

3 Divided by a common web

Some characteristics of the Russian blogosphere

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As a technology, the blogosphere emerged at roughly the same time in every part of the world, and is supported by technologies that spread at great speed, as a rule, irrespectively of national borders. Nonetheless, as with all new technological resources (such as the telephone and the car), their adaptation across the globe can be culturally specific. For example, in certain areas of post-socialist society, having your own motor vehicle is considered more a source of prestige than a means of transport. Similarly, access to virtual communication (a LiveJournal account, an email address) can enable a user to take up social roles that are not available to them in their life outside the internet. Not only have linguistic communities within the global blogosphere developed distinctive traits. But the internet itself continues to be organized in territorial terms, with IP addresses and web-hosting platforms traceable to physical locations. In this chapter, I will analyze the sociolinguistic aspect of the internet and its divisions, usually described by the word blogosphere. My main case study is the Russian-language segment of the blogosphere, with its national, regional, and global diaspora elements, which set it apart from blogospheres in other languages.

Before we can get to the peculiarities of the Russian case, some preliminary remarks on the general characteristics of the blogosphere and its users will be helpful. According to Lev Manovich's pioneering social theory of the internet, the virtual space of new media has created several types of users: the flâneur, the dandy, the online vagabond, the natural scientist, the surfer, and the navigator (Manovich 2001: 268–73). Thanks to the rise of the internet, the closely knit community of a small-scale traditional society (*Gemeinschaft*, in Ferdinand Tönnies' terms) is being replaced by the anonymous association of modern society (*Gesellschaft*, according to Tönnies ([1887] 1957)) (Manovich 2001: 269). Subsequent interpreters have corrected this view, by stressing the function of the blogosphere in creating a "society of experience" (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*) (Schulze 1992). According to Simanowski (2008), its users commonly exhibit two often contradictory tendencies: fighting to attract attention, on the one hand, and, on the other, taking part in mass production "under the influence of group pressure," in an "internet democracy," in the role of "mercenary (purchased) bloggers," "paid storytellers" or "free amateur advertisers."

The technological basis for the internet gives rise to a situation in which institutional boundaries in the offline world (the "real" world) are erased, and the space

thus cleansed provides a potential communications platform capable of connecting, in one and the same place, communication between a multitude of people who, in an Internet-free world, would not have had the chance to meet. Until blogs appeared, this potential had only partially been realized. Websites were created en masse by technical specialists familiar with the intricacies of domain delegation and HTML. The few mechanisms for feedback included chat forums, guest books and email. However, the content of chats was ephemeral, and could be saved only on a local computer, while email remained a form of correspondence, and guest books were not intended for communication as such, but instead were designed purely to convey the views of visitors to site administrators, without making any provision for a response. Moreover, guest books could not be combined into a single network similar to what would later become the blogosphere, because each guest book belonged to a separate website and was exclusively tailored towards that website.

This situation changed when creators of websites started following a new blueprint for populating the internet with content. Now all they did was to provide the technical infrastructure for users to publish, declaring that the users themselves were now responsible for textual content. Without needing to possess special technical skills, each internet user could play his part in creating the look of the internet. The opportunity for comment turned a communications space into a communications environment (the blogosphere), where restrictions were imposed not by external factors, but by the limitations of human ability.

As one of the media and, at the same time, genres in which social interaction occurs, the blog denotes a public, web-based media platform, which takes the form of a collection of entries (text or video), displayed in reverse chronological order, united around the identity of the author (a personal blog) or the common interests of a team of authors or a specific topic (collective blogs, a blog community), and offering readers the opportunity to post comments. A blog (irrespective of whether it is personal or collective) may be a personal diary, a news feed, a platform for comment on current affairs or a collection of recreational, educational or other material (Rettberg 2008). On occasion, blogs are conceived as a form of media, although from the legal standpoint a blog only acquires this status once it has been officially registered.

Historical overview of the Russian blogosphere

By the end of the 2000s, three main blog formats had clearly established themselves in Russia: (1) the text-based blog (sometimes accompanied by illustrations or embedded video and audio, usually hosted on platforms such as LiveJournal, LiveInternet, Diary.ru and others); (2) the video-blog (each post consisting of a video address to readers; recordings are normally stored on the YouTube and RuTube video-sharing websites and then exported to traditional blogging platforms by embedding); and (3) the micro-blog (a blog with limited functionality, including a restriction on the number of characters in each entry, such as Twitter). A group of blogs located on one blogging platform usually forms a

relatively closed community (see LiveJournal, for example). The blogosphere is, in essence, the sum total of all blogs. From the beginning, the Russian internet was highly regionalized, with Internet provisions focusing overwhelmingly in Moscow, and only then spreading through its large cities further to the periphery.¹

It was not too long ago that the blogosphere carried an air of the exotic; its name is itself a loan from English, regarded with a certain degree of irony. As the author of these lines defined it in 2009:

The blogosphere (from the Greek, English and American, literally “universe of blogs”) is a term which brings together all social networking sites and clusters of online diaries, which are understood to be potentially interlinked. In paronymous and semantic terms, the word brings together the concepts of *blagodat* [“grace”] and *noosphere*, although stripped of all religious and particularly philosophical content, in the meantime planting in the user a pleasant feeling that they are not simply wasting time and money in fruitless conversation with unknown individuals, but are among the first inhabitants of this new universe.

(Lenta n.d.)

But in the years since, it has found new ways to integrate into both the internet and the offline socio-political environments. As social networks have expanded rapidly, we have witnessed a global “devirtualization” of users in those regions where for many years the internet space was controlled by the state. The moment when bloggers transformed into *public figures*, they also became *humorous mascots*, e.g. *khomiachok* (“hamster”). This became apparent in slogans such as *khomiak raspravil plechi* (“the hamster has squared its shoulders”), which appeared at public protests in Moscow and other Russian cities in 2011. These protests themselves were partly organized through social networking sites (Dragunskaia 2012).

To what extent can we use the Russian blogosphere as an example of either a society of detached flâneurs, or as a “community of experience”? In order to answer this question, we need to map out the external offline boundaries of our subject matter, or, to be more precise, its border posts—those issues in public and political life which are actively depicted in both environments but which are most passionately discussed in the blogosphere and on social networking sites. Among the more prominent of such issues: the political campaigns against Russian bloggers, primarily Aleksei Navalny, and representatives of the opposition; Ukraine’s democratic revolution in 2004; the “Arab Spring”; the web-based organization in Russia of public protest events; and the attempt to use the blogosphere and social networking sites to draw up an “alternative diplomatic agenda,” focusing on developments such as the Pussy Riot case and global online campaigns in support of the “Magnitsky list.” The list would also include more local online campaigns against corrupt officials who flout traffic regulations, or for the preservation of local hospitals and schools.

From affective community to an economy of attention-seeking

In the modern economy of attention-seeking, the internet plays a central role. But paradoxically, while the lag with which the Russian sector of the global blogosphere has stayed behind its Anglo-American counterpart by approximately a decade, closed by the mid-2000s, the differences in character between the Russian and the English-speaking internet became more apparent. This has to do as much with the role of individual Russian users, who influenced their community by becoming its gurus (Anton Nosik aka *dolboeb*, Roman Leibov aka *r_l* and several dozen other leading bloggers with thousands of followers), but also with the development of the blogosphere in its sociopolitical context. In this respect, the Russian blogosphere has acquired new and unexpected properties, which can be described not so much in terms of “lagging behind” the Western blogosphere as in terms of “creating an idiosyncratic and on occasion very strange identity.”

As an intellectual system that displays self-awareness and seeks to be as expressive as possible, the blogosphere revolves around the relentless fluctuations of its users—as individuals, groups or herds—between complete openness and demands for privacy. This is how the blogger *sherman* describes this contradiction:

Life online
12 May 2011

We devise new forms of communication, we develop old ones, we walk around in large groups, lots of people are our “friends” on social networking sites, and YET we feel lonely. We say that we live the way we want to, but at the same time we don’t know what it is that we want. We are a new generation who are devaluing words and feelings and creating a new God. And we ourselves are trying to control that God, but ultimately we remain under his control. We refer to this God by various names: dollars, rubles, euros, there are thousands of different names. But is that really what we want? . . . We are a generation of people who are free. We are free to express our thoughts, share our vision of the world and try to be individual, and yet we forget that we are individuals. We freely make our own choices, freely moving forward, seeking assistance and resorting to various means, some of them unlawful, in order to achieve our aims.

Yes, we are free. Emotionally, we are not dependent on other people. But when we find ourselves alone, why do we feel sorry for ourselves, why do we regret our actions, why do we want to change the past? Why, then, do we look for more and more friends and people to love, if we are independent? Why is it so painful for us to be ourselves?

(*sherman* 2011, orthography and punctuation
as in the original)

The blogosphere and the history of counterculture in Russia

In the early 2000s, the predominantly private space represented by blogs started to enter the global media landscape alongside traditional media. On the one hand, on their websites, major traditional publications began to create pages where both the publication's employees and ordinary users could launch their own blogs. Between 2000 and 2005, as an employee of the Deutsche Welle radio station, I was involved in numerous debates within the journalistic community about the relationship between the blogosphere and professional journalism. These debates petered out of their own accord in the mid-2000s, when it became clear that amateur journalism, on the one hand, and professional news dissemination, on the other, did not in any way hinder one another. On the contrary, they contributed to the creation of new genres. The blogosphere rapidly defined itself as an arena for citizen and/or amateur journalism and everyday communication and self-representation (see also Timchenko 2012).

Meanwhile, having closely studied the balance of power between professional media and blogging (including micro-blogging) for many years, some specialists have come to the conclusion that “the media are working to popularize social networking sites, rather than social networking sites popularizing the media.” As an example, Timchenko cites statistics from the RIA Novosti news agency, which has “more than 200,000 subscribers on VKontakte, but barely 10,000 people accessing its website from social networking sites” (Timchenko 2012).

If one looks back on the history of the blogosphere in Russia from the perspective of the early 2010s, two stages stand out, the first of which, measured by many parameters, coincides with the international blogosphere. During the first stage, by the end of 1990s and the very beginning of 2000s, blogging platforms constituted a materialized private-public space, with no managers or supervisors to provide access to the resource as a showcase for the diversity of individual and communal life. However, the most popular blogging platform of the early 2000s, LiveJournal, fairly quickly found itself at loggerheads with some in its community over the attempts by its management (and principally its abuse team) to monitor bloggers' use of politically incorrect phrases.² This was a crucial moment in the history of the Russian blogosphere, since the early Russian blogosphere's most advanced users immediately began to position themselves as a counter-culture.³

On the internet, this anarchic subculture turned out to constitute the mainstream of textual production, acquiring its own leaders, including Dmitrii Galkovskii, Aleksandr Dugin and Mikhail Verbitskii. Verbitskii, indignant at attempts to exert the pressure of censorship on LiveJournal, set up his own blogging platform, Lj.russia, as an alternative to LiveJournal where there would be absolute freedom (an Abbaye de Thélème for our time, also known as Tifaretnik, based on Verbitskii's own nickname, *tiphareth*).

It is worthy of note that the most active of these pioneers who started with LiveJournal and ended with their own “underworld” of Tifaretnik, became involved with the internet during lengthy stays (for study or work) in the USA or

in European countries, and then brought this media to Russia at a time when strong anti-Western feelings were on the rise. The LiveJournal abuse team ganged up on Verbitskii over a campaign bearing the slogan “Kill NATO!”

The Lurkmore portal is an archive of the sort of politically incorrect and, at the same time, socially and politically edgy material that has been deposited in the blogosphere and its neighbors on the internet. In late 2012, facing the threat of closure owing to the generous use of bad language, Lurkmore moved to the .to domain. Lurkmore is assembling an archive of all the notable activists involved in the Russian blogosphere in its early years. Despite Lurkmore’s language and style, the blogosphere archive under construction at this counter-cultural portal possesses additional merits. For example, the archive does not contain dead links, and, like the best articles on Wikipedia, backs all its facts and artifacts up with citations. In addition, Lurkmore places portraits of the main protagonists in the wider offline historical and cultural context. In particular, it is of historical and literary interest that the protagonists of the early Russian blogosphere are mentioned in the works of the most famous Russian writers of the 1990s and 2000s, Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin (*Day of the Oprichnik*).

In the opinion of Aleksandr Dugin, a proponent of the ideology of a new Eurasia and a radical critic of liberalism in Russia, the blogosphere is “a crowd of degenerate teenagers who are gradually decomposing”:

They create a virtual dialogue that never goes anywhere. Living in LiveJournal is something that people who have no chance of leading a real life can afford. It’s about the retelling of distorted stock phrases that reflect the late autumn of the young soul. It’s about systematically subsiding into nothing. It’s a cemetery. Among the people sitting there are wanker managers who pretend to be Beowulf. It’s the illusion of an artificial life (*protezirovannaia zhizn*). It’s the shameless exposure of total nonsense. There are no critical or apologetic meanings. It’s a brutal, half-demented atmosphere. Archetypes of decomposed spirits. It’s a dictatorship of two or three formulae that are passed between one another in a senseless relay.⁴

The first Russians to use the blogosphere thus turned out to be radical critics of this new “system,” emerging out of the new medium, which was understood simultaneously as a focal point of Western liberalism and an institution resembling a totalitarian Soviet kindergarten or a pioneer camp for children with learning difficulties. The combination of hatred and contempt with enthusiasm and admiration, of complete assimilation and profound Russification, with a radical rejection of one’s existence in the “blogosphere,” as if in an alien and hostile space—that is what provides the cornerstone for the habitat occupied by Russian-language bloggers. It is possible that both the subculture nature of the Russian blogosphere as a whole, and the marked counter-culture nature of LiveJournal in particular, as the most popular Russian-language blogging platform, would have led to the blogosphere’s gradual transformation into a peripheral environment, located adjacent to the various new media of the “Web 2.0 generation.” But in the

mid-2000s, a new stage opened in the development of the Russian blogosphere, in some respects different from what was taking place at the same time in the West.

The citizen platform and Russia's media landscape since the mid-2000s

Since the mid-2000s, the Russian blogosphere and the Russian media environment have witnessed processes that have moved in a variety of directions. On the one hand, advanced hybrid media have emerged, including within their ranks more blogs maintained by representatives of the so-called expert community. Publishing projects such as Slon, Forbes, Grani.ru and Snob have either launched blogging communities on their own platforms, or turned in their entirety into semi-closed (expert) blogging platforms.⁵ At the same time, professional writers and journalists have found themselves in a community of authors who may have been specially selected, but are nevertheless far from professional. As a result, the material published by these hybrid media does not differ greatly from what can be found in LiveJournal's blogs and blogging communities. Moreover, even these media outlets' most popular bloggers and columnists cannot compete in terms of the size of their subscriber base with the former editor-in-chief of Stolitsa, Andrei Malgin (*avmalgin*), internet guru Anton Nosik (*dolboeb*) or photoblogger Rustem Adagamov (*drugoi*).

As citizen journalism has developed technologically and substantively—along with the prominence of online video and audio material, censorship has gradually returned to the domain of registered media. Towards the end of the 2000s, the publishing policy of state television channels and internet publications, as well as the majority of their privately-owned mass-audience counterparts, began to experience such strong pressure from censorship that the blogosphere increasingly came to assume the function of “grown-up” media outlets. Indicative of this is the role that web-based sources served in providing reliable reporting on one of the major man-made disasters of the 2000s—the accident at the Saiano-Shushenskaia hydroelectric power station in August 2009. Initially covered up at the order of then emergencies minister, Sergei Shoigu, the true extent of the damage quickly became clear once internet publications used the blogosphere to post photographs and primary textual material telling the story of the accident. On 17 August 2009, on its homepage, the Lenta.ru news website published a photo taken by a semi-anonymous blogger, because the official news agencies had failed to post any images from the scene. That same day, Shoigu said there was absolutely no threat to the safety of people living in towns and villages near the hydroelectric power station, and that the dam had not been damaged. “In situations such as these, people can always be found who will spread panic,” he said (Mil'man 2009). But it was too late—the panic was already under way. A photo report from a road jammed with cars was published not on news websites, but on LiveJournal. To the majority of LiveJournal users, the photographs of a queue at a petrol station in Abakan, posted by someone living in Khakassia and still

available on their blog (*rukhakasia* 2009), and a photo report on attempts by several local people to withstand possible flooding on a mountain, were only some of the blog-based evidence that demonstrated the importance of maintaining this medium not so much as a private space but as a social space. By the second and third day after the accident, even official television channels were using material from bloggers.⁶

By the start of the 2010s, the blogosphere had turned into an alternative source of information on the most important low-level events in public life in various regions around the country. The precise nature of the material and the rapid verifiability of reports made LiveJournal an archive for micro-blogs such as Twitter. For many bloggers, the automatic reposting of LiveJournal updates to Twitter and Facebook accounts counter-balanced both platforms' like tags on the organizer—the daily diary (LiveJournal), hour notes (Facebook) and minute signals (Twitter) of a clock. Different ways of visualizing memes appeared, along with demotivating caricatures, summarizing the behavior of users in the blogosphere and on social networking sites, or providing users with stylistic recommendations. The more censorship and deviation from fidelity users find in the media, the more active and aggressive bloggers become in their world. The spread of swear words and other forms of mutual humiliation provokes new censorship. Any new attempt to jam free expression provokes the expansion of obscene speech acts in the blogosphere.

The spread of social networking sites that provide users with new technological opportunities has not led to the abandonment of the blogosphere. It may be that the blogosphere's direct social effectiveness across post-Soviet space did not manifest itself until 2004, during the elections in Ukraine, when several Russian- and Ukrainian-language LiveJournal communities played a significant part in mobilizing society and helping to organize civil society.⁷ In Russia, the blogosphere and social networking sites could be seen performing a similar function from the winter of 2011–12 through to the winter of 2012–13.

During this period, the blogosphere assumed several useful functions normally performed by institutions of civil society, serving as a virtual surrogate for micro-group, street and parliamentary democracy. Particularly influential was the LiveJournal blog of Aleksei Navalny, where daily posts appeared documenting a multitude of high-profile criminal and civil cases—posts that inevitably spread through social networking sites through reposting. One recent exposé featured a scheme used on state procurement websites to rig the supposedly public procurement process. Officials maintaining the site mixed Latin letters inconspicuously into the Cyrillic script, making the tender pages inaccessible through ordinary searches. Only those provided with the specific algorithm could access and bid for the tenders. Within a day after being exposed on Navalny's blog, the scheme became common knowledge to several tens of thousands of people. As of 24 January 2013, 164 people reposted the information elsewhere on LiveJournal, 1,500 reposted it on Facebook, 1,279 reposted it on Twitter, 2,261 reposted it on VKontakte and 317 reposted it on Google Plus (Naval'nyi 2013).

At the same time as it was republished on social networking sites, the event was reported by major online publishers, so the text of the post authored by Navalny comfortably reached a circulation of more than 100,000. Since the inception of Navalny's blog in 2006, this sort of citizen journalism has turned the account into a serious media outlet with more than 70,000 subscribers, justifiably reinforcing the presumption that Navalny's subscriber and support base will become a factor of national political significance. Over the course of six years, some 3,000 posts on LiveJournal have attracted more than 1.5m comments. On Twitter, Navalny has 320,000 followers.

Since late 2012, state prosecutors have been leveling increasingly serious allegations at Navalny and his brother. Tens of thousands of Navalny's subscribers are following the confrontation between the lawyer and the Russian state in real time. Since December 2011, some of these subscribers have been attending actual political rallies and marches. Official electronic media (primarily the television channels owned by state media conglomerate VGTRK) have been smearing Navalny with terms such as "troublemaker," "nationalist," and "populist." Each such accusation boosts the lawyer-blogger's support base. And yet, despite all the quantitative measures mentioned above, even the tens of thousands of subscribers and "friends," none of this in any way signifies that all these people, or even the majority of them, are active or even passive supporters of the blogger. The pejorative classification of bloggers as "office plankton" is reinforced in practice by the fact that the online political and cultural efforts of bloggers, as well as of people who do not have their own blogs but are registered on social networking sites, remain marginalized. Even popular bloggers do not find much demand for their blogging from larger media outlets—official, semi-official and actively dissident (anti-government). The social stratum of "television viewers," the passive majority of Russia's population, continue to view the avant-garde segment of the blogosphere as alien, and even less influential than the official Soviet "intelligentsia" was during the Soviet era.⁸

Researchers studying the Russian internet tend to exaggerate the extent of the integration that has taken place between offline and online environments during the political protests of 2011–2012, which took place primarily in Moscow and St Petersburg. In his article, "The End of Virtuality," Sam Greene refers, in particular, to the "mobilization segment" as being the most intriguing, in the context of the collaboration between blogs and social networking sites, on the one hand, and "normal," "offline" citizens, on the other:

Of all of those who participated on December 24th, some 56% had taken part in the December 10th protest on Bolotnaia Ploshchad', and 21.5% were at the unsanctioned rally at Chistye Prudy on December 5th. But those active in on-line debates were significantly more likely to have been at each of those earlier protests: 25.3% of on-liners took part in the December 5th protest, versus 16.5% of off-liners, and 67.2% of on-liners came out on December 10th, versus 47.5% of off-liners.

(Grin 2012)

Greene interprets the chasm between “on-liners” and “off-liners” as follows:

On-liners were 53% more likely to have participated in the December 5th protest, but only 41% more likely than off-liners to have come out on December 10th. Tentatively, at least, this suggests a mainstreaming of the protests, as they gain more attention in the off-line media and more prominence in public debate. Moreover, it appears that solidarity is increasingly being generated not in the media, but on the streets themselves.

(*ibid.*)

And yet, in exposing the corrupt nature of Russian society “from the top down,” Navalny also serves as a negative example for the frightened inhabitant: the Russian Prosecutor-General’s Office openly and mockingly declares him to be under investigation. Even if the majority of the population does sympathize with Navalny, there is no way in which he can be described as a trendsetter (at least at the time of this writing), neither for the offline majority, nor for the “office plankton.”

The vulnerability of critical voices in the blogosphere was also exposed by the media campaigns waged in the late 2000s and early 2010s, such as those against Navalny and Adagamov, which spread across to the television channels, which enjoy far larger audiences than the Russian blogosphere. The art of using dirty tricks to “troll” or “extinguish” an opponent is acquiring ever newer forms. In 2012, public accusations that Adagamov had abused children were placed at the heart of the political campaign against the opposition. Signs that the security services and organizations of uncertain origin (Nashi, etc.) had apparently “developed” this case divided the protest movement: for some, the campaign was a sign of the mendacity and weakness of the country’s leaders, while, for others (988 2012), it was a sign that the authorities were right to say that the whole of the opposition blogosphere is sustained by an amoral and impure group of people (Belokurova 2012).

The “thick journal” in the blogosphere

In Russia and the USSR, the “thick literary journal” was considered to be one of the main cultural institutions of the pre-computer and pre-internet era (Martinsen 1997). This is despite the fact that, historically, Russia and the USSR are far from being the only countries in which this sociocultural genre has played an important role,⁹ it was specifically in the era of Web 2.0 that almost the whole of Russia’s thick-journal environment was packed into one mega-website, called the “Russkii Zhurnal,” the Periodicals Room.¹⁰ This online publication represents a special form of co-existence between the personal blogosphere—the diaries and blogging communities of writers and readers—and the collective blog environment of the editorial offices of the “thick journals,” “linked” to one another via social networking sites and/or broadcast to LiveJournal.

When, in 2000, I proposed comparing the “population” of the blogosphere’s prototypes with the “nation” in Stalin’s sense of the word, which, for example, populated the “archipelago GULag,” that “nation” was yet to acquire its own

history (Guseinov 2000). Over the past few years, that history has emerged. The self-perception of bloggers as a very special and even elite part of the population, with its own codex of norms and values since then has widely referred to the traditions of the Russian intelligentsia subscribing to the same thick journals, watching the same performances, reading the same books, and sharing very similar points of view on how things should be organized in Russia (*rokina* 2007). The controversial co-existence of encapsulated “solid” communities and fragments of the still non-existent open civil society is thus making virulent the historical pattern of the intelligentsia situated between people (*narod*) and a monarch (*vlast*) as we know it at the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the Soviet era.

The historicization of a blogger’s user experience can be illustrated by referring to certain comments on posts on Tatiana Tolstaya’s blog, which has more than 25,000 regular readers/subscribers (“friends”). Since Tolstaya’s blog is a literary project, she positions some of her entries as drafts or sketches for possible scripts. In a 12 March 2012 comment on one of those drafts, which contained alternative scenarios for “annual inaugurations of President Putin” (Tolstaia 2012a), one of the users said that Tolstaya’s sketch reminded him of an earlier joke by the same author. At the request of another user, he readily provided a link to an entry posted by Tolstaya on 17 September 2011.

tanyant:

“Prokhorov

We finally have someone who fits the saying: “Give an idiot a dick made out of glass—he’ll break his dick and cut his hands.”

(Tolstaia 2011)

Written following billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov’s refusal to become leader of a liberal party, the post triggered an immediate response from those who felt they had been offended. A comment on Tolstaya’s post contained a link to Andrei Mal’gin’s blog, in which Mal’gin, quoting Prokhorov’s former deputy in the Union of Right Forces party (Right Cause), said that Tolstaya had offended Prokhorov personally (Mal’gin 2011). Under the guise of exposing an anti-Medvedev conspiracy on the part of the billionaire, Mal’gin performed some so-called “mudslinging.”

The volume alone of the literary texts which pass through this sort of discussion is becoming an existential challenge for users of the blogosphere. Some discussions continue for years, like chess matches conducted by correspondence. Others turn into promotional events for forthcoming book launches, consisting of posts from LiveJournal being effectively recycled. In this way, the literary blogosphere forms communities of many thousands of people around a wide range of authors who constitute an alternative “Periodicals Room.” To a certain extent, this “room” overlaps with the “Russkii Zhurnal” Periodicals Room, and the points of overlap consist of reactions (likes) and comments on Facebook.

The blogosphere is developing into a synergetic advertising resource that allows an author not only to be open about the purpose of a post as advertising, but

indeed to stress that purpose. After all, the goods that are on offer are of very high quality, and the reader will not be disappointed. For example, *tanyant* publishes a detailed account of her new personal series “Tatiana Tolstaya recommends,” published by the Eksmo publishing house. Lavishing praise on a collection of stories by Lora Beloivan, Tolstaya reminds her readers that Beloivan blogs as *tosainu* and has 9,000 followers, as well as pointing out that the hard copy of the book will be on sale at shops run by the Artemy Lebedev Studio (Tolstaia 2012b).

The openness and lack of subtext in Tolstaya’s blog create a favorable environment for authors, editors and publishers to keep an eye on one another. The existence of an objective indicator such as the time at which entries and comments were posted makes it possible to establish that maintaining this sort of writer’s blog can take up a significant proportion of someone’s so-called spare time—not just the writer’s, but also that of some of their regular readers.

The distinctive symbiosis between an author and their fan club, all of them privy to a common “secret,” can be seen by taking a look at the blogs of the writer Denis Dragunskii (*clear_text*), the historian Nikolai Shaburov (*furlus*), the writer and philosopher Mikhail Bezrodnyi (*m-bezrodnyy*) and several thousand other LiveJournal blogs launched as “authors’ projects.” The people who set up these blogs propose separating their projects into short-term (the launch of a book as a LiveJournal “annual compendium”) and medium-term cycles (devirtualization during book launches at fairs, by working with students).

Conclusion

In tracking the development of the Russian blogosphere from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, we can highlight a number of principal and contrasting signs.

First, there is the combination of the civic counter-cultural practices of the internet era with the older practices of dissidence (alternative thinking) in the late Soviet period, leading to the emergence of two coexisting models: the citizen platform and the personal blog. In the post-Soviet Russian environment, the blogosphere has fitted itself into the traditional late Soviet subculture of dissidence. In this way, it is perceived as a new-fangled culture and counter-cultural practice, and at the same time as a reinforcement of old cultural stereotypes. This leads to the contradictory attitude to blogging adopted by those taking part in and observing the process—as a useful activity which expands the boundaries of the traditional media (Navalny), and as a pointless and harmful pastime (Dugin).

Second, oppositional bloggers have found it increasingly difficult to promote politically significant information offline, due to growing administrative harassment. As seen in the state-led campaigns waged against well-known bloggers (Navalny, Adagamov et al.), there is a clear desire among Russian officialdom to marginalize the blogosphere. On the other hand, among the blogosphere’s active users and creators alike, the points of contact between virtual content and offline social reality are constantly changing. The impulse triggered by the blogosphere is not always picked up by the social environment, but is becoming an ever more important feature of the media landscape.

Finally, the blogosphere is still perceived by most users as an environment for recreation and micro-group cultural consumption. Only a small portion of people using the blogosphere view this environment as a space for “real” (offline) social creativity. The rich traditions of elite cultural leisure find form in the blogosphere as personal artistic projects. The volume of texts produced and processed in this space–time continuum makes the blogosphere a parallel reality. This reality either pushes active users away from taking practical social, artistic, and political action, or offers itself up as a genuine lifestyle alternative. Just as this chapter goes to press, Aleksei Navalny has demonstrably taken the latter tack, publicly declaring his ambition to become the next president of the Russian Federation (Lenta 2013). The declaration would hardly be useful in his attempts to avoid reprisals by the Prosecutor General of Russia, but it stands as a clear challenge to Russian political bloggers less inclined to take the fight from the virtual to the real. Are they ready for a new positioning of the blogosphere or not? Will the very core of Navalny’s activities, some of which have led to the sacking of corrupt politicians, become a new trend in Russia? Or, maybe Navalny will suffer the fate of quite a few stubborn businessmen and politicians right now in jail? Negotiating these two main strategies remains a key issue for the self-perception of bloggers and the Russian blogosphere at large.

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Notes

- 1 Based on data from Rambler’s list of the top 100 online media (<http://top100.rambler.ru/navi/?theme=440>).
- 2 The harassment of Mikhail Verbitskii is described in detail on the Wikireality website: http://www.wikireality.ru/wiki/Миша_Вербицкий.
- 3 This is also the view of Ilya Kukulin, who even suggests that among the most radical members of the language environment, a favorable attitude towards the state’s radical anti-democratic position is refracted as a paradoxical distortion of the language of culture and the intelligentsia. From the standpoint of the most active counter-culture groups, the standard language is a hypocritical discourse among dissidents and liberals, which threatens Russia with collapse and destabilization (Kukulin 2012).
- 4 http://www.russia.ru/video/dugin_lj/ (accessed January 2013).
- 5 Slon (slon.ru), Forbes (forbes.ru), Grani.ru (grani.ru), Snob (snob.ru).
- 6 For photographs of the devastation at the Saiano-Shushenskaia hydroelectric power station, see *socro* (2009). Compare with an analysis of blogging in the USA in connection with Hurricane Katrina: Kay Trammell’s (2005) conclusion—“blogging will not change the world in crisis, but it will make it more human”—fully applies to the function of the blogosphere in Russia as an environment that offers an alternative to or supports the media.
- 7 See the LiveJournal blog Vybir 2004 (2004-vybory-ua.livejournal.com/).
- 8 For more on the intelligentsia as a source of critical ideas on development, see Beyrau (1993).

9 See, for example, the German history of the “thick journal” in Philpotts (2009).

10 Zhurnal’nyi zal (magazines.russ.ru).

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