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Construction of Cultural Identity in the National Internet Space

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The article deals with social aspects of development and cultural assimilation of Internet technologies in Belarus. The first national domain .by appeared in Belarus 15 years ago and since then the Internet has been developed greatly from an experimental technology available only at research institutes to one of the key communication channels. One of the reasons for writing this article is the desire to ground the possibility for national segments to exist on the global Internet web not only in the national language, in general, but the Belarusian segment, in particular, as well as to clarify the mechanisms aimed to develop national identity by means of Internet technologies.

Keywords: cultural studies, Internet, cultural identity, representation, cyberspace

Point

Each society has its peculiar way of assimilation and application of «neutral» technologies. And there can be a variety of answers to the question about the fact, how the use of the Internet can be integrated into the existing social relations. How the concepts of distance and social space are generally changing while new social and cultural relations emerge and transform the existing ones. As mainly at this level we can discuss the influence and use of the Internet in the process of cultural identity development. Hereby it is important to clarify the issue of correlation between the Internet and identity, where at least two possibilities may be singled out:

1. The Internet is a tool helping to develop cultural identity(ies), i.e. on-line technologies are used to influence off-line practices.

2. The Internet is the space where one can acquire its new identity, new self, i.e. it is a new dimension of social reality, where one can perform a great deal of potentialities, which are impossible to fulfill in other spaces.

The present article is focused on the first possibility, which interprets the Internet as a tool aimed to develop one's identity.

The problems existing in the national Internet spaces are sufficiently global: from the attempts to clarify the issues of its possible existence in principle to difficulties relevant to opposition against power intending to control information space. While «Ru-Net» has been the object of research for a long time, other national Internet spaces remain uninvestigated.

However, before discussing the Belarusian Internet space it should be clarified, what «Ru-Net» is and how one can briefly determine

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the boundaries of the concept «Ru-Net». May websites in the domain .RU be referred to «Ru-Net» or may this notion include all websites in Russian? Within the frames of this article the term «Ru-Net» shall be used in accordance with the definition suggested by Schmidt and Teubener: «The boundaries that confine this assumed 'Ru-Net' may be accordingly language, technology, territory, cultural norms, traditions or values and political power» (**Schmidt and Teubener**, 2006: 14).

Is there something that is common for developers of national Internet resources, which allows them to feel the community of their identities? In order to discuss local national and cultural phenomena of the Internet use we would focus on the consumers of this local information. At this point it would be appropriate to use the comparison with the phenomenon of printing capitalism and its influence on emergence of national states with the development of national Internet spaces as local communities: «It (the community) is imaginary, since the members of even the smallest nation would never get to know the majority of their brothers-in-nation, meet with them or even hear of them, while the image of their community would be present in the mind of each such member» (**Anderson**, 2001: 31).

It is logical to ask, in what way cyberspace may be independent and autonomous from national states? On the one hand, it can be explained by the famous text «Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace»: «Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live [...] Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge. Our identities may

be distributed across many of your jurisdictions» (**Barlow**, 1996).

However, declaring the independence of supranational cyberspace does not mean avoiding interventions on behalf of national states. We can mention attempts of national states to control and govern civil relations on the Internet: «The general technique of controlling information intermediaries has extraordinary potential. Consider how often you rely not just on search engines to find information but also on blogs, online newspapers, and other intermediaries that point you in the direction of useful information. It is one thing for government to crack down openly on forbidden information. But it can be harder to notice that information has become more difficult to find. It is hard, in other words, to know what you don't know» (**Goldsmith and Wu**, 2006: 75-76). As well as manifestations of global censorship, restrictions, which are far beyond the limits of national states and become worldwide phenomena: «A number of other countries were found to be engaged in less pervasive forms of Internet filtering, typically concentrated around a single content area or contentious Internet service. For example, in addition to blocking some gambling and pornographic sites, ISPs in South Korea block access to all websites related to North Korea. India blocks access to websites related to extremist and militant groups, particularly those associated with Hindu and Islamic extremism. A number of Middle Eastern and Gulf Countries, including Syria, Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, block access to the entire Israeli (.il) domain» (**Deibert**, 2009: 327-328).

Herewith, disciplining and teaching users may be carried out by means of creating cultural images. For instance, we may mention an intention to upgrade computer skills and improve informational culture. The mechanism of individual virtual socialization may be discovered through the meaning of the term «informational

culture): «By the term community informational culture we shall mean steady forms of behavior in the informational space, the forms being accepted by the majority of members of the given virtual collective» (Konstantinov, 2008: 527-258).

The role and influence of new media, in general and the Internet, in particular on development of cultural identity and their place in national and cultural projects is attracting attention of more and more researchers in the field of cultural studies. A number of hypotheses have been suggested in the process of research project planning, validity of which shall be verified in the course of the present research work:

1. No national «Internets» exist in Belarus and Ukraine (they exist only in Northern Korea and Cuba, but they are rather common «Intranets»). It would be possibly more appropriate to state national peculiarities of assimilation of new communication technologies and cultural legitimate application forms of the latter.
2. Belarusian Internet space forms and considerably identifies «Ru-Net» and this may be regarded as cultural colonization and re-experiencing cultural dependence on soviet cultural practices.
3. Russian-language space does not equal to «Ru-Net». It is much broader than Russian user-oriented websites and includes a variety of resources irrelevant to Russian users.
4. Cultural dependence of national Internet spaces on «Ru-Net» exist in human consciousness and is relevant not only to the Internet, but also to any other communication practices.

However, in spite of the general level of development of theoretical Internet problems, classification and typology of its national segments has not been duly elaborated.

Example

The present article is based on the results of the research project «Development of national identity in the countries of Eastern European Borderland (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) on the Internet», which has been successfully implemented in 2006-2007 within the frames of the program «Social transformations at the Borderland (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) administered by the Center for Advanced Studies and Education.

The object of the research shall be the Belarusian segment of the global Internet web as a social and cultural phenomenon in its historical perspective.

The subject shall apply to the practices of cultural identity development in the process of representation by using Internet technologies.

The aim of the project is to conceptualize of the mechanisms and strategies of cultural identity development by means of Internet technologies. The named aim is supposed to be achieved upon accomplishment of the following **tasks**:

1. to determine the degree of independence (or dependence) of Internet development in Belarus on the basis of description and analysis of national Internet projects;
2. to study the specific character of mechanisms developing cultural identity in national segments of the Internet on the basis of Belarusian resources;
3. to examine the role of web information in the process of cultural identity development;
4. to identify the degree to which the traditions of soviet cultural past practices determine the level and character of integration of Belarus into global informational space.

We applied a method of semi-standard in-depth interviews with experts to obtain primary information (face-to-face). The interviews were

conducted in winter-spring in 2007 in Minsk, Kiev and Kishinev. The interviews were recorded by means of a digital dictaphone. There have been totally conducted 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with top managers and managers of Internet projects in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. Firstly, we applied the method of open coding to transcripts, which allowed to «stick» concept labels to the latter and split the continuous speech of the interviewed persons into semantic units. Later we used axial coding and selective coding. Mainly these two multidirectional strategies allowed us to obtain more multidimensional results of the research. The present methodology is based on theoretical knowledge of the grounded theory. Theoretical sampling was used in the research: «Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory» (**Glaser and Strauss**, 1967, p. 45). We have also sorted out the central category of the project. This central category shall be the national Internet or national Internet space. We identified three subcategories to develop and support the central category on the basis of the interviews conducted: Identity, Space and Influence. These three subcategories are closely connected and interact with each other. The problem of identity is the subject of our interest firstly in the context of cultural identity, and mainly the way in which social and cultural practices and routine activities define our identity.

Pursuant to the above-mentioned aims and tasks we created a large-scale coding system used as the main criteria of further interview deconstruction. Upon the deconstruction of the interview they were reconstructed in the compliance with the criteria of the coding

system. Individual statements used by experts were regarded not as their «personal opinion» or «private point of view», but as the statements cycling in the discourse. Herewith it is rather symptomatic to consider frequent repetitions of the same ideas used by different experts.

We have to emphasize that in the course of traditional quantity researches in the media field the audience and its behaviour become the object of studies. Later, pursuant to «feedback» obtained from the audience and available information relevant to the latter (demographic characteristics, consumer behaviour, employment etc.) we formed the notion of mass media, with its audience under investigation. The peculiarity of our research work shall be the fact that mass media are investigated not pursuant to «feedback» obtained from its audience, but the mass media are studied as a self-sufficient social institute. In other words, presented research's results are not typical for traditional communication studies of media effects. Herewith, not the external manifestations of social activity of mass media are under analysis, but its latent self-description narratives.

Proposed approach correlate well with idea of conceptual changes in cultural studies: «The cultural production thesis is an adaptation of the cultural studies' approaches by shifting the focus on to the cultural politics of production on the Web while maintaining the insights derived from celebrating the activity of the populace in making meaning. This new thesis is the fundamental reorientation of cultural studies from reception to production in order to make sense of the Web» (**Burnett and Marshall**, 2003: 72).

In the present article Internet studies shall be regarded as a scope of research strategies and practices aimed at investigation of social, cultural, political and economic relations emerging in the process of user interaction both in the Web (on-line) and relevant to the Web (off-

line). We may state that Internet studies apply research principles of cultural studies to new communication technologies.

And if the methods applied for cultural studies of the Internet ten years ago were greatly criticized: «The most important methodological principle for a cultural study of the Internet is simply to have one. To truly learn anything about the Internet, one has to ask carefully considered questions that can be answered only through some kind of organized research» (Sterne, 1999: 265). At present the researcher is regarded as completely independent and free to choose any methodology: «The program of contemporary culture studies is based on the principle of necessity for direct observation of different forms of social interactions; a concrete program of scientific investigations on culture is connected with selection of methodology for social interactions studies. Selection of the basic form of social interactions 1) depends on subjective intentions of the scientist carrying out investigations on culture; 2) determines concrete subjects and methods of culture studies on the base of direct observation of people's social life» (Koptzeva and Reznikova, 2009: 493).

The Internet has been ignored in academic research works in the humanities field for a long time, but at present the Internet investigation in Russia is becoming more and more popular. Previously it was analyzed and studied as one of possible communication technologies, as an applied field of computer science, but at present more attention is paid to the studies of social and cultural consequences of implementation of this new communication technology.

Social aspects of the Internet may include a change in its perception as a new dimension of public space, transformation of its previous forms of social and cultural interaction of individuals and social groups etc. «The Web produces a continuum of engagement from collective

organization to audience. The user in his/her cultural reproduction of his/her Web space navigates between these collective identity poles» (Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 80).

However, identity issues are becoming a matter of peculiar interest for cultural studies. We have to underline that the specific character of the Internet is observed in the course of new role distribution in the communication process. Hereby, we take into account user development and conceptualization, but not the audience: «Audience, consumer, reader and listener are the usual ways of identifying the subjective experience of other media and cultural forms and, though they relate to the experience of the Web, they do not express its essential difference. In order to advance on understanding the Web of identity, it is the different subjectivity of the user that has to be explored. To organize that interpretation of the user and how it relates to but differentiates itself from how people use traditional media, we have called this interpretation the cultural production thesis» (Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 70). The research is focused not on a consumer but mainly on a user as an active individual directly participating in its own identity formation.

However, Internet researchers, and the Internet in general, are targeted at a certain group of users: «Most Internet content targets well-off, well-educated, English-speaking users. An estimated 78 percent of all websites are in the English language, even though just over 50 percent of Internet users are native English speakers, and only 10 percent of the world population use English as a first language» (Chen et al., 2002: 79). Concentration on study of «English-speaking users» had produced a new term for description and explanation of this domination and influence on global Internet's research in studies – «Anglophonic». But Internet is not limited by the English language. In other words: «However, despite the clear importance of

attending to the Internet's Anglophone origins, in this introduction we have been arguing that it is necessary for Internet studies to take greater account of developments in the non-Anglophone world and to qualify the conception of the Internet as a «global» technology with increased recognition of its very local histories and cultures of use» (**Goggin and McLelland**, 2008: 12).

Ru-Net is already under active consideration and research. Now start to appear the Ph.D. thesis on Ru-Net in English. And the text of Eugene Gorny is very important. In his text is a statement about nowadays condition of Internet studies in Russia from foreign point of view: «Generally, the Russian Internet remains to a great extent *terra incognita* for English-language Internet researchers. The study aims to contribute to the knowledge of Internet uses and interpretations in various cultural contexts by developing theories based on empirical and historical case studies of the Russian Internet» (**Gorny**, 2006: 7). And his dissertation is logical a step to internalization of the Russian Internet studies'.

Troubles in construction of national Internet space as object for studies are actual for many non-Anglophone cultures. And researchers need to create they own local research object's in context of global Internet studies'. Global (Anglophonic) theory of Internet's development should be tested by local (non-Anglophonic) studies: «Local Internet histories and concepts question the analytical power of generalizations while also making the directions and stances from which these can be made in the first place visible». (**Paasonen**, 2008: 28).

Locally based Internet studies produces and provides visibility of the object being studied – national Internet space. In this context, all discussions about Internet's development in Belarus we should mention its cultural dependence on Russia. This becomes apparent both in borrowing the terms (for instance, the

offsetting point for provider traffic in Moscow RU9 and BY9 in Minsk), and in structuring information (for instance, complete adoption of catalogue subject headings) etc.

In other words, the mainstream in Internet studies is targeted at English-speaking users and the English language resources, while other Internet spaces remain unstudied by the researchers. The presented project is an attempt to complete this lacuna and presented in the first approximation – What is Bel-Net?

Resume

The conducted research allows to draw the following conclusions:

The Russian language space does not equal to «Ru-Net». It is much broader than Russian user-oriented websites and includes the variety of resources having no relevance to Russian users. The Russian language predominance in the national Internet spaces is not regarded as a sign of belonging and loyalty to Russia. And this provides grounds to speak about such phenomenon as a great number of Russian national websites. At present it is possible to speak the same language on one sixth part of the land as in the period of the USSR, but presently it is feasible in virtual space. We may assume that in the period of the Russian Empire its territory was connected by the common railway network. In the period of the USSR there was a common power supply network. At present this connecting function is fulfilled by the Russian segment of the Internet (global network).

There is no national Internet as autonomous and self-sufficient space, but there is the national Internet as a local way to learn new technologies. Being a part of the national Internet is one of the developmental stages of the Internet project. Transfer to the global level is a kind of threshold, the indicator of maturity of not only a single project, but of the national information system

as a whole. When we talk about Belarusian Internet we do not mean the Internet developed in Belarus, but the peculiarities of its usage and cultural assimilation of this new communication technology.

It may be stated that the main dependence of national Internet spaces on «Ru-Net» lies in our consciousness, i.e. it is revealed not only with regard to the Internet, but also to any other communication practices. The existing dependence on «Ru-Net» may be abolished by means of creating a new independent one. This

is a classic model of masterpiece creation: to obtain the status of expert the pupil has to create a masterpiece.

Up to now we experience the influence of ideas recorded in written culture, when we perceive the Internet as a big book (newspaper). But this is another informational space functioning according to organization and interaction principles. Development and investigation of virtual space, its review in the actual context is performed by means of transfer of familiar off-line practices into on-line space.

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Конструирование культурной идентичности в национальном Интернет-пространстве

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Статья посвящена социальным аспектам развития и культурного освоения Интернет-технологий в Беларуси. С момента появления белорусского национального домена .by прошло 15 лет, и за этот период Интернет прошел долгий путь от экспериментальной технологии, доступной только научно-исследовательским учреждениям, до одного из основных каналов массовой коммуникации. Одной из причин написания этой статьи является желание обосновать возможность существования национальных сегментов глобальной сети Интернет не только на национальном языке вообще, но и белорусского сегмента в частности, а также прояснить механизмы конструирования культурной идентичности пользователей с применением Интернет-технологий.

Ключевые слова: культурные исследования; Интернет; культурная идентичность; репрезентация; киберпространство.
