Analysis

Understanding the Real Impact of Russian Blogs

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Abstract

Previous Western efforts to understand the impact of the Russian blogosphere on the Russian political system have taken a limited approach and come to the conclusion that the blogosphere has little political impact. In undemocratic countries like Russia, political discourse becomes diffuse since virtually any topic may acquire political connotations and political activity tends to take oblique, indirect and symbolic forms, which may seem non-political or quasi-political to outsiders. In fact, the Russian blogosphere reproduces the fundamental structural features of Russian society, such as social atomization, negative attitudes to official institutions (and, more generally, to any "Other") and a strong dependence on personal networks as a source of information, opinions and support. Informality, symbolic action and laughter as the key features of the Russian blogosphere make it closer to popular laughter culture than to the public sphere.

The Size of the Blogosphere

The blogosphere can be defined as the totality of all blogs and their interconnections. It is not homogeneous but consists of distinct networks shaped by users with common or intersecting interests who interact with each other and the world by writing, linking and commenting. The resulting networked space reflects political, social and cultural patterns and processes in a society. Blogs are probably the most democratic and popular form of sharing information and opinions. The study of the blogosphere (and its constituting networks) is a way to understand "what people really think".

The Russian blogosphere is big and growing. According to Yandex (2009), in the spring of 2009, it included 7.4 million blogs. By the end of November this figure exceeded 11 million. A million posts and comments are produced daily. The scale and variety of the Russian blogosphere presents a methodological challenge to researchers seeking to understand it on both qualitative and quantitative levels since it is difficult to embrace it in its totality and interpret perceived regularities correctly.

Of the 7.4 million blogs in the spring of 2009, only 12 percent were active in some way (had at least 5 entries and had been updated at least once in the past 3 months) and only 5 percent (370,000) were super active (updated at least weekly). This active and productive segment constitutes the Russian blogosphere in a proper sense and it should be distinguished from dead or junk blogs. Of the million entries produced daily, a third qualify as spam.

Global and Local Aspects

The Russian blogosphere is a structural and meaningful formation within the global blogosphere. It has its specific topology, discussion topics, attentive clusters and patterns of user behavior. It is both global and local. It is global because it facilitates the flow of information and uncensored discussion irrespective of state borders; unites members of Metropolis and Diaspora (about 20 per cent of Russian bloggers live abroad); provides links to information resources worldwide and serves as a tool of social mobilization (grassroots movements, organization and coverage of protest actions, charity fundraising, etc.).

At the same time, the Russian blogosphere shows strong localizing (or glocalizing) tendencies: it is to a large degree self-contained (isolated from the rest of the Internet); has relatively few "bridge bloggers" writing about other countries and cultures in Russian or about Russian affairs in other languages; the dialogues of Russian bloggers with foreign bloggers are rare and mostly of mock or destructive nature. In brief, in the blogosphere, Russians tend to communicate with Russians in Russian about Russia-related topics.

The case of the Russian blogosphere clearly shows that the global communication technology is not necessarily used for the dissemination of global content or discussion of global issues. The Russian blogosphere is, for the most part, an inwardly focused social network more interested in what is going on in the country rather than in the world.

The Blogosphere's Political Potential

The Russian blogosphere's political significance is uncertain. On one hand, blogs are extensively used for documenting corruption and social injustice, uncensored discussion of current events and the viral spread of information. On the other hand, although the level of discontent with the political regime is high, it most-

ly finds expression in resentment, cynicism and humor rather than in organized political action. Potentially, the Russian blogosphere (especially its "discussion core") is a powerful agent for social change. However, this potential is still far from being fully realized.

Unlike most of the Russian media which are directly or indirectly controlled by the state, the Russian blogosphere remains a place of free speech and uncensored discussion. This makes it an invaluable source of knowledge about the sentiments, opinions and attitudes of the population. The study of *vox bloggeri* has tremendous significance as it can help to understand the current situation in Russia and potentially predict the country's future.

Anglo-American scholarship tends to approach the Russian blogosphere from a political science perspective. Unfortunately, this approach has revealed serious limitations and its validity is questionable.

The application of political science's normative framework to the Russian Internet (as well as to the Russian society in general) invariably leads to the conclusion that they do not conform to the ideal model and can be only described in terms of deviation, defectiveness and fallacy. The Western concepts of participatory democracy and civil liberties may work well in societies with developed democracies but they have a different meaning (if any) in undemocratic countries like Russia. The scholars who suggest that the main function of blogs is political discussion (or any serious discussion of any serious issues) which should result in political action and then blame the Russian blogosphere (because they find little politics and seriousness in it) are victims of their own a priori assumptions.

Thus, a recent study by Fossato, Lloyd and Verkhovsky (2008) begins with the assumption that the Internet in Russia has been perceived as an "an antidote to state dominance… a liberator, a tool whose possession, or ability to access, allows individuals, oppositional parties and NGOs to escape the control the state can exercise over TV and radio channels, and the press." The study attempted "to gauge how far that is true in Russia" and came to a rather pessimistic conclusion that "the power and potential of the Russian Internet is very limited" and that the Russian web has failed to fulfill the promise of individual and social liberalization. Fossato (2009) goes even further and advances a hypothesis that the Russian blogosphere serves in fact as a means of people's adaptation to the regime rather than an instrument of social change. Both conclusions are questionable as they are based on just a few case studies and do not take into account the specifics of blog discourse. Probably what has failed is not the Russian web but a biased research strategy.

The initial assumptions on which the quoted research is based are in fact a projection of the researchers' own political beliefs and expectations and they are not supported by documentary evidence. My analysis of the early reception of the LiveJournal blogging platform in the Russian media (Gorny, 2004b) demonstrated that the emergent blogosphere was interpreted in terms of "one's own circle", personal self-expression or interpersonal play rather than in terms of "an antidote to state dominance", "political liberation" or "opposition". The development of political discussion and activism in blogs is a relatively late phenomenon. It was difficult to find examples of online activism in 2004–2005. Even now, when political issues are discussed or political actions are performed, they often take unserious, playful, mock and grotesque forms. However, it does not mean that these forms of resistance are insignificant and have no impact upon either public opinion or the political situation in Russia.

Is the Russian Blogosphere the Public Sphere?

The concept of the public sphere (including a derivative concept of the "networked public sphere") should be used with care with regard to the Russian blogosphere.

The public sphere is defined as "an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action." The public sphere is understood as a mediator between the "private sphere" (individual citizens) and the "Sphere of Public Authority" (the state authority, the ruling class) (Habermas, 1962/1989). The study of the public sphere centers on the idea of *participatory democracy*, and how public opinion becomes *political action*. The basic belief in public sphere theory is that political action is steered by the public sphere, and that *the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere* (Benhabib, 1992). "Democratic governance rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate" (Hauser, 1999).

In authoritarian regimes there is not much opportunity for participatory democracy and the conversion of public opinion to political action. The government is alienated from the people, it serves its own interest and it has little interest in dialogue. In this sense, it is not legitimate (from the viewpoint of democracy theory).

In undemocratic societies, such as Russia, where the official institutions are used to defend the private ends

of the ruling elite rather than to serve the public good; where the state routinely uses brute force to suppress any hint of opposition and dissent; where public social institutes are underdeveloped and too weak to be able to bridge the gap between citizens and the government, the opportunities for meaningful political action (be it organized political opposition or grassroots movements) are very limited. In this situation, political discourse becomes diffuse (virtually any topic may acquire political connotations) and political activity tends to take oblique, indirect and symbolic forms (which may seem not political or quasi-political to outsiders).

It is true that the blogosphere in Russia is a *substitute for the public sphere* — much the same as literature in the 19th century and the independent media in the 1990s. But is *not* the public sphere in the proper sense of the word. Unlike the public sphere, which is rational, serious and which follows the rules of public discussion, the Russian blogosphere is full of emotions, mockery and highly informal speech including jargon and *mat* (profanity, swearing).

Recent research on the connection between the Internet and democracy has found that this connection is not straightforward. Thus, Kalathil and Boas (2003) argue that while certain types of Internet use do pose political challenges to authoritarian governments and may lead to political change, other uses of the Internet can actually reinforce authoritarian rule. Faris and Etling (2008) come to the similar conclusion that the Internet is just a tool, which can be used for different purposes, and that "the impact of digital networks in promoting political change unquestionably depends on the context". However, it is not enough to state that the context defines the purpose the Internet is used *for*. It is much more challenging to understand *how* it is used for the same purpose in different contexts. Democracy theory should be supplemented by an anthropology of undemocratic society. And this is an important topic for further research.

The Russian Blogosphere and Russian Society

If even networking and informal exchange are anthropological universals, their functions and implications are very different in different regimes (Ledeneva, 2008). The defects of the authoritarian regime in Russia are compensated for by informal personal networks: a low level of trust in formal institutions (from the parliament and NGOs to the police and courts) places emphasis on interpersonal trust. The blogosphere (and other computer-mediated networks) in Russia provide a specific example of a more general principle – a case of informal personal networks compensating for and replacing ineffective formal and impersonal institutions.

The Russian blogosphere reproduces fundamental structural features of the Russian society such as social atomization, negative attitudes to official institutions (and, more generally, to any "Other") and a strong dependence on personal networks as a source of information, opinions and support. This opposition towards the "official" applies to the Russian Internet generally, especially to its early stage of development, before commercialization and state intervention. As Rohozinski (1999) noted ten years ago, "The informal social networks, or *blat*, which pervaded Russian society and facilitated day-to-day decisions in an ossified system, formed the basis for constructing Russian cyberspace". However, *blat* is just one manifestation of the Russian culture of informality (Ledeneva 1998, 2006, 2009). The Soviet legacy of kitchen-table talks and *samizdat* (Gorny, 2007) and jokes culture (Gorny, 2008) is no less important for understanding the reality of the Russian Internet.

Probably the most striking feature of the Russian blogosphere is a paradoxical mixture of the public and the private. Most blogs are publicly accessible but very few follow the norms of public discourse; the dominant mode is informal in-group communication. The triumph of informality in Russian blogs has deep sociocultural reasons and far-reaching consequences. Informality, symbolic action and laughter are the key aspects of the Russian blogosphere. Perhaps, Bakhtin's (1941/1993) theory of popular laughter culture rather than Habermas' (1962/1989) concept of the public sphere can provide an adequate theoretical framework to understand "how the Russian blogosphere really works" and to reveal the unwritten rules by which it is governed.

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(Suggestions for further reading overleaf)

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