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Russian Blogosphere as a Public Sphere

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The article observes several ways in which Russian bloggers express their civic position by using Internet options and use blogosphere as a public sphere. Evolutionally, it describes how the Internet has changed the behavior of usually politically passive users of Russian cyberspace. Several cyber events that from the author point of view describes the evolution of development of self-consciousness of Russian bloggers are presented in chronological order: the first (and the only) Internet conference with President Vladimir Putin which occurred in Summer 2006, a cyber war with Estonia in April-May 2007, a cyber war with distributors of Biologically Active Addings in October 2007, it also mentions a cyber war with Georgia during the military actions in Summer 2008, and two cases when simple bloggers used the blogosphere recourse to resist the system. It analyzes how in situation of total lack of attention of politicians to the population everyday problems and the level of state corruption, blogs are the only way to catch an eye of authorities and make them act, when usual means do not work. It all proves that with the help of Internet tools, average users can become a significant power, having an ability to influence different political and social events.

Keywords: Internet activity, blogs, Runet, cyberwars, political activity, civic activity, blogosphere, youth, Internet studies, Cybersociology.

Point of view

Despite significant development of Internet space in Russia, the potential of new media space as an area for political activity has not yet been completely evaluated. However, the role of mobile media in organizing political collective action has manifested itself worldwide through the following: coordination of street demonstrations (which, in the Philippines and Spain, some have asserted contributed directly to the downfall of regimes), monitoring elections, and augmenting the get-out-and-vote campaigns in both Western countries and Asia. The use of mobile telephony and SMS, both by themselves and in coordination with Internet tools such as listservs, blogs, and

online fundraising is still young, but has had significant impacts in the world. [H.Rheingold, 2003].

Proper use of the Internet may change the predictable results of elections. In addition, as an arrangement of political powers, it may destroy business or political careers. An example of such Internet potential is a story of American senator Trent Lott.

On December 5, 2002, during the reception in honor of the 100th birthday of senator James Strom Thurmond, who was known for his racist views and political projects against the black population in the US, the republican senator Trent Lott said: “When Strom Thurmond ran for

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president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over the years either." [Hewitt 2001].

Even though there were a lot of press representatives at this reception, no journalists except ABC news reporter Ed O'Keefe paid attention to these words. ABC news mentioned Lott's comments twice the following morning, but didn't emphasize it. This story might have died if popular blogger Atrios didn't post it in his blog, which triggered a chain reaction of cross postings and discussions. In three days, the whole blogosphere was discussing the racist remarks of Lott, puzzled by the absence of any reaction from the republicans and printed media [Hewitt 2001].

On the tenth of December, Lott finally apologized and the story was printed on the front pages of newspapers, including the links and quotes of bloggers. As a consequence, Lott was destroyed as a politician. Although he stayed in the US senate, he lost all support, including the support of the republican party.

This example shows that with the rise of Internet media, especially the blogosphere, cycle and dynamics of information distribution have changed dramatically. As a result, institutionalized media channels have lost their peculiarity. It is now no longer necessary to have special equipment for broadcasting for creating a major media event. As it turns out, Internet access is all you need. Certainly, there are blog "stars" and "authorities," whose blogs are read by thousands of subscribers. Because of this, their chance to be heard is slightly higher than a chance of an ordinary blogger. However, if there is a real story that is considered significant by most of the users, an average blogger may become reason enough for a cyberwar (the proof follows).

In the world of "traditional" media, the news about the senator was broadcasted once on primetime and wasn't repeated. Without the

Internet, the news would disappear, but because of the opportunity to copy and paste the original link and express one's opinion, users could gain the attention of the public and printed media.

So, new technologies become a sphere where people express their their views on different questions, including their political and civic positions, in other words- public sphere, a phenomenon that was minutely studied by Jurben Habermas. He focused on political participation as the core of a democratic society and as an essential element in individual self-development. According to Habermas, public sphere as a space where citizens could express their opinion regarding social life concerns began appearing around 1700. The public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where socio-political discussion took place. For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. The bourgeois public sphere made it possible to form a realm of public opinion that opposed state power and the powerful interests that were coming to shape bourgeois society. Habermas's concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family and the workplace – where private interests prevail -- and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. What Habermas called the "bourgeois public sphere" consisted of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and

public power. The principles of the public sphere involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern in which discursive argumentation was employed to ascertain general interests and the public good. The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making (Kellner, 1998).

In the contemporary high-tech societies there is emerging a significant expansion and redefinition of the public sphere to conceive of the public sphere as a site of information, discussion, contestation, political struggle, and organization that includes the broadcasting media and new cyberspaces as well as the face-to-face interactions of everyday life. (Kellner 1995).

Electronic modes of communication are creating new public spheres of debate, discussion, and information; that's why usually politically passive people start not only discuss the relevant questions but also undertake some actions that they had never done before, thanks to easy access and simple organization of the blogosphere. The rise of the Internet expands the realm for democratic participation and debate and creates new public spaces for political intervention. Computers, have produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain both the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas as well as new possibilities for manipulation, social control, the promotion of conservative positions, and intensifying of differences between haves and have nots (Kellner, 1998).

Russian cyberspace has recently become an arena for political activity of both official and unofficial powers, but it might be more clearly seen as a specific feature of how ordinary Russian users express their civil position online. It is remarkable that the structure, ways of communication, and activity of the Internet

make that expression much easier. Moreover, the Internet world offers original methods of the "problem impact" that are extremely attractive to a large part of RuNet users, including young, educated professionals. When RuNet users started to participate in mass actions, they did it with great pleasure and for fun. Russian language speakers transfer their sense of humor to many political and civic actions, a humor that is created and supported on the Internet.

Examples

In this article, I would like to describe several cyber events that can be considered as an evolutionary line, and reflect on the development of ways, methods, and results of civic activity expression by Russian Internet users. You will see, how the whole attitude to the blogs has changed. Starting with innocent flash mobs, then using the whole power of social media collaboration, users finally realized, that blogosphere might be the only space in contemporary Russian media area, that possesses abilities to unite the attempts to change the things and to express the opinion.

I will introduce the following events: an Internet conference with Russian President Putin that happened in Summer 2006, the cyberwar with Estonia in April-May 2007, the war with distributors of Biologically Active Addings (BAA) in October 2007, the cyberwar with Georgia and fights against the system when simple users looking for justice grabbed attention of authorities to punish guilty ones.

In July of 2006, search engine Yandex, the most popular web portal in RuNet, organized an Internet conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin, giving everyone an opportunity not only to ask the President a question, but to vote for any question the user liked.

It was declared that the President would answer the questions that would collect the maximum number of votes. During the

conference, the Internet population started to act. At the end of the conference, 175,895 questions had been asked. There were 1,259,420 votes in total.

It is interesting to note that along with “ordinary” questions about political, economic and social situations in the country, a large part of the questions that were asked were absurd questions such as:

“-Imagine you are an Elf and you are followed by angry orcs. You have a bow and arrows. You shoot very well and you are able to kill one ork with every arrow. The problem is that you have only five arrows and there are ten orcs after you. What would you do?” Another question read, *“-Do you hear voices that command you to kill somebody?”* One final question that was asked was, *“Could you tell what you think about peasant’s log huts?”* [Yandex, 2006].

However, the most popular questions that collected the biggest amounts of votes, 28,424 and 26,602 correspondingly, were:

“Preved Vladimir Vladimirovich, what do you think about Medved?” [Yandex 2006]

In addition, *“Is the Russian Federation going to use Huge Fighting Androids to defend the borders of the country?”* [Yandex 2006].

As it turns out, the President didn’t answer those two questions (and RuNet was really disappointed), but the tactic expression of civic position by Russian speaking Internet users was indicated in them. A lot of the Mass Media didn’t take these questions seriously, assuming that

this was another flash-mob. But it may also be viewed as an attempt to express the real feelings and the mood of RuNet users toward political authorities. By declaring themselves as a group that exists and has certain resources, RuNet users are saying: “We are not interested in politics. We do not believe that you will treat us seriously. But if we can have fun, we will, and if we can have fun with authorities, we will. That’s the way we are dealing with this.”

Although authorities didn’t react to this way of thinking (showing that politics in Russia is spoken with stricter “official” language), this event was widely discussed on the Internet, and showed users the potential of expressing civic opinion. This idea was further proved nine months later.

In April 2007, the Government of Estonia decided to dismantle the bronze statue of a World War II-era Soviet soldier in Tallin. As a result, this caused riots and street protests in Russia as well as in Estonia. Estonian authorities expected this; they also expected some reaction on the Internet. “If there are fights on the street, there are going to be fights on the Internet,” said Hillar Aarelaid, the director of Estonia’s Computer Emergency Response Team [Landler, Markoff 2007]. However, Estonia’s government didn’t expect that the actions that followed were what some described later as the first war in cyberspace.

While the defenders of the Bronze soldier kept vigil by the monument, Internet fields faced their own battles. By the end of April, there was the first massive attack on the websites of the Estonia Government. In different websites and weblogs on RuNet, there was a message with detailed descriptions on how to make 10,000 queries from one user as well as emails from the prime minister and Parliament. As a result, on the 26th and 27th of April, prime minister and government websites were shut down.

¹ Medved (from Russian Medved’ (bear)- a character of RuNet, embodied as anthropomorphic creature, looked like a bear. The peak of popularity of this image was in 2006. Its origin is connected with the picture “Bear Surprise” by John Lurie. On this picture, one can see a bear, who’s catching a couple, having sex in the forest, and telling them, “Surprise”, raising forepaws, wanting to scare them. In Russian version of this picture, the word surprise was replaced by *Preved*- errative spelling of Russian friendly greeting (Privet).As a result the gesture of upraised paws got absolutely different meaning [Wikipedia 2006].

The websites of the several daily newspapers were ruined on the 30th of April. Afterwards, the government of Estonia asked for help, expecting the biggest attack on the ninth and/or tenth of May (the national Russian holiday, also known as Victory day. The Russian holiday that marks the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany and honors fallen Red Army soldiers).

As expected, the attack happened. On the ninth of May, online banking of the largest Estonia bank, "Hansabank," was blocked. Russians used unprecedented measures of blocking IP addresses with the help of computer security experts from NATO, the European Union, Israel and the US. Despite these efforts, the Estonian bank still lost approximately \$1 million. For clients, this meant that they couldn't use their accounts while abroad.

The last wave of attacks occurred on the 18th of May. After that, the war was finally over. During the investigation, Estonian authorities surmised that these attacks were managed by the Russian government, but after additional inquiry, it was found that the cyberwar was an initiative of RuNet users.

Although the monument was removed anyway, Estonia sustained significant financial losses as well as losses to its reputation, being absolutely powerless to do something against "mass Russian hooliganism."

The third cyber event that had the largest response out of online users took place in October 2007.

It wasn't directly connected with politics, but it was an uncommon expression of the civic position of the Russian Internet population, resulting in substantial consequences offline.

On October 12, 2007, a livejournal user whose nickname was "brockhurst" posted a story: his mother called him crying, asking for money to buy a new "miraculous" medicine "Gravikoll" that was advertised on the radio. The

distributors of the medicine announced discounts for seniors within limited dates. Because of this, she needed the money as soon as possible. The blogger checked the list of Russian medicines, consulted with his friend's doctor, and found out that there was no such miracle medicine, and that "Gravikoll" was merely a vitamin. After having read the story, an indignant blogger suggested that swindlers who made a profit by misleading seniors, one of the most financially vulnerable populations in Russia, should be punished.

5000 comments were left to this posting, and bloggers developed a strategy of the real war, with the intent of blocking the activity of the company.

There were several tasks, which included:

- block telephone lines
- use as many delivery men as possible
- attack radio stations who advertised this "medicine"
- attract the attention of the community, media and authorities in order to take the problem to an even higher level

First of all, the company that sold "Gravikoll" was ruined by the squall of telephone calls. According to one blogger, "delicateline," during two days, distributors of the medicine received 14 million (!) calls [Belkin, 2007].

Telephone operators were asked by callers to give details about the medicine. When operators asked them what phone numbers they could call back at, they received the phone numbers of police departments, advertising departments of radio stations that advertised "Gravikoll," the phones of the Federal Antimonopoly Department, and Ministry of Health of Russia.

Users also left posts on websites (such as adult and apartment rental sites) with the phone number of the mentioned organization. As a result, the manufacturer was called for a variety of different services, including: plumbing, piano tuning, and escort services.

To block the delivery service of the company, bloggers began ordering the medication, and gave addresses to distant neighborhoods of Moscow (the whole list of blocking methods could be found at <http://consatosi.livejournal.com/15171.html>). The same methods were used toward the radio station “Echo of Moscow,” one of the main advertisers of “Gravikoll”.

Along with the rough methods of blocking the activity of the company, users started to call different media and public services.

As a result, the whole activity of the company that sold the medicine was completely paralyzed. All basic Internet media and some printed newspapers posted information about this company and how it swindled seniors. The war with “Gravikoll” coincided with the teleconference of president Putin, causing a flashmob when Putin was asked when “Gravikoll” would be included into a basket of goods for Russians (Belkin 2007).

On the 15th of October, three days after “brockhurst’s” post, an inquiry was made by the Federal Antimonopoly Department. The representatives of the department promised to institute proceedings against distributors of biologically active additions in “Gravikoll” because of violating the law of advertising.

In August of 2008, along with real military actions on the territory of Southern Osetia, cyberactions were taken in the Cyberspace. However, it is necessary to mention that a cyberwar with Georgia, had a totally different nature than a Estonia cyberwar. The “fun” element was completely removed, for the first time in world history, cyberwar accompanied real conflict. Nevertheless, the scenario of the last cyberwar was the same: governmental websites as well as websites of Mass Media and banks were under hacker attacks. For example, a photo collage of the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and Adolph Hitler was placed by

Russian hackers on the first page of the official website of Internal Affairs of Georgia. This cyberwar was also noticed by a large amount of professional hackers who also participated in the actions. According to experts, these hackers were connected with the Russian Business network, a network of criminal computer professionals with close links to the Russian mafia and the government. The company is known for its hosting of child pornography, spam hosting and other criminal activities. On the 5th of avrycra in RBN Exploit blog was declared that Russian Business Network remembered about its “Russian” roots and began the Georgian cyberspace invasion. According to the web-sites owners, many Georgian web-sites were controlled by Russian hackers. Several hours later, a map was presented, according to which several Russian servers controlled the whole traffic of the key Georgian servers. Georgian hackers also participated actively: a famous news web-site RIA Novosti was blocked more than for 10 hours. The web site employers declared that it was a very serious planned attack. The informational war went far beyond Russian-Georgian cyberspace. The first rate website of IT links quoted Koka Archvadze: “Russia blocked Georgian web-sites for its citizens”. The same microblog contained other quotes:” Russian hackers attack every web-page that publish the real news from precipitable Georgia. (<http://lenta.ru/articles/2008/08/11/hack/>).

We can suggest, that this cyberwar was a turning point in changing the mentality of Russian users. They finally realized the power of Russian blogosphere. It turns that with the total lack of attention to the population everyday problem and the level of state corruption, blogs are the only way to catch an eye of authorities and make them act, when usual means do not work.

Now we can notice another tendency, the blogosphere becomes a tool for the fight to get

a personal justice. The following two stories are a good example of that. It is necessary to notice that the most recent cases can't be described as performed in a fun and criminal style- probably because the topics are too dramatic.

On the 21 of May, a simple user Alexander Shumm published in his blog , that his pregnant wife was knocked down by a car, that didn't stop and left the locus delicti. The woman and her unborn baby died in the hospital. The witnesses of an accident wrote the license plate of the car. Soon the driver was found. He was a police officer, who denied everything. Alexander Shumm tried to bring an action against the driver but he was helpless till the blog post appeared. It grabbed an attention of many people. More than 1000 commentaries were left and users decided to help Alexander. Livejournal users were looking for the witnesses, looked thought the street cameras tapes, and helped the victim with advice. The case also took an attention of traditional media. So the news about the accident was presented into several federal TV-channels, all-Russian newspapers and radio stations. The driver was finally taken into the court and an accusation was brought against him.

For better communication, a special group was organized in Vkontakte – the most popular Russian social network. The case is not closed yet, but the user keeps the readers informed. (<http://ashumm.livejournal.com>).

The second story in a certain sense reminds the first one. It was also connected with the death of a baby: a perfectly healthy woman was taken into the hospital, where she gave birth. The doctors reported to her husband that the child was absolutely fine but in the evening he found out that the baby was dead. He was struggling for two months trying to find out why his son died but everywhere he faced the situation when everybody from the hospital to the insurance company hide the information.

Only when he published the story in the blog and users raised the post in top stories – he finally started to get some answers and got local authorities' attention who took the investigation under control. He got an explanation form the reanimation group, who transported his baby to the different hospital and received the feedback of hospital management. This case also raised an important question- the responsibilities of doctors in contemporary juridical Russian system (<http://dead-mazay.li.vejjournal.com/29377.html>).

Resume

As you can see, Russian users have become increasingly confident in their actions. The Internet conference with Vladimir Putin was an event that was mainly discussed online and didn't draw much attention offline. However, the cyberwar with Estonia was a different situation. Though the bronze statue was removed, users still managed to cripple Estonian government. Methods that were used were limited to cyberspace. Furthermore, when RuNet was fighting with distributors of "Gravikoll," the tools were more complicated. Users also used offline space, and as such they were successful in achieving results. The work of the company was blocked, the authorities attention was gained, and the company was sued. It seems that every user who has a story that may touch the hearts of bloggers can rely on the their help.

So, the Internet may play a crucial role in establishing the relations between authorities and population and that raise several additional questions. Why the exact stories become the center of blogosphere news, when there are many similar situations are posted? How the access to such a powerful resource will develop the social inequality? And how to check the truth of posted stories if there were already several false stories of that kind? Somehow or other, the users permanently develop new strategies to express

their civic and political position through the Internet.

As Douglas Kellner writes : the political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past conflict, but politics today is already mediated by media, computer, and information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future. Those interested in the politics and culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the new public spheres and intervene accordingly.

It is hard to conjecture how this feature could change the dynamics of social, political and cultural life in Russia. Who will control the media and technologies of the future, and debates over the public's access to media, media accountability

and responsibility, media funding and regulation? Will the new space be used by Russian political powers to manipulate Internet users, who might take advantage of its potential according to political interests of the ruling party? Could it in turn be used for coordination and creation of real cyberwars, using the right methods and ideology that would be interesting for the active part of RuNet? The Georgian cyberwar proved that this was possible. Or will perhaps Runetizens be able to stay independent, staying out of manipulation by different political and social forces, defining by themselves how to react and what events need to be reacted to. We have to face the fact, that at the present time, Russian Internet space is a critical resource with a huge potential for organizing different political and civic actions.

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Русскоязычная блогосфера как особое пространство выражения гражданской позиции

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В статье рассмотрено несколько стратегий, с помощью которых русскоговорящие блоггеры выражают свою гражданскую позицию и используют блогосферу как публичную сферу, а также описано, как Интернет изменил поведение обычно политически пассивных пользователей русского киберпространства. В хронологическом порядке представлены несколько событий, которые показывают эволюцию развития самосознания российских блоггеров: первая (и единственная) Интернет-конференция с президентом России Владимиром Путиным летом 2006, кибервойна с Эстонией в апреле – мае 2007, кибервойна с распространителями БАД. Также в статье упоминается кибервойна с Грузией во время военных действий летом 2008 и попытки простых блоггеров противостоять системе. Автор считает что, в ситуации государственной коррупции и отсутствия внимания политиков к повседневным проблемам граждан блоги – это единственный способ обратить на себя внимание властей и заставить их хоть как-то повлиять на ситуацию, когда другие средства не работают. Все это доказывает, что обычные блоггеры Интернета обрели способность влиять на различные политические и социальные события в стране.

Ключевые слова: блоги, Рунет, кибервойны, политическая активность, гражданская активность, блогосфера, Интернет-исследования, киберсоциология, публичная сфера.
