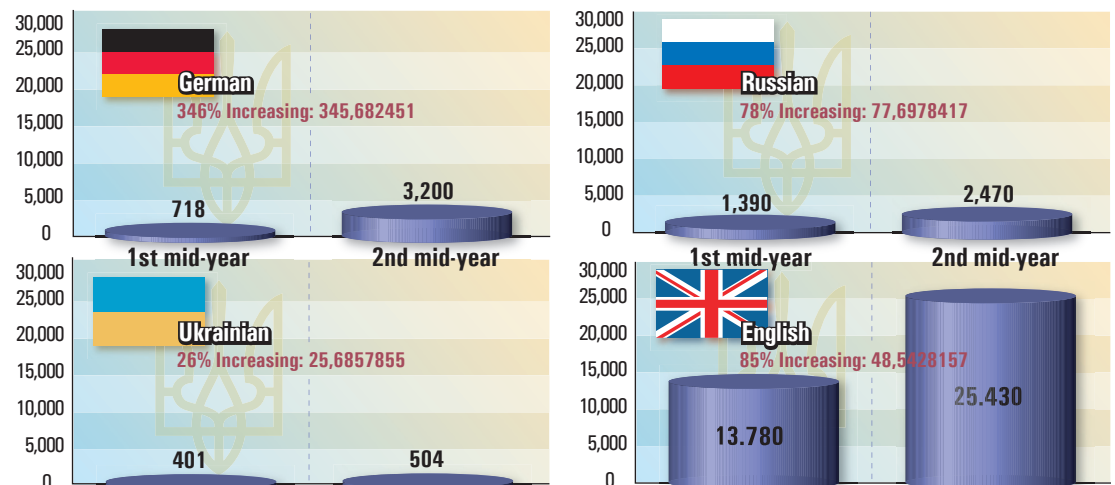
In English-language groups, the lingua franca of the Internet, the numbers also rose, but the growth was distinctly more moderate than among German-language postings.

In the first half year, 13,780 statements on the Ukraine appeared in discussion groups identified by Google as English-speaking, only to go up to 25,430 in the second. The result is even more surprising for a search in Cyrillic typeface. Typing in the Russian word for Ukraine (Украина), the numbers not even doubled with an increase from 1,390 to 2,470 hits. In Ukrainian (Україна) it rose even less, from 401 to 504 postings. On the one hand, this may be due to the fact that the Internet in these countries is both less common and more recent; and it has entered the public discussion system later than in the West, where the Usenet can fall back on a twenty-year long tradition. On the other hand, the selection of postings registered by Google plays a role as well.

Still, this explains mainly the low total number of postings and not so much the low percentage of increase. Part of the reason may be that the Ukraine is split between Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking areas, and that even in normal times there would be more discussions on it than, say, in Germany.

But since the relationship between the Kremlin and Kiev was an important concern for both presidential candidates, a noticeable increase in

Share of Usenet postings by languages

German
346% Increasing: 345,682451
718 — 1st mid-year
3,200 — 2nd mid-year

Russian
78% Increasing: 77,6978417
1,390 — 1st mid-year
2,470 — 2nd mid-year

Ukrainian
26% Increasing: 25,6857855
401 — 1st mid-year
504 — 2nd mid-year

English
85% Increasing: 48,5...28157
13.780 — 1st mid-year
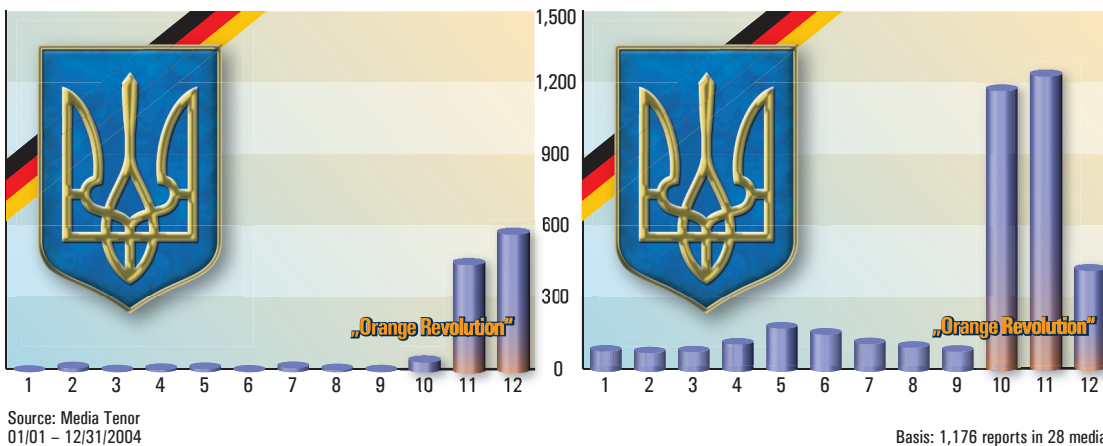25.430 — 2nd mid-year

Source: Google Groups

attention might have been expected – especially in Russia, where the majority of the people still do not consider their Western neighbor to be a foreign country.

Yushchenko opponents depend on the web
A look at the content of German discussion postings leads to yet another surprise. Despite the fact that the demonstrations in Kiev started shortly after the 15th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, comparisons between the two revolutions were far less frequent than could have been expected. Instead, many of the initial postings sounded as if they had been written by the Rus-

opposition. The number of Usenet postings suggests that this might have happened, without however playing a major role. This may partly be due to the fact that Ukrainian and foreign journalists were already able to report more freely from Kiev under President Kuchma than, for example, from the Belarus capital Minsk or even today's Moscow. The development of the German-speaking postings supports this assumption by confirming the role of the Internet as a platform of the government-backed counter-public. It is true that one can hardly blame the German media for not attributing any space on their news pages to a fringe support group of a foreign vote-rigger.

In Germany, newsgroups woke up before the media

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 12/31/2004

Basis: 1,176 reports in 28 media

sian ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky. In contrast to the media, Viktor Yushchenko did not appear as a hero in the Usenet, but rather as neo-liberal puppet of the West and as Trojan horse of the kleptocratic elite of Kiev. A considerable number of users would have preferred to declare the vote-rigger Yanukovich the winner.

But the contributors of those postings did not manage to lead overall opinion, meeting fierce opposition from the other participants in the discussions. What they did manage, however, was to publish their opinion through the newsgroups, which would have hardly been possible in the established media.

No preliminary selection on the web
The analysis of the Internet discussion suggests an unexpected conclusion. The experience with previous events in Eastern Europe, such as the war in Kosovo, but also the Kremlin coup against Yeltsin in 1993, supported the assumption that the Internet would have primarily been used by the

But in a democratic country with constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech, this privilege would also benefit other groups in a different constellation, who have been refused access to the media agenda for one reason or another: The possibility to bypass the mass media's editorial selection process uncontrolled.   me