

Analysis

Russian Blogs: Tool for Opposition and State

By Robert Orttung, Washington

Abstract

Russian blogs reach the most dynamic members of the youth generation. Members of civil society have utilized them to mobilize activists who support a variety of ideologies, including liberal opposition groups and nationalists. In some cases, information that first appeared in blogs was later picked up by the traditional media and then led to political action. The state has also used blogs effectively to mobilize its own supporters. Additionally, it has used information in blogs to coordinate police responses to street protests and has taken action against individual bloggers whose views the state authorities do not support. Despite these crackdowns, Russia's blog culture is evolving spontaneously and thriving.

Blogging in Russia

Blogs are widely viewed as the most vibrant and least regulated part of the Internet. They are important in Russia because they are reaching the more sophisticated and active part of society, including the younger generation, at a time when the traditional media is heavily controlled by the state and aimed at a mass audience. Since television and most newspapers work within strict guidelines, Russians see the Internet as a refuge. Blogging has become a popular way for young Russians to learn about, and actively discuss, politics and current events largely unfettered by state restrictions. In particular, blogs allow for argument, which is generally absent in the media.

In Russia today about a quarter of the adult population, 28 million people, use the Internet, up from only 8 percent in 2002. At the same time, state-controlled television networks reach almost every household.

Blogs allow almost any individual to communicate with a potentially large audience at very low cost. Bloggers do not need printing presses, paper, or other equipment beyond a computer and an Internet connection.

Most politically-active Russian bloggers have placed their blogs at the livejournal.com site. The site had just over 500,000 users in Russia on September 21, 2007, according the site's statistics page. Livejournal.com is an American company and its servers are located outside of Russia and presumably beyond Russian control, though they are vulnerable to hackers. However, in October 2006, Livejournal caused a controversy when it handed Sup, a Russian company with ties to the oligarch Aleksandr Mamut, the right to service its Cyrillic sites.

Blogs are increasingly affecting main stream media, which reported on Livejournal discussions of topics including the case against then Defense Minister Sergei

Ivanov's son, who took the life of an elderly female pedestrian in an automobile accident, and the trial of Alexandra Ivannikova, a young woman who killed an Armenian cab driver after he allegedly tried to rape her. She was ultimately cleared of all charges, but her case led to heated discussions of illegal immigration and nationalism.

In some cases, blogs are serving as an alternative source of information to the mainstream media. During the Kondopoga ethnic riots in September 2006, bloggers provided some of the first eyewitness accounts of what happened as well as commentary on the events.

The growing use of the Russian Internet has attracted the attention of foreign advertisers, who are flocking to ru.net sites. Within a year they could bring \$90 to \$105 million in advertisements, about 35 percent of their income, according to Mindshare Interaction. Ru.net registered its one millionth website in September.

Russia has already had some scandals associated with blogs. Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Security Committee Sergei Abel'tsev (LDPR) fired his assistant Irina Tolmacheva for her blog (<http://budnipomdepa.livejournal.com/>). In the blog she quoted her boss saying that Muscovites should round up the stray dogs in the city and turn them loose on the participants in the March of Those Who Disagree, which took place in mid-April. The blog also quoted humorist Viktor Shenderovich criticizing Abel'tsev for his views. The LDPR party staff informed Abel'tsev about the blog and ordered him to fire Tolmacheva for betraying the party cause.

Political Activists Use Blogs to Mobilize People

A wide range of political activists are using blogs to mobilize their supporters to have an impact on Russian politics. On the liberal end of the spectrum, activists like Masha Gaidar and Ilya Yashin use their sites to

advertise protests or debates. Yashin is the head of the Yabloko party's youth movement and has used his livejournal blog to mobilize thousands-strong street protests. Once the rallies take place, the participants frequently post pictures of the events, including, at times, photographs that show how the police beat some of the protesters. These pictures demonstrate the extent to which the authorities are willing to go to keep dissent within limited bounds.

At the same time, blogs have proven to be an effective resource for nationalists. Konstantin Krylov, for example, used his livejournal blog to rally 3,000 for a march in Moscow in November 2006. In the controversy over Estonia's decision in April 2007 to move a WWII memorial from the center of town, both sides used blogs to their advantage. Russian nationalist protesters published maps showing where demonstrators should meet, while some eyewitnesses gave neutral accounts of what was actually happening on the scene. Likewise, both sides in the Chechen conflict have found it useful to post videos of battle scenes and abuses on sites like YouTube.

There are concrete cases where blogs are having an impact on politics. In 2006, bloggers began to express their anger about the decision of the Russian government to build an oil pipeline near Lake Baikal. Subsequently there were publications in the media, demonstrations organized by livejournal.com users, and ultimately, Putin's intervention to move the pipeline route away from the lake.

Are blogs a qualitatively new platform for organizing people? Mobilizers have always been able to rely on leaflets, then radio and television. In contrast to those methods, blogs allow all variety of individuals to address a large audience, getting out their information quickly and cheaply. While these features are attractive, blogs still have nowhere near the direct impact of the traditional media. For one thing, it is very hard for any individual blogger to rise above the general noise of the vast multitude of blogs.

The State is also Effectively Using Blogs to Mobilize People

While blogs present useful new tools to civil society, in Russia the state also has been effective at using them. While so far civil society activists have been able to turn out small protest actions, the authorities seem to be able to use the information readily available on the blogs to coordinate efforts to ensure that these rallies do not go too far.

Not only have the authorities been able to use information on the Internet to place limits on opposition groups, pro-Kremlin blogs work to activate youth to work in the Kremlin's favor. In this sense, blogs represent both mobilization from below and above. For

example, when the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi held its summer camp at Seliger, many of the main events there were recorded in a blog (<http://community.livejournal.com/seliger2007/>). Many other bloggers commented critically on these activities. While some accuse Nashi of being funded by state money, members of the group claim that it receives funding from a variety of corporate sponsors. In the Russian context, companies often contribute to pro-Kremlin causes in order to curry favor with the political leadership.

Whether the mobilization is driven from above or below, the motivation of blog writers can also vary. In some cases, they may be true believers in the cause and simply writing about what they believe. In others, they may be interested in contributing to a blog largely as a way to advance their career. Some people receive money to blog specific opinions.

According to the Moscow Carnegie Center's Masha Lipman, the Kremlin has a number of sites under its control financed through Kremlin-associated businesses. These sites are difficult to identify because they are not necessarily overtly loyal to the Kremlin, but only include criticisms that the Kremlin allows. The presence of such sites makes it difficult to know what to believe and not believe in the greater blogosphere.

The state is also using blogs in a more straightforward way to get out its message. In September, the Central Electoral Commission set up its own blog as a way of allowing ordinary citizens to ask questions of election officials and to report irregularities (<http://community.livejournal.com/izbircom>). The officials hope that the blog will give them greater access to Russian young people between the ages of 18 and 35.

Authorities Crack Down

While the authorities have sought to harness the power of blogs for their own causes, they have also turned to the cruder approach of simply shutting down the most outspoken opposition contributors. This process began in 2006 when the authorities prosecuted sites that reproduced the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. The site gazeta.ru received an official warning for republishing these pictures; a second such warning would force it to shut down.

The Russian authorities have taken action against several bloggers who have expressed critical opinions in their writings.

- The Ivanovo-based Kursiv site, which lampooned Putin's efforts to increase birthrates by dubbing him the "phallic symbol of Russia," was immediately shut down and the editor fined 20,000 rubles (US\$770). In the past, this site has exposed corruption in Ivanovo, and this investigative work may have been the real reason for the crackdown.

- Savva Terentyev, a Syktyvkar resident, was summoned for an interview with a local procurator after he denounced the local police in explicit language, calling for them to be burned in a public square. Terentyev was angered because the police had removed computers from the office of *Iskra*, a local opposition newspaper, and found pirated software on them. On August 9, the procurator filed charges against him under article 282 of the Criminal Code, inciting hatred or enmity and humiliating a person's dignity, with a maximum sentence of two years. Observers have described this incident as an example of local authorities flexing their muscles rather than a systematic crackdown on the media.
- Taras Zelenyuk, of Novosibirsk, was fined 130,000 rubles (\$4,500) on July 16 under article 282 for arguing that Ukrainians are superior to Russians on Ukrainian forums in an Internet forum.
- Dmitry Tashlykov, a Vladimir journalist, was arrested for describing the activities of Governor Nikolay Vinogradov in critical terms in 2006. The governor's spokesman objected to his use of explicit language.

In several instances the authorities are going after Internet news sites in cases that could set a precedent for the use of blogs. The authorities are using a loophole in the law that allows them to treat Internet news sites as full blown media outlets, with all the responsibilities they have. While this practice may currently be informal, the State Duma is seeking to make it a law. The lower house is drafting a bill that equates Internet material with mass media publications. "Once the bill is ... signed into law, Runet will fall into the realm of provisions of the Criminal and Administrative Codes and any critical remark against the authorities may be interpreted as an insult or libel," according to an ITAR-TASS analysis published April 13, 2007. So far the authorities have targeted two sites. In December 2006, a court in the Siberian region of Khakassia shut down the Internet news site *Novy Fokus* because it had not registered as a media outlet. The site was known for critical reporting on local issues. It reopened in late March after agreeing to register, accepted stricter supervision, and paid a fine of 20,000 rubles. Bloggers followed the case because they feared it would affect them. The site *Zyryanskaya Zhizn* (Komi Republic) was fined after failing to register and prosecutors have applied to have it shut down. (It was still on line as of September 24, 2007 – <http://www.zyryane.ru/>)

In April, at the request of State Duma member Viktor Alksnis, the Moscow procurator filed charges against a livejournal user, pro-Kremlin Fund for Effective Politics employee Timofei Shevyakov, for alleged slander and insulting someone in a public forum. Shevyakov had

added a rude comment to Alksnis' blog. The defendant faces a possible year of correctional labor and bloggers are worried that the case will set a precedent.

As Russia heads toward the December 2007 State Duma elections and the March 2008 presidential elections, the authorities are making institutional changes that will give them greater control over the Internet. Only one day after regional elections held on March 11 suggested that Moscow's grip was not as tight as it could be, President Putin moved to establish a new agency, merging the Federal Service for Media Law Compliance and Cultural Heritage (Rosokhrankultura) and the Federal Information Technologies Agency (Rossvyaznadzor) into the new Federal Service for Mass Media, Telecommunications and the Protection of Cultural Heritage, that will both license media outlets and monitor their output. The new agency will have control over television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet.

While official explanations of the merger cite efforts to streamline and rationalize the process of licensing television and radio broadcasting, the real purpose of the new agency would appear to be something different. Raf Sahkirov, a former *Izvestia* editor dismissed for critical coverage of the 2004 Beslan school siege, said "This is an attempt to put everything under control, not only electronic media, but also personal data about people such as bloggers."

Freedom of Information

Russia is making only halting progress toward giving its citizens free access to information. On April 18, 2007, the State Duma passed in the first of three readings a law "On Supplying Access to Information about the Activity of State and Local Government Agencies." State Duma member Vladimir Ryzhkov criticized the draft, saying that it will change nothing and that a different version is needed. He said that the law allows the bureaucrats to determine how they give out the information. Moreover, the current draft does not actually require the bureaucrats to release information and puts journalists at the same level as ordinary citizens. There has been no further action on the law since its introduction.

Blogs are moving ahead much more quickly in terms of creating more transparency in apparently state-sponsored actions. For example, liberal bloggers republish Nashi leaflets on line to demonstrate what these groups are doing on the streets.

Hyper-Local Media May Prove Effective

While blogging remains popular, the Russian Internet is evolving in line with global trends. For example, there are now hyper-local neighborhood news sites with information supplied by professional journalists and the

users themselves. One example is Moi Raion, which provides information about numerous neighborhoods in Moscow and St. Petersburg (<http://www.mr-spb.ru/>). The Scandinavian media company Schibsted currently owns a 70 percent stake in the project and the Media Defense Loan Fund also holds a stake. The corporate involvement suggests that the project may be financially self-sustaining.

This site differs from opinionated blogs because it is fact-based, providing neighborhood news and public service information that is not available elsewhere.

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Useful Links for Blogs in Russia

Overview of Russian Blogs

<http://blogs.yandex.ru/>

Political Blogs

- Political Discussions – [Community.livejournal.com/ru_politics](http://community.livejournal.com/ru_politics)
- Official Central Electoral Committee Blog – <http://community.livejournal.com/izbircom>
- Regional Elections (g_golosov.livejournal.com)
- Vladimir Pribylovskii (anticomproamat.livejournal.com)

Blogs of Russian Politicians

- Nikita Belyh (belyh.livejournal.com)
- Ilya Yashin (yashin.livejournal.com)
- Maria Gaidar (m_gaidar.livejournal.com)
- Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (blogs.mail.ru/mail/zhirinovskiyv/)

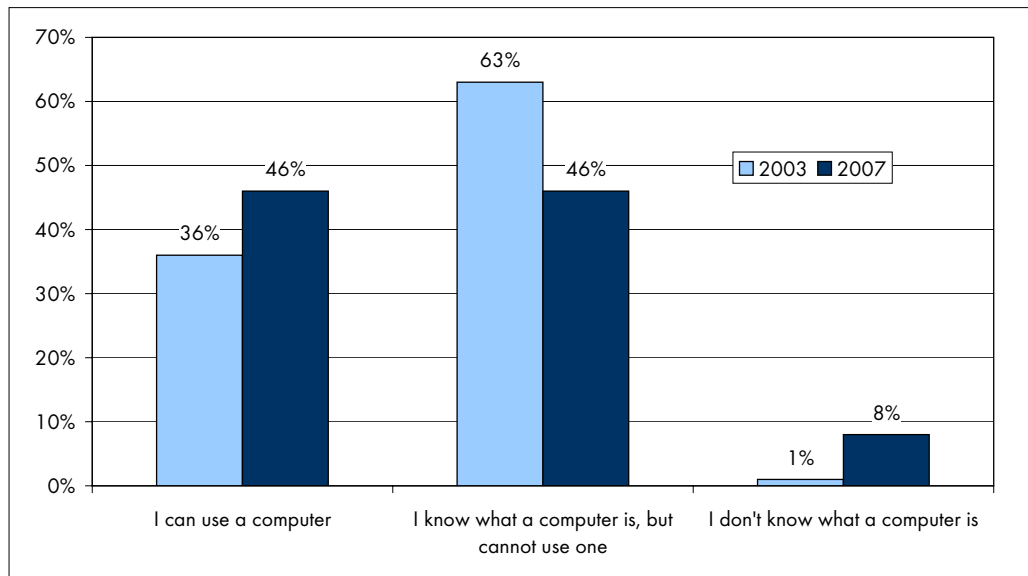
While much of this news is not necessarily political, it can have political overtones, for example, by reporting that there are an unusually large number of infant deaths in a local hospital, where corruption is rampant.

Hyperlocal media are having a growing impact in several US communities because they give voice to grassroots concerns. In serving this function, they might provide a way to effect change, over the long term, in places where free media is not widely available.

Tables and Graphs

Opinion Poll Conducted on the Occasion of the Day of the Internet

Do You Know What a Computer is and Can You Use One?



Source: Opinion poll conducted by the Levada Institute 21–25 September 2007, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2007092804.html>