

Analysis

The RuNet – Lost in Translation

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Abstract

This article argues for a socio-cultural analysis of the Russian Internet and social media landscape. I contend that the Russian Internet and social media landscape is unique, with features that are specific to Russia and distinct from their counterparts in the US or elsewhere. Russian Internet and social media use needs to be understood from within its own socio-cultural context – Western understandings of Internet use and social media categories do not necessarily translate to Russia. This article discusses some of the key variables – such as level and degree of penetration, style of use, areas of attention and social media categories – which are necessary for a nuanced understanding of the Russian Internet.

Specifics of the Russian Internet

“The Internet” is not a universal, monolithic entity, but rather a combination of elements and features – a landscape whose topology is as unique as the country in which it evolves. Russia is no exception. This article discusses some of the key variables – such as level and degree of penetration, style of use, areas of attention and social media categories – which are necessary for a nuanced understanding of the Russian Internet.

First, the RuNet remains an elite and stratified medium, dominated by urban and educated users. National Internet penetration is growing rapidly, but remains at about one third of the population. Second, those who do use the Internet, do so relatively frequently and, most significantly, pay attention to different sources of information than their less-wired peers. Finally, the categories of social media – personal, public, blog, online journal, social networking site, community, friend, reader etc. – have emerged with distinct and different definitions, features and parameters in Russia. These categories are a result of social, historical, technological and cultural elements that are specific to Russia. Researchers, analysts and readers must keep this in mind, and be wary of allowing their own assumptions about these media to influence their understanding of Russia.

RuNet is an Elite, Stratified Medium, Dominated by the Urban and Educated

The simple term “Internet user” has multiple layers. One aspect is Internet penetration – what percentage of the population goes online. Another aspect is frequency of

use – both among the general populace, and among Internet users themselves. In Russia, the figures are telling: while Internet penetration is not deep (approximately 33% of the population) – those who do go online, do so relatively frequently – a large majority (80%) of Russia’s Internet users are online at least once per week, and a smaller majority – 55% – go online daily. And the numbers in Moscow far exceed the national average – highlighting a common error – extrapolating from Moscow to “all of Russia.”

While a national Internet penetration of about one third may not seem impressive, the rate of growth in the Russian Federation has been steady and exponential, especially in areas outside Moscow. During the years between 2002 and 2009, the percentage of Internet users increased almost six fold, from around 5% to around 30%. In Moscow the pace was a bit slower, but still impressive, with penetration more than doubling, rising from 27% to 60%.

At the national level, Russia’s current Internet penetration of 33% can be compared to Brazil’s, for instance, which is at around 29%. In contrast, Internet penetration in Moscow is currently at European levels (approximately 60%) and slightly below that of the U.S., which is above 70%, according to a 2009 Russian Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) survey. In fact, while Moscow has only 8% of the country’s adults, it has 14% of its average Internet users and a full one fifth – 20% – of its daily users.

Socio-economic demographics paint a similar picture, influencing popular perceptions of “Internet boom” versus “Internet hype.” In Russia, as elsewhere in the world, the higher the income and education, the higher the rate of Internet access and use. For example, while only 17% of Russia’s total population has advanced degrees, a majority of these people, almost 65%, are Internet users. Moscow, of course, is more educated

¹ The Russian Analytical Digest is proud to welcome Karina Alexanyan as a special guest editor for this issue on Russian blogging. The three articles published here build on the discussion started in RAD 50 (November 18, 2008) by Floriana Fossato’s contribution “The Web That Failed: How the Russian State Co-opted a Growing Internet Opposition Movement.”

than the rest of Russia – a full 43% of Muscovites have advanced degrees – and 78% of those people are online. For roughly 70% of the population, those with a secondary education and a high school diploma, Internet penetration is below the national average – from 30% to 22%. And of the remaining 12% who have not completed high school, only 5% are Internet users.

In other words, for the urban educated elite, it may seem that virtually everyone they know is online, and virtually all the time; however, for many others, the Internet is categorized as a “luxury item,” or even something that has no significant relevance to daily life.

Internet Users & Non-Users Pay Attention to Different Sources of Information

In terms of sources of information they accessed, daily Internet users differed dramatically from non-Internet users, and even from average urban residents, according to a nationwide poll that FOM conducted in Spring 2009.

FOM pollsters asked two questions: “Where do you most often find interesting information?” and “Which source do you trust the most?” Respondents chose from six sources – television, Internet, books, print, radio and relatives/friends. Figures 1 on p. 5 and 2 on p. 6 compare the responses in terms of three groups – “urban residents”, “Internet users” and “non Internet users.”

Based on these charts, two facts stand out:

1. For all three groups, television is the leading source of interesting and trusted information.
2. For the daily Internet user, the Internet is rapidly gaining as the most trusted source of information, and already exceeds television as a source of interesting information.

The portrait of the average urban resident and the “non Internet user” are not very different. Both (potentially overlapping) groups find interesting information primarily on television. Print is a source of interesting information at about half, or less than half, the rate of television. The main difference is unsurprising – for urban residents, the Internet and relatives/friends vie for third place, while for “non Internet users”, the Internet, obviously, is not a source. For both of these groups, television is by far the most trusted source of information, with all the other sources trailing far behind. Even for the urban resident, the Internet is “the most trusted source” less frequently than relatives and friends, and less than 10% of the time.

The active or daily Internet user has a very different profile. The Internet exceeds, by a small percentage, television as a source of interesting information – and

television is less dominant as a source in general. Other sources – print, relatives, are also cited less frequently. The daily Internet user is more literate than the other groups, however, and books are cited as sources a bit more often than for others. And, while the daily Internet user also chooses television as his or her most trusted source – the frequency is far lower, less than 30%. The Internet is the most trusted source almost as often, with the rest of the sources trailing far behind. Again, the daily Internet user chooses books as the most trusted source more frequently than the other groups.

In other words, in Russia, the Internet competes with television as a source of information only for frequent (daily) users. That select group, however, chooses to access and trust a set of different sources of information than the rest of the population.

The Russian Webscape is Uniquely Russian

For those 35 million people across the vast expanse of the Russian Federation who access the Internet at least once a month, the various features of social media – private, public, blogs, online journals, social networking sites, friends, readers and communities – overlap and converge in different ways than they do elsewhere.

In the U.S., for instance, blogs can be divided into public and private groupings, with a distinction based on content, focus and intended audience. Public blogs are usually topical, and aimed at a wide audience. Private blogs are more like online journals, with a personal focus and a narrower group of viewers or readers. American blogs have a certain typical structure, with a static blogroll of links identifying what or whom the blogger reads, and a dynamic series of posts and comments. In this context, the distinction between blogs and social networking sites is relatively clear: one group is for spreading information, whether private or public, and the other is for connecting with friends and communities of like-minded thinkers.

The Russian landscape is quite different, and the categories have different connotations. Due to specific social, historical and technical factors, Russian blogs blur the line between public and private, and between blogging and social networking platforms.

A case in point: in the detailed quarterly reports on the Russian blogosphere that Yandex has been issuing since 2006, the terms “blog” and “online journal” are entirely synonymous (ie there is no sense of blogs that are NOT journals), “friends” are interchangeable with “readers,” and “communities” are included in the total blog count.

One reason for this merging of public and private, blogging and social networking platforms can be found in the history and evolution of the Russian blogosphere. Russian “blogging” began in the early 2000s with LiveJournal (LJ), a site which continues to dominate the Russian blogosphere. LiveJournal does not follow the traditional blogging model, but is rather a social media hybrid that combines features of both blogs and social networking sites such as personal diary entries, blog posts, comments, communities and friendship networks.

In its early days, most journals on LJ were like the public blogs in the U.S., kept by a veritable “Who’s Who” of literati, with friends lists that often numbered over 1,000. These lists represented subscribers, or regular readers, rather than friends, creating a virtual listing of the blogger’s “fanbase.” Although in more recent years this scenario has changed, and the average number of “friends” has dropped considerably, the central assumption still exists that in the Russian blogosphere, “friends” are readers, not friends; hence the interchangeability of the terms “friend” and “reader” in Yandex’s most recent, Spring 2009 Blogosphere Report: “The average personal blog is read by 18 people and the average community has 112 bloggers. Only 2% of bloggers have over 100 friends, and 0.2% more than 500.”

Russia’s top four “blogging platforms” (LiveInternet, Ya.ru, Blog.Mail.ru and LiveJournal) host nearly 70% of all blogs, and all emulate the hybrid LiveJournal model. Acting like social networks, they all provide “friend lists” and the option to join communities/groups and share images, video and audio. According to Yandex, these groups and communities are also included in the “blog” category. So for instance, in its Spring 2009 Report, Yandex claims that the Russian blogosphere contains 7.4 million blogs, comprised of 6.9 personal journals and over 500,000 communities.

Pure social networking platforms emerged more recently, in about 2006, and were essentially modeled on their U.S. counterparts, namely Classmates and Facebook. These differ from the blogging platforms in that, by not catering to extended blog/diary posts, they focus primarily only on locating, reconnecting with, and compiling lists of (actual) friends, participating

in groups and communities, and sharing images, video, audio. In the case of these social networking sites, “friends” are indeed friends, and not simply readers of one’s posts and diary entries.

Monthly audience numbers also reflect Russia’s unique blend of social networking and blogging, as the list of top social media sites in Russia contains both social networking and blogging platforms. The social networking service Vkontakte, modeled on Facebook, is by far the most popular, attracting almost half of Russia’s Internet users. Mail.ru offers social networking and blogging as separate but interconnected services, and while separately their audience numbers are low, when combined, the audience of both those services makes up roughly one third of Russia’s monthly Internet users. LiveJournal is next, attracting more than a quarter of Russia’s Internet users, followed by the social networking site Odnoklassniki, modeled on Classmates, with almost a quarter of the users.

Conclusion

While Russian Internet penetration is relatively low – only one third of the population – those that do go online, do so relatively frequently, and with a passion for social media. Daily Internet users in Russia are primarily educated and urban, and differ from the rest of the population in their sources of attention and trust – with the Internet gaining on, and in some cases, exceeding television as a reliable source of “interesting information”. It is important to note here, however, that “interesting information” does not necessarily mean that it is relevant, or even informative in any meaningful or political sense. The “interesting information” that users find online can take many forms, most often appearing in the content of blogs or social networking sites. While “pure” social networking sites may not, yet, be as predominant as elsewhere, social media use – through both blog/social networking hybrids and “pure” social networking sites – is considerable, especially among active Internet users. In fact, if the statistics are to be trusted, the percentage of active Internet users that blog and use social networking sites is consistently higher in Russia than in the US and those who do use social networking sites are “engaged” to an above average degree.

About the Author:

Karina Alexanyan is a Ph.D. candidate in Communications at Columbia University. Her doctoral research explores the Russian-language social media landscape.

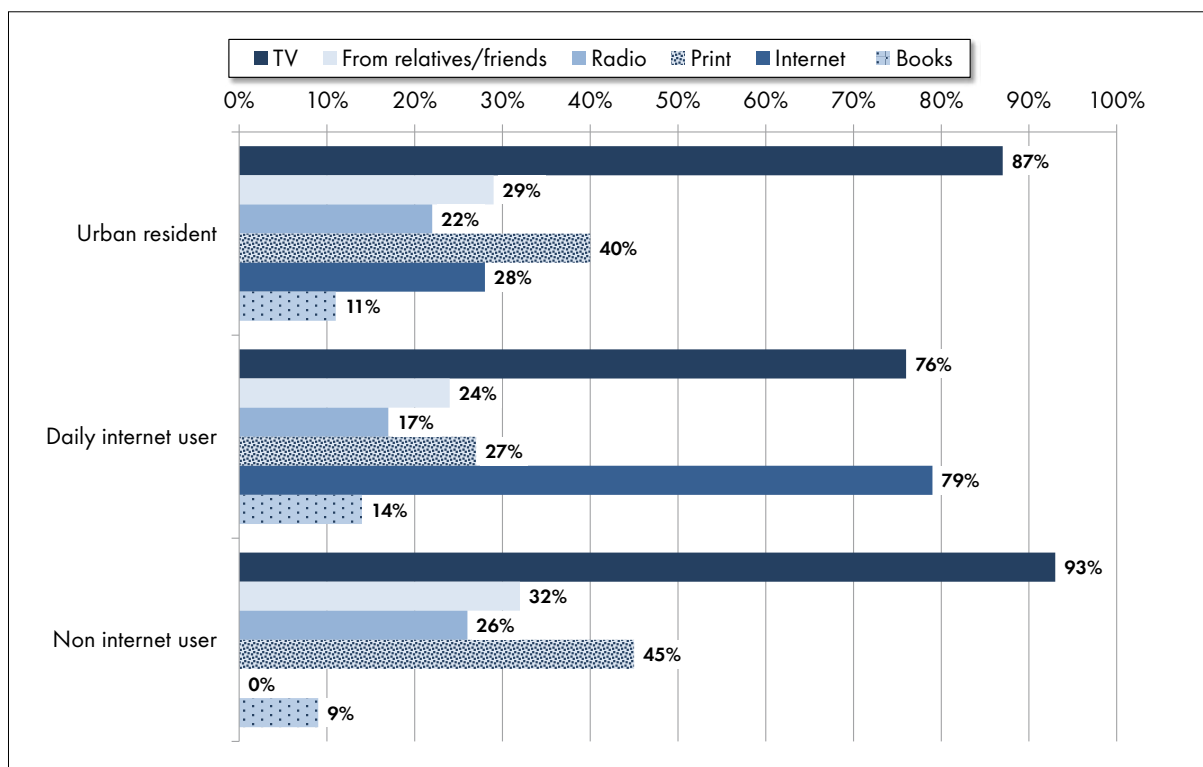
Further Reading:

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- FOM Public Opinion Foundation, “Internet in Russia, Special Release,” http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/smi/smi_int/d091617, March 2009.
- Universal McCann, “Social Media Study, Wave 3” http://www.themarketingsite.com/live/content.php?Item_ID=7860, March 2008.
- Yandex “Trends in the Blogosphere,” http://download.yandex.ru/company/yandex_on_blogosphere_spring_2009.pdf, Spring 2009.

Tables and Diagrams

The Internet as a Source for Information; Internet Frequency and Use

Figure 1: Where Do You Most Often Find Interesting Information?



Source: *Mediynye predpochteniya naseleniya: internet tesnit televidenie 23 April 2009*, <http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d16lp.pdf>