

# New Media in New Europe-Asia

## Workshop 2 (London)

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### ABSTRACTS

Martin Calvert

*Identity, Strategic Essentialism and Informal Networks among Social Activist LiveJournal Bloggers in Nizhny Novgorod; Implications for Information Transfer and the Individual*

Livejournal is the most widely used and widely read blogging resource in Russia with many thousands of writers and readers. Due to the network-based, inward-looking architecture of the site, most bloggers communicate to other bloggers on the site in reciprocal reading and commenting relationships, rather than a one-to-many broadcast model. The early adoption of Livejournal by artists, poets and academics has been said to have led to an environment conducive to the intelligentsia, and to anyone with a niche or marginal interest. The capacity of the site to allow individuals to network with others like themselves has implications for how we view identity, the information on which users base their assessments of kinship, and a wider role (of what is primarily a recreational site) to serve as source of information that can usefully augment offline life.

For my social activist respondents, this engagement with new media has had interesting implications in their daily life and how they frame themselves in relation to it and the societal and media mainstream. As anti-capitalists, anarchists and/or environmental protesters, these bloggers use the Livejournal form to make relatively quick judgements about how they identify with other users based on the content of blog postings, Interest lists and common contacts. This strategic essentialism, the boiling down of oneself and others to certain characteristics of interest is an approach used by many but there is special significance for those who feel like outsiders from the mainstream.

By creating and participating in communities and networks of choice online, users can constitute hubs or 'walled gardens' where they feel free to discuss aspects of themselves and their approach to the world that they may not be fully able to offline; more than this, in such a densely networked, discursive environment, such networks can serve as a filtering mechanism to propel information of interest towards a user. This has use value for those who feel mainstream media does not address topics that concern them, and that mainstream society is similarly indifferent. Blogging networks allow users to exercise real aspects of themselves, to come together and even organise protest actions. In a milder but no less important respect, information can serve as an artefact of social value, something that solidifies and adds value to reciprocal blogging relationships from which users can draw fulfilment.

However, there are also questions about the extent to which online activity and information flow draws attention to activists from oppositional or far-right individuals and groups who may use the same site architecture for less constructive ends. My respondents attempt to situate themselves both within a discursive environment that they enjoy and offline realities that may be less supportive. Information

# New Media in New Europe-Asia

and approaches to its exchange, reciprocity, privacy, sociability and blogs as 'tools, places and ways of being' (Markham) impact on their reconciliation of online and offline activities and the different ways information can be valued, and what can result.

## **Boris Gladarev and Markku Lonkila**

### ***The Role of the Internet in Organizing Environmental Protests in Russia and Finland***

This paper compares the use of the internet by Russian and Finnish local social movements organized against building construction plans in St. Petersburg and Helsinki. In Helsinki the inhabitants of the city district Kumpula succeeded in stopping the plans of the city government to build a new street across a park in their district in 2009. The Helsinki case will be compared to the uprising of the inhabitants at Komendantskii prospekt 40, in St. Petersburg, where citizens organized in 2008-2009 to protest against the building of a new block of flats in the nearby small park.

## **Yelena Jetpyspayeva**

### ***Online Citizenship Journalism and Activism***

The talk will be on the topic of promoting new media and citizen journalism in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. I will discuss how authors try to differentiate countries from each other and how they promote their agenda. I will also share my experience of various projects I have been involved in as well as I will discuss other cases (Global Voices, moblog, bloggers communities, etc). I will focus on barcamp experience in Central Asia, this is a new format for the conference organization that had great success in Kazakhstan and this year it will be organized for the second time in April, it as a new format of teaching, sharing, getting to know each other and becoming a community.

## **Stephen Hutchings**

### ***Media Convergence and Russian Television:***

#### ***Remote Control, Or The Mouse and the Elephant***

It is now superfluous to discuss the subordination of Russian national television to the influence of the Kremlin which exerts a form of remote control over its personnel, programming, journalistic practices and news agendas. This, then, constitutes the 'elephant' in our title. However, Russian television is no different from any other national media system in needing to meet the growing

# New Media in New Europe-Asia

challenges of new/old media convergence with all that it brings in terms of viewer participation, the infiltration of unofficial discourses and global formats, and the consequent loss of control over meaning. This paper examines the significance of convergence for the production and reception of Russian television, and for its interaction with its viewing public, noting that new media forms represent both a threat and an opportunity to the Kremlin.

Our analysis posits new media forms as the 'mouse' confronting television's 'elephant', in a battle the outcome of which is by no means certain. It treats new media as (a) a source of alternative narratives, (b) a channel for dissent, (c) a tool for recalibrating preferred meanings, (d) a weapon of authentication, (e) a means of localisation/globalisation, (f) a site for identity negotiation. In its conclusions it underscores the perils of technological determinism when assessing future developments in the battle.

**Galina Miazhevich**

## *New Media and Pop-Culture: Eurovision in Post-Communist Europe*

This paper investigates how recent transformations of sexuality displayed at Eurovision and societal attitudes towards it in two ex-Soviet countries shape the reconstruction of the boundaries of taste in the post-communist nations, and how this in turn enables them to reconfigure their own position within the New Europe. I argue that post-Soviet attempts to engage with the culture of sexual and aesthetic excess characteristic of Eurovision are twofold. On the one hand, they involve intracultural dialogue. Here I draw attention to how the performers mediate between state delineations of the limits of the sexually permissible (cf. recent examples of homophobia in fSU, such as the prohibition of the Gay Pride parade in Russia) and popular, grassroots currents within which sexual 'deviance' and excess is openly explored. Thus, the Eurovision performances constitute a bridge between rigid, official conceptions of the national self and alternative non-mainstream identities. In this context, the long-standing role of pop culture and its relationship with 'high art' in the building of (post)Soviet national consciousness must be accounted for. On the other hand, I analyse the intercultural and transnational aspects of Eurovision. Here post-communist performances of excessive and aberrant sexuality can be read in terms of an implicit dialogue with West European constructions of 'bad taste' and the emergent notion of Euro-trash. Thus, post-communist Eurovision performances are treated as a 'double voiced' act which self-consciously parody western imaginings of an exotic, yet sexually promiscuous East (hence the frequent inclusion of ethnic 'pastiche' alongside sexual excess).

The paper looks at the Eurovision contest over the last five years (2005-2009). Within this period, I focus on Russia and Ukraine, both of which have participated in the final round and both of which have hosted the event (Ukraine in 2005 and Russian in 2009). The comparison highlights the type of imagery foregrounded in the respective songs and their performance. The selection and sexual persona of the singer, the language of the song, and the appeal to ethnic symbols are all linked to (re)conceptions of Euro-taste and Euro-trash. Since public attitudes are of vital importance in shaping attitudes to the shifting culture of Eurovision, critical discourse analysis of selected internet forums discussing relevant issues (the singers' style, costumes, etc.) is also employed.

# New Media in New Europe-Asia

**Jeremy Morris**

***Narratives of Internet Use in the Post-Socialist Margins: the Strange Bedfellows of Knitting, Diesel Engines and One-Armed Bandits***

This paper presents the findings of a short period of ethnographic fieldwork in a ‘marginal space’ of post-socialism. The field selected was a former monotown (dependent for employment in the Soviet period on a single industrial enterprise) with a demographic profile of low socio-economic status and educational attainment, but with relatively developed new media infrastructure, and located in a region with a reasonably benign economic outlook. This particular combination of contexts – allowing a focus on the narratives of new-media use and non use performed by the working poor – was selected to address the ‘class’ bias of our current understanding of socialisation through new media, narratives of use, and ‘actual use’ in E Europe and FSU. Using open-ended interviews, participant observation, and virtual ethnographic techniques, case studies were obtained illustrating a variety of narratives of use and non use as well as some limited examples of online behaviour and habits, the latter aspect raising some ethical issues. Respondents put a strong accent on the ‘informative-educational’ role of the Internet in the domestic sphere, and in particular on sustaining practical skills of ‘make due and mend’ – an indicator of if not of ‘exitism’ from consumption, then continuing narratives of self-reliance and DIY. However, outside the domestic setting a completely contrasting realm of use was discovered: the use of ‘Internet clubs’ – exclusively by men for gambling. This aspect of use and the narratives around it require further investigation.

**Natalia Rulyova**

***The Construction of Immigrants’ Identity: What Are the Chinese Made of on the Runet?***

The paper analyses some popular blogging Russian-language websites (such as Live Journal) and social networking groups (on such websites as vkontakte, facebook, odnoklassniki) related to the representation of the Chinese on the Runet. The Chinese form a growing immigrant community in Russia and it is important to study how they are represented not only in the national mass media but more so on informal websites. The internet is a powerful medium for constructing and negotiating immigrants’ ethnic identity. The analysis of social networking groups and blogging sites informs us about the current level of xenophobia, nationalism, anti-Chinese sentiment as well as interest in Chinese culture and language. The findings are compared to the representation of the Chinese in recently published literature in the Russian language, some national and regional media publications. This comparative approach helps identify the main trends in shaping the Chinese identity in Russia.

# New Media in New Europe-Asia

**Lara Ryazanova-Clarke**

***Minimal and Incomprehensible: Political Satire on the Internet (a Case of Rulitiki)***

The paper examines the linguistic and visual aspects of the show and contextualizes them within the pattern of development of political satire in post-Soviet Russia and within the general trends in the new media. The series of blogs display a generic connection with both the 1990s television show Kukly and the satirical Soviet TV journal Fital. The Rulitiki cartoon may also be interpreted as a performance of imperfection on both, linguistic and visual levels. The video blog is deliberately made as if by an amateur, in a crude animation form, linking it to homely low tech contemporary art such as The Blue Noses group. On the language level, similarly to the intentional spelling errors featuring in bloggers' language, or *iazyk padonkov*, the Putin-Medvedev dialogue is so audibly flawed that only due to subtitles it is possible to be comprehended. The speech of the cartoon leaders is primitive, producing associations with child's talk. On the one hand this can perhaps be interpreted as the author's strategy of the deconstruction and dismantling of the dominant discourse, on other hand this may signify the absence of language altogether, the continuation of the post-Soviet condition which Serguei Oushakine described as linguistic aphasia. That said, the connection with the *iazyk podonkov* may be deeper than it looks as devices of minimalism and incomprehensibility of the performance also allow the author to play with language creating new means for satirical expression. The paper provides examples of linguistic creativity such as the use of childish diminutives for word creation (машину куплю безнацененькую), or the shifts in grammatical categories (ну Ди, ну дай посадочку). Finally, it attempts to frame theoretically the described internet phenomena.

**Natalia Sokolova**

***Online Fan Communities in a Context of Transmedia:***

***Cyber-Entertainment or 'Free Labour'? (The Case of Runet)***

The role of «interpretive communities» (online fan-communities which are involved in active communication, gathering and classification of information on their fandom, fan-art` creation and so on) is especially important if to consider the resent tendency in media industry to advance media-products (and a brand) through a number of media channels – this is a phenomenon named «transmedia», «crossmedia» or «synergy platform». Online communities and their activity around the brand are an obligatory component of similar media-strategy. Thanks to its interactivity and a feedback this strategy effectively supports the feeling of audience` influence on a policy of the media-companies and media content. It is possible to consider cultural practices of «interpretive communities» in a context of Web 2.0` paradigm as its main futures are user-generated content, collaborative activity and vernacular creativity.

I am especially interested in a such phenomenon as «free labor» of consumers as prosumers (A.Toffler) or produsers (A.Bruns). Cultural activity of «interpretive communities» are quite entered in concepts of immaterial labor (M.Lazzarato, M.Hardt, A.Negri, T.Terranova) in the age of so-called digital or

# New Media in New Europe-Asia

cognitive capitalism where the consumers' reception and creativity appear as an integrated part of a media product.

In my opinion, the enthusiasm of many theorists connected with audience` (co)creation (for example, P.Levy` idea of «collective intelligence» or H.Jenkins` concept of «participatory culture») is hardly defensible. Actually the strategy of media companies is focused on a «new» consumer, it is quite entered in philosophy of modern marketing according to which the control over the consumers and the market can be more effectively reached through formation of the «reflective» and «creative» consumer. New creative practices which are possible thanks to new technologies actually once again promote new level of consumption.

My central question is the local aspect of this tendency. I will analyze how this tendency is shown in Russia taking into account such moments as intensive capitalization of Russian culture in the conditions of not-completed modernization; «free labor» of the amateurs and «gift economy» in frame of traditional national understanding of a copyright and `shadow economics`; intensive monopolization and ideologization of national media field; cultural globalization and new media.

## Claire Wilkinson

### ***'neweurasia: Learning to Blog in Central Asia'***

*neweurasia* started out in 2005 as an English-language volunteer-run blog project about the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia, rapidly becoming one of the most visited blogs about the region. Following this auspicious start, over the last five years *neweurasia* has developed into a funded multi-language locally-driven project with more than 80,000 unique page views on average per month. In addition, *neweurasia's* bridge-bloggers have held around 50 training sessions, seminars and conferences promoting blogging in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, reaching more than 600 people in the process, as well as participating in new media training courses and BarCamps.

Despite the project's indisputable successes – not least of which was being blocked in Uzbekistan in 2006 – it would be true to say that it has been a steep learning curve for all involved. This paper explores some of the key challenges faced by *neweurasians* over the project's evolution and the solutions found to them. Specifically, we examine the experiences and opinions of people involved with the project as bloggers and advocates of blogging in order to begin answering fundamental questions about blogging in Central Asia: Why blog? Who blogs? Who doesn't? What challenges are there to blogging in specific republics? In what language(s) do people blog? Do bloggers network? Are blogging communities online or also 'IRL'? Is blogging citizen journalism? Can blogging play a role in building civil society? What is the future of blogging in the region?

We draw on these accounts to reflect upon the development of the "Stanosphere" to date and consider the sustainability of *neweurasia*, and blogging more widely, in the region from the perspectives of bloggers themselves.

# New Media in New Europe-Asia

**Orlin Spassov**

*Searching for Identity: Latin vs. Cyrillic Script on the Bulgarian Internet*

The paper investigates the conflict between two different ways of writing in Bulgarian on the web: using the traditional and normative Cyrillic alphabet or using the foreign Latin alphabet. The last decade of 20th century was marked by an immediate and total domination of the Latin Script in the growing Bulgarian internet space. Initially the reason was purely technological: the absence of appropriate software instruments for coding Cyrillic fonts. Even though in the meantime the problems with the code were solved the Latin writing kept its popularity acquiring new ideological meanings. The rising net of web subcultures used the “Western” alphabet as a sign of cultural identity and opposition to the official culture. This tendency however did not become a norm. Instead it provoked a counter-movement of users sticking to the Cyrillic script as a marker of authentic identity in the globalized world. The last episodes in the battle between the alphabets in Bulgarian internet show a growing resistance to the usage of Latin letter system. The paper discusses the subcultural, cultural and political consequences of these developments.