

## Analysis

### News in the Russian Internet: The Growing Indifference of a Closing Society

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#### Abstract

Although Russian news sources often are limited to presentations of the official perspective, many Russian young people, and even editors and journalists are not seeking out alternative points of view on the Internet. The way most Russians use the Internet reflects their lack of interest in political topics. Instead, they prefer to go online as a way of connecting with friends and finding out information from them.

#### The Internet Replaces Television for Some People

- “I haven’t watched TV for a year now. My mind has cleared.”
- “We don’t watch TV, we don’t even have it at home; we browse the Internet and learn everything we want to learn from it.”
- “Mailing lists and blogs are everything I need to be connected to the world I am interested in”

Such statements are common from Russian university students and professors, according to my research on how Russian citizens use the Internet.

Russian TV once played a crucial role in uniting post-Soviet society. However, in recent years, it has been consistently losing its audience due to its absolutely uniform support of the Russian authorities.

At the same time, the speed and accessibility of the Internet has made it a mass medium in Russia. Twenty-two percent of the Russian population (people older than 18) have access to the Internet at home, and 28 percent can be called Internet users (including those who browse the net at work or Internet-cafes), according to recent Levada-Center data.

It seems Russia differs little from the West in the way that its citizens use the Internet: In Russia, the net society links all parts of the country, from the European area west of the Urals through Siberia and the Far East. It functions effectively, forming numerous horizontal connections that make it possible to work around vertically-organized official society.

Nevertheless, the question remains: does the Russian Internet really provide a diversity of information to citizens who feel that official sources (TV mostly) do not provide them what they are looking for?

According to media statistics, even the best of which are not very reliable, more than 80 percent of the population in Russia still watches TV and news programs retain their traditionally high ratings. Nevertheless, the most active and youngest part of the population (people

aged 18–35 years old) watch TV the least (a situation that holds not only in Russia but in all countries with a developed media system). These people claim that they get their news from the Internet, though it is quite difficult to measure the popularity of Runet news resources using the numerous on-line rating systems. Some of them place news and analytical resources near the top, on in the third or the fourth positions; others do not list news anywhere in the Top 100.

It is difficult to say how many Russians have given up TV for the Internet. According to my research in 2008 (limited to interviews with students and teachers at one Moscow university) half of the former TV viewers partly or fully switched to the Internet in search of “objective” news. People who are older than 40 and teenagers still watch TV actively, but the young people prefer entertainment to the news. Their older compatriots though are active news watchers, which is partly a function of the media habits they developed in the Soviet era.

#### “Fashionable” Net for “Indifferent” Users?

There is a great difference between the Russian television of the late 1980s – early 1990s and today’s broadcasts. As the Soviet Union was collapsing and the new Russia emerging, Russian television was only partly controlled, included live programs, provided direct broadcasts of official political events and cultivated such outspoken and opinionated TV news stars as Leonid Parfenov, Yevgeny Kiselev and Svetlana Sorokina. Even though it often lacked professionalism, it was interesting to watch. By contrast, the television of the 2000s, with its state ownership, strong system of self-censorship among reporters and editors, ban on live broadcasts, and the evident dominance of the First Channel and Russia TV channel, means that viewers have little choice beyond the official line and entertainment programs.

The news on Russian television no longer works to shape public opinion. News programs cover a well

known list of people and evaluate them as either positive or negative. TV news today, in both its format and content, does not support any form of public discussion: its broadcasts include no opposition figures or opinions; such people and ideas simply do not exist in the world portrayed by TV news. At the same time, TV news shows actively promote the idea that political news is boring. There are a lot of “other news” programs: local news, household news, gardening news, etc. The motto of such programs is: “There are much more interesting things in the world than politics.” Thus, the official media widely disseminates the idea that politics is not the people’s business and that they should grow gardens and repair flats instead.

In contrast, the Internet is the only mass medium which presents different voices – including the political opposition, subcultures, and various counter-cultures – and uses different social languages as well as provides resources in different languages. Runet is still largely uncontrolled by the Russian state. Since counter-cultural modes of expression and behavior in everyday life still provoke suspicion and hostility, Runet helps members of different communities, societies, professional associations and fan-clubs unite and express themselves. It is also the best communication tool for diasporas, as well as the last medium for Russia’s miniscule political opposition. The Internet serves this purpose not only in Russia, but also Belarus and other countries of the post-Soviet space. Accordingly, one would expect the Internet to be needed and extremely popular in Russia, where the means of expression in the other parts of society are closing down.

In fact, however, the Internet is often a trendy fashion accessory rather than a tool for acquiring information that is not available from official sources. The relative novelty of the Internet in Russia gives the use of this mass medium distinct connotations. New media in Russia were assimilated later than in the US and Western Europe, but the process, at least in some social groups, goes faster. Accordingly, the idea of the Internet as technical miracle, “Western” fashion and a tool facilitating everyday activities co-exist in the popular conception of new media in Russia. The majority of people are quite emotional towards them, but do not use even half of their capabilities.

While society may worship or curse the Internet, most users approach it very directly and unsubtly. In fact, many people only go on-line to check their e-mail. The situation is similar with mobile phones: many see them as jewelry rather than as a communication tool: it is habitual to change phones monthly in an effort to display the newest and the most expensive model, but

often the owners of these phones do not know how to use their new brand devices, e. g. how to take photos or send text messages. New media in Russia are in the sphere of prestige consumption and everyday necessity at the same time. The Web is “fashionable”, the words associated with the Internet and names of some on-line resources are popular, and they have become a part of popular culture now in soaps, pop songs and films. One recent hit song, for example, talks about a girl who spends all her time, day and night, on *Odnoklassniki*, a popular website that allows Russians to connect with former school chums.

Although the Internet provides access to a diversity of views, critical journalism, and news in foreign languages, in reality there are few users who are interested in gaining political information from outside official channels. This specificity of new media use is reflected in the content of the Russian Internet. The huge range of new medium possibilities in Russia have yet to be exploited. If we speak about the “mass user” and the “mass of users” they mostly know how to perform only simple functions in the Internet, such as using one of the most popular search engines. So, those who know more, e.g. how to blog, make a personal page in social networks or even watch YouTube, gain a great informational and communicational advantage. Many have recognized the informational capability of the Internet, but few have actually applied it yet.

### Information Is Not (In) Communication

The notion of “information” is discussed widely among journalists and scholars in Russia in spite of almost one hundred years of media theory and its recent conclusions on the irrelevance of the notion itself and the desirability of replacing the word *information* with the word *communication* in the majority of media situations. So, using the word *information* today means not *objectivity* but *diversity*, not *information* per se but the availability of *different agendas* and the possibility to choose among them. So, in speaking about the news, I refer not, for example, to Niklas Luhmann’s definition of it as “programs that spread ignorance in the form of facts,” but Jurgen Habermas’s understanding of the ideal of an informational environment as a space for public discussion. Of course we should have in mind that Habermas also sees the contemporary media as one of the main reasons for the decay of the public sphere.

The crucial question is whether we can diagnose and describe any specific feature of Internet use in Russia which is determined by the “post-Soviet” social, political and cultural environment.

In exploring this question through my research, I have relied on sociological methodology in spite of its evident limitations. The question of what methodology is the most useful in studying the Internet is still highly problematic. Many advocate the use of a visual studies methodology or a linguistic approach. Formalist research seems to be more productive than sociological efforts: form does not lie, but interviewed people often do. Nevertheless, when we speak about such an ever-changing form as the Web, even people's opinions seem stable.

In 2006–2008 I carried out several small research projects in Moscow and Moscow region. Overall, I conducted about one hundred interviews with editors of Russian TV news programs and Runet news sites (10 interviews), university teachers (20 interviews) and students (62 interviews). The interviewed people were mostly females (about 80 percent of the interviewees).

The following are some of my research results, revealing why my conclusions on RuNet's public information role are quite pessimistic:

The students, journalists and editors I interviewed claim that to learn "the real" situation in Russia and the world, they download news from the Internet. But among the most popular sources of news they listed are mail servers such as Mail.ru and Yandex.ru. Such admissions were remarkable because Mail.ru news, for example, is among the worst examples of web journalism, providing yellow journalism reports mixed with official news that panders to the authorities. The popularity of these sites suggests that, despite their claims, my respondents did not invest any effort into searching for information on the Web.

Among the other often mentioned Russian-language Internet information resources were the Russian Version of the BBC and the sites of off-line newspapers, such as *Izvestia* and *Vedomosti* (mentioned mostly by professors, but also by students and journalists). Made-in-Russia Internet news and sites which seek to define alternative political agendas, such as *polit.ru*, *gazeta.ru* and even *grani.ru*, do not attract significant attention. The move-

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*Suggested reading:*

Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk. (2009) Politika i mediareal'nost': formirovanie obshchestvennogo mneniya o poslednej kavkazskoj vojne, in: Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya. No. 1.

Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk, "Construction of "Reality" in Russian Mass Media: News on Television and on the Internet," in Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet. Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, Natalja Konradova (Eds.). Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006. P.34–50.

Boris Dubin. (2005). Postoronnie: vlast', massa i massmedia v segodnyashnej Rossii, in: Otechestvennye zapiski, No. 6.

Floriana Fossato (2009) Runet kak instrument adaptatsii, in: Pro et Contra. No. 2.

ment away from these sites is a major change from the results of surveys I conducted in 2004 when these resources were mentioned frequently.

To my surprise, *LiveJournal* and other blogging sites were not mentioned often either. The lack of interest contradicts current market conditions since bloggers are now even more welcomed at public events than traditional journalists and their activities are more profitable for advertisers.

Among the most popular sites described as "informational resources" were the social networks such as *Odnoklassniki.ru* and *Vkontakte.ru*. Some respondents considered these sources as too low-brow ("popsovye") and my respondents mentioned *Facebook* as an alternative social network for intelligent people. But this preference for Facebook does not change the general situation, which reveals the spreading desire to learn the news from other people in the flow of gossip, social commentaries, and other forms of communication.

## Conclusion

Thus, the answer to the question posed above is negative: There is nothing specifically post-Soviet about the use of the Internet in Russia. According to my research, the Internet is not informing a virtual public sphere in Russia, which can compensate people for the lack of information that they experience. If we follow Raymond Williams' understanding of mass media as not only technology but also a cultural form, it could be argued that Runet reflects the situation of indifference in contemporary Russian society. The typical Russian Internet user is not interested in discussion and accepts media content uncritically. The users are dependent on it and have great antipathy toward it at the same time.

Of course, another explanation which focuses on Internet technology may be correct as well. This point of view suggests that the Internet provides new ways of interacting, which are more popular than the old ones and political news is universally becoming extinct.