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Actually Existing Internet Use in the Russian Margins: Net Utopianism in the Shadow of the “Silent Majorities”

Jeremy Morris

The article presents empirical data on Internet and social media use in a Russian regional and urban space. Ethnographic methods provide a picture of ordinary users and their online habits. Data was gathered “online” and using traditional participant observation of informants, constituting a “connective ethnography.” The empirical findings highlight a degree of “circumspection” by ordinary users in terms of the social networking potential of VKontakte, the main social networking site (SNS) popular in Russia. The SNS use is characterized by limited acknowledgement of social others in contrast to extended communication typical of Facebook. In addition, the article discusses at length the problems with scholarship that seeks to highlight the civic potential of new media in less democratic societies, such as Russia. The complexity of imputing civic or politicized use of the SNS is highlighted by informants’ observed use.

Dmitri had called me in the middle of his shift at the metal fabrication facility to see whether I wanted to come over after work for a beer. “I’ve got this new fishing game I’ve downloaded; I want to show you,” he said, knowing my interest in his use of technology. I met him off the works bus in the center of town and we waited in the entranceway of the small supermarket for Dmitri’s younger son, Egor, who had also finished work. Dmitri had signaled to Egor that we were waiting by “beeping” him—telephoning by mobile phone without letting Egor pick up.

“Are you going to show him that catfish you got last night?” were the first words from Egor to his father.

I shot them each a quizzical look in turn. “A real one?” I said, rather dimly.

They both laughed. A few carrier-bags of beer, chocolate, and salted fish later we sat down in the cramped one-room flat in front of the computer screen. Behind a partition stood a hand-made wooden bunk bed, where Dmitri’s sons slept. Directly behind us was a battered sofa-bed, where Dmitri and his wife slept. The TV was tuned to a domestic music channel and, as

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always, was very loud, though not quite loud enough to drown out the shrieking parakeet in a cage in the kitchen next door. There, Tanya, Dmitri's wife, had her "own" TV perched on a bracket next to the refrigerator. It too was on loud—a chat show on Channel One.

We sat down to the computer. Dmitri's social networking profile in VKontakte was permanently visible as the "wallpaper" to his family's PC. His sons were growing up fast—they complained they had to keep logging him out to access their own profiles. Instead of opening up email or even the messaging service in the profile, Dmitri clicked straight through to his favorite application—*Kopai mogilu*, literally, 'Dig the Grave', a social game very popular in Russia which I discuss in the second part of this article. A nearly static page shows a cartoon-style cemetery with Dmitri's personalized "grave" and "headstone," the latter with a photograph of its owner superimposed. Dmitri had had a visitor since the early morning, when he had last been online: his cousin had "filled in" his grave and left a message: "Hi cousin, ;-). See you at the weekend."¹ Dmitri said, "Ah-ha, now we'll show him," and furiously clicked away at his cousin's grave, before leaving a "smiley" in return. Then he clicked to the "gravesite" of his ex-colleague, Sasha, within the application-game. We had been talking about Sasha as we walked home from the shops. He had recently left the factory where Dmitri worked and was now unemployed. Dmitri was concerned about him—Sasha changed jobs so often that he was finding it more and more difficult to get the better employers (invariably large-scale manufacturing and extraction) to interview him. Dmitri clicked on to Sasha's page, similarly personalized with a cartoon werewolf guarding the grave and a bust of Lenin behind railings around the headstone. Dmitri, with his superior "firepower," easily defeated the werewolf and broke the headstone in two. This "objective" to the game allowed him to leave a friendly, if pointed, message: "How are you, drifter [letun]?" Dmitri's son signaled that it was his turn and sat down to the PC; Dmitri and I went out with our beers so he could smoke—in the end, the fishing game could wait.²

Dmitri's use of the social networking site—and perhaps more importantly, his family's indifference to other affordances of the internet—illustrates the main arguments of this article. Firstly, use of the internet is narrowly social and equally bound by parochial cultural and social needs—killing time in low-intensity play after a hard day's work. This boundedness mirrors the socially compact physical setting of peoples' lives—a former

¹ For "cousin," the actual word used was "brother," typical of standard Russian usage regarding relatives.

² I discuss computer games like the fishing game briefly elsewhere. See Jeremy Morris, "Learning How to Shoot Fish on the Internet: New Media in the Russian Margins as Facilitating Immediate and Parochial Social Needs," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 8 (2012): 1546-64.

monotown in the Russian margins (more on that below).³ The reach of the virtual socialization of Dmitri and other informants rarely extends beyond the existing “real-world” local work, kin, and friendship network. It is almost as if the internet did not extend more than 40km in any direction from the center of the social world of informants—this humdrum town of twenty thousand, located four hours by bus from Moscow. The game-application, *Dig the Grave* allows an accurate mapping of the physical and social boundedness of Dmitri’s life-world. As it happens, he was born in the neighboring region, so there are two nodes to his social media world, but no more.

Secondly, this social media use within Dmitri’s network is typified by other-regarding affective work: what I call “nodding.” Interactions—whether through social games, wall-posts (where a public message is left on a personal profile page), or private messaging—are part of the stock of mundane but essential daily interpellations between significant and less-significant others. The workmate gets a friendly virtual nod; it is important to maintain one’s actual social network—you never know when you’ll need a favor: the famous Russian *blat*.⁴ The in-laws and even mere passing acquaintances are bombarded by e-cards, usually posted publicly on a virtual profile “wall”: “heartfelt seasons greetings,” to which the recipient, following an iron law of local social media use, acknowledges, equally publicly and rather formulaically, with “Thank you, Dmitri, season’s greetings to you and yours also.”

A final observation needs to be made about an online affordance conspicuous by its absence: the narrow, personal, and local orientation of internet use by informants is paralleled by a lack of interest in the wider base of information and communicative resources online. Russians get their news from federal TV channels.⁵ Dmitri and other informants are good examples of how the silent majority ignore and avoid online sources of alternative politics, oppositional messages, and even established independent media presences (such as the site for the radio station Echo of Moscow). This uncomfortable truth about the silent majority is in stark contrast to scholars focusing on civil society and opposition politics who paint a picture of online

³ “Monotown” refers to urban spaces dominated by a single enterprise which provided a large proportion of that space’s employment in the Soviet period. Arguably, such urban contexts remain socially significant in the post-Soviet era. See C. Alexander and V. Buchli, “Introduction,” in C. Alexander, C. Buchli, and C. Humphrey, eds., *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007): 1–40; and Jeremy Morris, “Beyond coping? Alternatives to Consumption Within a Social Network of Russian Workers,” *Ethnography*, 14, no. 1 (2013): 85–103.

⁴ Alena Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵ USC Annenberg SPRC, “Media Myths and Realities: A Public of One,” special issue, *Perspectives* 1 (2008), <http://www.ketchumperspectives.com/archives/2008_i1/>, accessed 7 July 2013.

activism. The internet, like television before it, confronts those who try to deny the masses their passivity.⁶ Baudrillard's infamous observation on the sometimes willful ignorance among the majority regarding politics was prompted by Certeau's analysis of the marginality of the individual in modern urban society which is "no longer limited to minority groups but is rather massive and pervasive, and becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority."⁷ Certeau also intimated possibilities for spatial practices within everyday lived experience and movement through social and physical spaces for facilitating resistance to hegemony. However, the vast majority of online life in Russia, as this regional urban field site illustrates, is either allergic to the national and international social and political context or, at best, politically conservative. Research on everyday activism shows that where there are fleeting glimmers of civic engagement, they appear around concrete local issues⁸—disputes over community and formerly common social assets, environmental risks (particularly industrial and man-made hazards), etc. In this article I discuss whether such locally civic uses of new media are likely to develop in the form of counter-hegemonic practices that scholars of civil society see as the norm in other societies. Interpretation of everyday new media use regimes that seeks to identify resources that may lead to the building of civil society needs to start, not with oppositional politics, but with the socially cohesive mundane use of ordinary people.⁹

From the ethnographic introduction above, it can be seen that this article takes a critical approach to new media studies of post-socialist societies, particularly those in Russia. I draw on ethnographic materials from my own regional research on new media use (specifically the internet) to show that grounded approaches that mix "virtual" research with qualitative methods are a fruitful way of understanding new media use and meaning-making in Russia. This has been called "connective ethnography"—where researchers connect online with informants, as well as do research physically at a site, including interviews, participant observation, and other qualitative methods.¹⁰ My findings and discussion illustrate three wider key points about new media research and post-socialist societies. Firstly, they show that caution is

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities; or The End of the Social*, trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston, and Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 17.

⁸ Boris Gladarev and Markku Lonkila, "The Role of Social Networking Sites in Civic Activism in Russia and Finland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 8 (2012): 1375–94.

⁹ Katy E. Pearce, "Phoning It In: Theory in Mobile Media and Communication in Developing Countries," *Mobile Media and Communication* 1, no. 1 (2013): 76–82.

¹⁰ V. Dirksen, A. Huizing, and B. J. Smit, "Piling on Layers of Understanding: The Use of Multiple Methods for the Study of (Online) Work Practices," *New Media & Society* 12 (2010): 1045–63.

needed in imputing progressive social change to technological effects—especially given the mass apolitical use of new media. Second, there is a need for genuine intercultural research on new media focusing on innovative aspects of actual use, in particular of social media networks.¹¹ This is an extension of the first point. It is all too common for scholars to project their own class-, socio-, and region-specific identity when theorizing about the uses and effects of uses of new media. Genuine intercultural research on new media has often highlighted the socially- and culturally-specific continuity effects of mobile phones and the internet, and the localizing dynamics of use.¹² On the other hand, any social “renewal” or transformation brought about by new media might well be found at a much more mundane level than civic-society scholars find comfortable for their theses. Connective ethnographies are well placed to apprehend and make sense of this change, which is ironically often embedded in local and class-based existing practices—far from the putative virtual world.

The (Already)-Networked Individual in the Russian Margins?

For all the interest in online social networking as a possible rallying point for dissent given the carefully controlled mainstream media, as a nation of “small cities,” it has been argued that Russia does not “need” the Internet as much as territories where the population is very rural or inhabits large metropolises.¹³ If personalized networks are therefore not so geographically or informationally fragmented as in other spaces, does this mean that in Russia the networked individual is not a new or accompanying effect of informational-technological change? Wellman and Haythornthwaite make the point that most individuals operate in multiple “specialized, partial communities.”¹⁴

¹¹ R. Shuter, “Introduction: New Media Across Cultures—Prospect and Promise,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 4, no. 4 (2011): 241–45.

¹² Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Inge Brinkman, *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*, (Bamenda, Cameroon; Leiden, Netherlands: African Studies Centre, 2009); A. Stambach and G. A. Malekela, “Education, Technology, and the ‘New’ Knowledge Economy: Views from Bongoland,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4 (2006): 321–36; Julie Soleil Archambault, “Breaking Up ‘Because of the Phone’ and the Transformative Potential of Information in Southern Mozambique,” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 3 (2011): 444–56.

¹³ Julian Cooper, “The Internet in Russia—Development, Trends and Research Possibilities,” (presentation, CEELBAS Post-Soviet Media Research Methodology Workshop, Birmingham, UK, March 2008).

¹⁴ B. Wellman and C. Haythornthwaite, eds., *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 32.

One of the most striking insights that new media research in Russia brings to area studies is how “pervasive communication” affects social relationships within societies with a history of ideological, centralized control.¹⁵ By pervasive I mean the kind of hyper-communication with which many young people have grown up, which functions today as a “virtual prosthetic of the self,”¹⁶ part of one’s identity, and which is maintained through ongoing social relationships. However, the meaning of “democratization” of the Web is both ambivalent and unpredictable; it is unclear whether virtual-real civic engagement and decentralized networks can really challenge vertical hierarchies.¹⁷ For example, what is the significance of the internet for the mobilization of 40,000 marchers in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow in late 2011? Digital utopians would say it shows the potential for new media to mobilize and energize civic politics in countries with ostensibly weak civil societies. In 2012, six months after the main Moscow protests over the parliamentary election results, I interviewed highly educated Muscovites about why they did or did not take part in the demonstrations, and the influence of social media on their actions. While many expressed a strong oppositional mentality and understood the power of the internet in articulating ideas and encouraging others to participate in actions, they struggled to express their own reasons for taking part. One interviewee, a nephew of a famous Soviet-era writer, said: “I don’t really know why we went out. Just to show we disagree.” “With what?” I asked. “With the stealing of elections,” he finally added. “But it was a bit boring so we didn’t bother going again.”¹⁸

In the case of societies emergent or still beholden to relatively centralized, authoritarian patterns of social control, it can sometimes appear that observers bring a digital naivety to their analysis of new media’s potential to enact or foster lasting change. While at the level of the sound bite there is no doubt that elements of the Arab Spring uprisings will continue to be referred to as “Facebook revolutions,” in the long term it falls to scholars of new media to critically evaluate simplistic correlation-causation inferences when new media are linked to political and social change. These approaches are not dissimilar to work on new media influenced by Habermas’s concept of the Public Sphere. Like the Public Sphere, the internet would articulate consensus

¹⁵ M. Fischer, S. Lyon, and D. Zeitlyn, “The Internet and the Future of Social Research,” ed. N. Fielding, R. M. Lee, and G. Blank, *The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods* (London: Sage, 2008), 519–36.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ J. S. Juris, “Networked Social Movements: Global Movements for Global Justice,” in ed. M. Castells, *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004), 341.

¹⁸ Research on Moscow internet users is largely outside the remit of the current article, although important similarities remain—e.g., lack of significant “conversation” carried out in the public space of new media network users’ profiles.

from below, regardless of status or power, in order to shift the state in some way. However, this position ignores a host of counter-effects.¹⁹ Habermas himself is sceptical—the internet’s “structure is not suited to focussing the attention of a dispersed public of citizens who form opinions simultaneously on the same topics....”²⁰ Furthermore, as the Russian protests showed, it does not yet mediate between state and private spheres, and perhaps more importantly, social media use is highly status-specific (one might argue, status-driven)—a point this article brings out. Mundane use in the Russian margins, or use generally beyond a small, educated, metropolitan elite, is still political, but does not resemble that of the “anti-Putin” intellectual elite. Scholars have provided a critical analysis of the limits of the Habermasian bourgeois Public Sphere and proposed the concept of “counterpublics”—a space where the marginalized are able to articulate a community response to the facts of their marginalization. A focus on the production of experience is central to this work and may sit more comfortably with the mundane uses and effects of new media. This “sphere carries the subjective feelings, the egocentric malaise with the common public narrative, interests that are not socially valorized.”²¹ These feelings are neither necessarily oppositional, nor show loyalty to the hegemonic political order.

In the Russian case the reach and impact of civic activism through new media is limited and particular—groupings are inclusive only to the extent that immediate aims are shared. Gladarev and Lonkila showed this in work on housing activism in St. Petersburg.²² While this activity is self-directed and managed, and involves the open circulation of information, it is still far from Castells’s vision of the building of horizontal ties among diverse interests and groups, and collaboration and coordination in democratic praxis,²³ or the Habermasian Public Sphere. Perhaps mundane use, popular culture, and popular opinion (which may or may not overlap with the sphere of politics proper) are more fruitful sites of the democratizing potential of new media. Mundane use of new media can bring to the foreground overlooked affordances often pigeon-holed as “mere” popular culture: online chat forums, mass online gaming, or, entirely absent from an elite focus, the inter-

¹⁹ Zizi Papcharissi, “The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere,” *New Media & Society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 9–27.

²⁰ Stuart Jeffries, “A rare interview with Jürgen Habermas,” *Financial Times* 30 April 2010, available online at <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/eda3bcd8-5327-11df-813e-00144feab49a.html#axzz2Lzvs3UuC>>, accessed 27 Feb 2013.

²¹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 38.

²² Gladarev and Lonkila, “The Role of Social Networking Sites in Civic Activism in Russia and Finland.”

²³ Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

net as a facilitator of existing parochial sociality and leisure activities that are not necessarily peculiar to virtuality. I question how “transformative” everyday lived experience is the pervasive background culture of virtualized information for those who, in Russia, inhabit marginal urban spaces.

Methodology and Field Site

The field site where I conducted research was a small, provincial town in the Kaluga region of European Russia called Izluchino (a pseudonym). I spent a total of six months there between 2009 and 2012. Informants were mainly families dependent on a single, non-professional wage, i.e., blue-collar workers in manufacturing and industry. Research materials—semi-structured interviews and participant-observation—comprising a “connective ethnography” are supplemented by survey data. The research questions for all the fieldwork were generated on the basis of a grounded approach to seeking a contextualized understanding of new media use. This included considering how it is embedded in established everyday social settings and practices. More detailed information about the initial basis of my research and detailed information about interviews and other contributing material and methods can be found elsewhere.²⁴

Traditionally, ethnography is a hands-on, place-specific form of qualitative research that seeks to build an empirically valid but not necessarily generalizable picture of a research setting. The ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening, and asking questions.²⁵ Virtual or online ethnographies have been conducted that are passively observational. Other researchers have utilized a more participative approach in which the researcher participates in an online community. This latter approach is closer to traditional ethnographic standards of participant observation, longitudinal engagement, and immersion.²⁶ The criticism has been raised that virtual ethnography cannot fully replicate traditional participatory ethnographic methods and their production of a holistic and valid picture of a research setting.

The research in this article has numerous advantages over an exclusively virtual or traditional approach to studying new media use. It is described as connective because it blends materials collected during numerous fieldwork encounters with virtual ethnography conducted mainly when the researcher

²⁴ Morris, “Learning How to Shoot Fish on the Internet.”

²⁵ Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1995).

²⁶ Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000); and Anette N. Markham, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1998).

was absent from the field. The former include talking to informants about their online habits and use: observing informants discuss with each other such habits, watching informants use the internet individually and collectively in the research setting, participating with informants in using new media, and conducting surveys with the public in the field sites on new media use. The virtual component of the research involved the researcher viewing and reading material online which the informants had also used; this included communicating with informants via social networking services and observing behavior on such sites. The most important of these are VKontakte, which is similar to Facebook, and to a lesser extent Odnoklassniki. While the internet is increasingly important to Russian communication and sociality in the urban margins, it should not be forgotten that the mobile phone remains the “umbilical cord” between individuals and their household, sustaining social networks—just as it does in less developed countries.²⁷ This is especially true in Russia, where mobile phones fulfil a raft of technological and social functions beyond just making calls.²⁸ Thus as a connective ethnography, material generated by each method adds “layers of understanding” to the ethnography.²⁹ Such an approach more accurately captures the dynamics of online practices or, more generally, all those practices that mediate between online interaction and everyday life.³⁰

Everyday Pragmatic Regimes of Use

In my overview of the first period of fieldwork in 2009–10 my collected ethnographic materials and survey data indicate that Woolgar’s “rules of virtuality” hold true in the Russian margins: use of new media depends on the local social context and supplements, rather than replaces real activities.³¹ Most users are highly instrumentalist and have little interest in the communicative and non-grounded aspects of the media.³²

²⁷ Lotte Pelckmans, “Phoning Anthropologists: The Mobile Phone’s (Re-)Shaping of Anthropological Research,” in Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkman, *Mobile Phones*, 28.

²⁸ David MacFadyen, “Can You Hear Me Now? Mobile Technology in Rural Russia” *Eurozine*, available at <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-03-02-macfadyen-en.html>>, accessed 21 March 2007.

²⁹ Marilyn Strathern, “Abstraction and Decontextualization: An Anthropological Comment,” in ed. Stephen Woolgar *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 303.

³⁰ Dirksen, Huizinga, and Smit, “Piling on Layers of Understanding,” 1046.

³¹ Stephen Woolgar, “Introduction,” in ed. Woolgar, *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–21.

³² Morris, “Learning How to Shoot Fish on the Internet.”

The most common reasons given for internet use were a general anxiety about not having access to the latest technological gadget and the peer recognition that came from getting connected before or at the same time as others. Generally informants could not articulate a “why” for getting a dial-up, or later, broadband connection and found it difficult to articulate a concrete need to justify their decision to invest in what was always a quite costly service.³³ At first a narrative of general usefulness was pursued: “you really need it to keep up to date [*byt' v kurse*]—the internet means we’re not living in the Stone Age.” But no informant ever visited news sites or current affairs blogs.

As a general informational resource, in contrast to a source for consuming “news,” the internet became more and more important to informants. However, the term “information” needs to be carefully qualified. Often technological change is discussed in terms of networking characteristics allowing unbounded communication and informational flows.³⁴ In its lay iteration, informational affordances can be viewed as analogous to the “informational utopics” described by Hetherington, whereby reification of such utopian technological visions via networking of individuals takes place.³⁵ In the field site, the affordance of “information” turned out to be epistemologically framed by informants not as widening the socio-cultural informational frame (to facilitate involvement in civic movements, for example), nor even as particularly pragmatic, but as strongly or exclusively instrumentalist. Misha (26, fabricator), the informant who liked to visit online forums on dirt bikes (motocross), was at pains to compartmentalize his online experience as “informative”—an almost technical/intellectual affordance separate from the actual practice of riding bikes:

I just like finding out about all the different models you can buy. You can get good information on the characteristics of the bike. I even found some for sale and maybe I’ll buy one in a year or two. I don’t participate in the discussion though—that’s for real connoisseurs. Anyway, I don’t have the time or inclination. (Misha, 2012)

³³ Up to 5% of take-home breadwinner pay.

³⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Castells, *The Internet Galaxy*. Lay interpretations of the socioculturally widened communicative opportunities of the internet often include references to intercultural communication—either directly between individuals located in different countries, or indirectly in terms of the informational resources the internet provides for people to discover “thick” descriptions of cultural knowledge pertaining to their own or other countries and cultures.

³⁵ Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance and Politics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

Misha articulated a distinction between an informational affordance relating to a personal interest and more *communicative* aspects which remained unexplored virtually. A similar narrative emerged from discussions with others about interests as diverse as knitting patterns for clothes and the maintenance of diesel engines (also a “hobby”).

If “informational” use was posited as the active, goal-orientated gathering of knowledge, then leisure use was usually placed on an opposite pole by informants—passively to “kill time” together with family or friends, most typically in viewing so-called “fun[ny]” (*prikol'nye*) sites comprising user-posted jokes and images designed to amuse and/or shock, playing online computer games, and downloading films, games, and music.

In contrast to the purportedly informational or educational utilities of access, there was often an understandable initial reluctance or discomfort in admitting the potential of the internet as a leisure resource. However, the entertainment resources that the internet provided were often revealed, usually only after the informant had prioritized the utilitarian reasons. This could be partly explained by the abstracted description of the use of the term “entertainment” (*razvolechenie*). When given concrete examples of activities observed—downloading games, cartoons for the children, or the latest cinema release—then informants readily agreed that these activities were a significant impetus for initial connection.³⁶ Physical (offline) exchange and sharing of downloaded material significantly contributed to social intercourse and the maintenance of personal networks. This practice supported local communication and socialization. Such socialization is also linked to the physical siting of internet access in the domestic space—often a multi-use room where family activities, socializing, sleeping, and eating take place.

While solitary online gaming is ubiquitous among young males, this “entertainment/leisure” use was rooted in sociality. A new game would be downloaded by an informant, prompting a visit from extended family or friends to make a CD-ROM copy or play together. Alternatively, a film or game was downloaded and copied on recordable media. Then, a short journey was undertaken by the downloader himself to visit friends. In a number of cases, the online or downloaded game provided the focus for the only permissible use of the internet by children under direct observation by parents, or as a whole-family activity. A case in point is the extremely popular online game built in as an application to the social networking site VKontakte (a clone of Facebook in some respects). This game, *Kopai mogilu* (*Dig the Grave*), is a socially interactive flash-based game where players compete to dig out and then fill in each other’s graves, posting funny messages that all

³⁶ Informants were generally quite sophisticated users of online sources of pirated material and the software enabling such use. However, on the other hand, the researcher observed an alarming number of cases of users falling victim to online scams and computer failures due to viruses and Trojans.

acquaintances can then see. There is no “objective” to this game. It is predicated on a kind of sophisticated “nudging,” “prodding,” or “winking” of the kind less encountered now on Western models of social networking.

The rest of this article focuses mainly on informants’ use of social networking sites. This reveals three distinct aspects of technology-society mediation which are worthy of remark for how they contrast to civil society’s motivational approaches to new media under post-socialism and broader assumptions about how the internet augments individualism and self-focused modes of social behavior, as well as erases the place-basedness of a user’s identity—the embeddedness within a physical locality that informs and indeed directs social acts.

Social Networking in the Margins—“It’s not about *me*, it’s about *us* and our habitat”

The literature on affective culture in Russia and the social and cultural history of collective spirit is well established in area studies. Indeed, the assumption of the specific otherness of Russians rooted in a sense of shared identity can lead to a sense of such research performing a latter-day kind of orientalism, something of which area studies in general is sometimes accused.³⁷ In particular there is a danger of Western researchers, attuned to the dominant discourses of identity politics in cultural studies,³⁸ continually finding the same cultural difference everywhere they look in Russian culture—the expansive Russian soul that displays a “love of togetherness,” itself continually utilized by Russians as a self-label of difference.³⁹ Unsurprisingly, such self-mythologizing is clearly important in how Russians describe, and in practice, make use of social networking online. While critical of an overly identity-culturalist approach, and wary of the self-mythologizing Russians perform to each other, the following narrative of social networking regimes of use does highlight some localized and culture-specific instances that are worthy of comment. Recent scholarship, particularly on Japan, has shown the value of intercultural research on uses and meanings around online social networks.⁴⁰

³⁷ Biray Kolluoglu-Kirli, “From Orientalism to Area Studies,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 93–111.

³⁸ Nancy Condee, “Drowning or Waving? Some Remarks on Russian Cultural Studies,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 50, no. 1 (2006): 197–203.

³⁹ Dale Pesmen, *Russia and Soul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Mind* (London: The Bodley Head, 1977).

⁴⁰ Toshie Takahashi, “MySpace or Mixi? Japanese Engagement with SNS (Social Networking Sites) in the Global Age,” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 453–

Vkontakte (VK) is, as of 2013, the largest online social network used by Russian speakers, with nearly 200 million users and one of the most visited websites in Russia. The usual functions of a social network, such as messaging, public pages, and sharing images, are provided. In contrast to Facebook, which is zealous on removing and banning copyrighted material, VK serves as a major platform for individuals who wish to upload and share commercial music and videos. Like other social networks, VK allows users to message contacts publicly or privately; create groups, public pages, and events; share and tag images, audio, and video; and play browser-based games. VK allows its users to upload media content, such as videos and music. These features have caused controversy in regards to copyright with several court cases settled recently. While many Russian users, especially in the metropolises, use Facebook, and some others use a school-graduate based networking service, Odnoklassniki, due to the dominance of VK, the discussion below is based on use of that platform.

As illustrated in the opening portrait of internet use in this article, social media networking is now a ubiquitous element in the daily rituals of almost anyone with a personal computer attached to a phone line, or indeed a “smart” mobile telephone that allows mobile social networking. Nodding, witnessed in Dmitri’s case, where brief, online acknowledgement of social others beyond merely kinship/close friendship constitutes an important networking activity, was the most common communication observed. Another key informant, Anton (26), a factory technician, had a “wall” almost entirely composed of e-greetings-cards congratulating him on his birthday. There were no personalized comments beyond short phrases such as “Happy Birthday, Anton!” However, Anton was meticulous in responding to each of these greetings personally with an equally curt “Thank you, Vickie.” Some of the e-cards, on amusing or sentimental themes with images from children’s cartoons or animals and flowers, reappeared more than once, indicating a relatively small pool of images reposted multiple times. Among users in the town Izluchino, regardless of age, such dominant “walls” of “nodding” greetings were common. Another informant, Nadezhda (23), a student, who was unusual in not having any photographs of herself uploaded, had a similar feed of short affective messages from friends—her “wall” was more typically gendered and reflective of her age: multiple messages from others and suitably sentimental images with tags such as “To my friends with love. You are the best!” and “I hope your dreams come true and wish you all the best, faithful friends and success in everything.” She also received messages on the occasion of her birthday, with e-cards displaying popular current cartoon characters, bouquets of flowers, etc. Many users frequently posted their own content to their “walls”; in Anton’s case, recorded scenes from military first-

75; Hiroko Tabuchi, “Facebook Wins Relatively Few Friends in Japan,” *New York Times*, 10 January 2011, p. B1.

person shooter computer games, satirical videos on Russia's road-safety record, and a three-minute American video on a chassis straightening system for sports cars. In Nadezhda's case the wall served as a musical diary—a record of the latest pop and electronic music she was listening to. Every few days a new full-length official music video would appear. Occasionally she would post a single line of text, separately: "Happy New Year, everyone" and "The shame!" after a defeat of the national soccer team.

While such everyday uses of social networking appear not that dissimilar to those of anyone in any country, on closer inspection something was missing: any extended two-way communication in the public, or semi-public, space of the "wall." A very large amount of other-regarding posting was taking place. In fact, there was far more direct addressing of others using the personal "space" of the "wall" of an individual's profile. This is somewhat in contrast to, at least the stereotypical, Facebook use in the anglophone world, where more individualist regimes of use are arguably exacerbated by the ubiquitous "like" button whereby the media encourages the posting of a person's latest personal triumph or disaster, however mundane. However, the strikingly other-regarding use in VK was not accompanied by feedback beyond the "nodding" back shown above in Anton's and Dmitri's cases. Rarely, if ever, did a conversation of "comments" get going on a wall, regardless of the number of users included. The wall as an absence of communicative discourse was all the more remarkable due to the public nature of the vast majority of users' profiles.⁴¹ While VK's visual format is largely cloned from Facebook and therefore also makes prominent the ability to "like" and "comment" on others' content, use of these facilities were largely absent from the profiles of informants. "Nodding," rather than online chatting or "liking," was taking place. One exception to this was the practice of sharing photographic content at a virtual distance from the main "wall" of the profile and then "tagging" the people in the photograph (typically a special social occasion) to attract their attention to the location. Having been tagged, the individuals clicked to the photograph and added their comments, often resulting in a more conversation-like exchange. Another informant, Olga, when asked about the numerous posting of photograph albums with copious commenting, responded: "I use VK all the time, but it's not about me, it's about us and our habitat." By "us" and "habitat" she referred to the local circle of others—the online mirror of the physically bounded social network of the small town. She went on to discuss her circumspection about posting her news, preferring to "nod" to others, and socialize within games or "deeper" within the profile pages' photo albums. In contrast to Facebook,

⁴¹ In the researcher's regular use of VK only a single user was observed to have changed the default privacy settings from all content visible to all users, to a more restrictive setting. This included access to photographs. On the other hand, most users did restrict the ability of non-"friends" to post content to their profile.

overall, VK's most vibrant space, its profile "walls," were largely typified by the one-way, affective, and other-regarding posts discussed above, as well as individual expressions of mood, interest, past times, etc.

There are two straightforward but significant reasons for this type of use. The first is technological: smart-phone use in Russia, which allows mobile social networking use, and therefore more immediate posting and responses, lags in comparison to other developed countries (in fact, market research shows Russian use well behind India, Brazil, and China). The second is the redundancy of social media as a technological affordance facilitating in-depth social network maintenance. This affordance was already amply supported by mobile phone use (sometimes innovative usages as in the beeping of father and son at the beginning of this article)⁴² and face-to-face encounters in the compact social geography of the town (dominated by a single urban park square next to the bus station and shops, through which almost all working-people's paths crossed in the mornings and evenings). The daily real-world "nodding" and more extended passing of time in the physical network spaces of socialization—the works bus, park, square, queue in the pharmacy or beer shop—can explain why so many virtual exchanges lacked an extensive, communicative quality. Their contexts had already amply fleshed out in the gossip, chat, and mutual social niceties and acknowledgements in the everyday spaces of the small town. Finally, it is worth noting that working long hours in employment contexts where computer access was limited, informants did not have the opportunities for internet use that white-collar workers frequently do.

Lonkila and Gladarev studied the ubiquity of mobile phone usage in Russia given the technological and geographical barriers to internet diffusion and reliable land-line connections.⁴³ In the current research, much mundane new media use was text-messaging, even among middle-aged informants. In the field site regional tariffs from mobile phone service providers allowed text messaging and calls between two people on the same network at a fraction of the cost of inter-network or inter-regional texting. This led to mass migration of pay-as-you-go mobile contracts to a single provider. Perhaps 80 percent of informants (who did not constitute a single social network, but multiple age, class, and professional groupings) subscribed to a single provider. A notable fact illustrating the economic and social importance of mobile use (including uses of the mobile phone beyond voice calls) was that the most up-market shop in the town was rented by this mobile provider, selling calling credit without commission as well as all kinds of mobile gadgets and accessories:

⁴² On "beeping" as a culturally differentiated practice, see Pearce, "Phoning It In," 77.

⁴³ Markku Lonkila and Boris Gladarev, "Social Networks and Cellphone Use in Russia: Local Consequences of Global Communication Technology," *New Media & Society* 10, no. 2 (2008): 273–93.

from expensive leather pouches to protect telephones to radar detectors mounted in cars to warn of police speed traps. Pay-as-you-go telephones (as opposed to contracts with regular electronic payments) are the norm in Russia and are topped up at small ATMs within the lobbies of shops and public spaces. These terminals are ubiquitous throughout Russia, but unlike service-provider-specific manned kiosks and shops, they charge a hefty commission.

“Officialdom—where are you looking?” “No comment”

In this final section I discuss how the everyday social circumspection of new media users in the field site extended to civic issues in the locality. As mentioned above, social networking by informants was never used to comment on or discuss national political issues. This was unsurprising given the general absence of the articulation of politicized talk despite a wide spread and deep-seated aversion to the government and Putin. In more intimate settings conversation would often turn to the parlous state of the country: to the “swindlers and thieves” in charge. But given the semi-public nature of social network posting and the ever-present risk of someone in authority eavesdropping (Soviet experience dies hard), it is hardly surprising to find an eerie apoliticism in the everyday online. In everyday conversation informants were much more willing to debate issues of the locality, including the closure of the local hospital, the price of utilities run by local authority, etc. It was reasonable to assume that this relatively higher level of engagement with local issues would translate into more local political activism online. Despite this it was therefore puzzling that the pressing issues of the day seemingly never got an airing on VK. The opportunity to discuss this with informants arose when one of them, Nadezhda, reposted a video from a friend that lamented the continuing lack of local political will to renovate the local disused school building, a major eyesore in the center of town and a common focus of anger.

Posted without comment on Nadezhda’s wall was a six-minute video entitled “Izluchino School Number 3.” The video stood out from the rest of the content of music videos and e-cards with bunches of flowers—the opening image was clearly of a disused swimming pool in an abandoned building, full of rubbish. “Vladimir,” the young earnest creator of this video, introduced himself at the beginning of the recording: “Hello, I want to show you what the school I studied in and where I learned to swim has become.” In a slightly emotional voice he continued, “This isn’t a message to the officials.... I just don’t want people to be so laid-back towards this... not to do this.” The sometimes unclear message (what were they not to do?) continued for the next six minutes, lamenting the fact that this very well equipped school had been left to rot after closing due to the demographic crisis in the country, and that now it was subject to continuous vandalism, making its renovation yet

more unlikely. "It's like the Titanic taken out of the sea... I would help renovate this place... Where are you looking, bureaucrats [*chinovniki*]?"

Nadezhda had seen the video on a friend's wall in VK and reposted it from her own; however, she didn't know the author. Why had no one liked the video or commented, I wondered? "Well, it's something everyone knows about. Everyone knows the bureaucrats don't want to spend the budget on the school even though the other building is old and there are more children now." But no one was even prepared to "like" the video. Why was that? "I think people are tired. I posted it because that day I felt really angry when I saw the video. I am younger than Vladimir and unlike him I never even got the chance to study in such a wonderful school. But now people have their own problems and we can't expect them to show support online when they see these things and speak of them everyday. For most people, VK is a place for fun things and not to think about the bad things in their lives."

Nadezhda clearly articulated the paradox of the stubborn apoliticism of social networks. The seeming lack of interest in politicized discourse within social networks was not representative of any real disinterest. The lack of success in Vladimir's civic call to arms reflected a thorough online circumspection in internet use by informants that is complex and mediated by a raft of political, social, and cultural factors. However, in one respect the weaknesses of the social and civic affordances of new media in the Russian margins are similar. Circumspection over social and civic networking online reveals a general wariness of the possibilities of building a public (or counterpublic) sphere. In this respect, new media use in Russia is illustrative of well-understood wider social and political vectors. Much scholarship both in cultural studies and social sciences emphasizes the difficulty of building trust communities beyond existing professional and kin networks—this is true whether the frame of analysis is the corporatism of Soviet and post-socialist life (Ledeneva's *blat* culture where trusted contacts are needed at every turn), or cultural meta-analysis (Lotman's posting of the binary opposition between Western archetypes of communication around "contract" and Slavic "self-giving" [*vruchenie sebia*]). Counterpublics are seen as voicing oppositional needs and values not by appealing to universalistic categories but to specific community identities which then allow communication beyond the moderating and filtering gaze of the hegemonic public sphere.⁴⁴ But where can the "counter" arise, if the public is captured completely by the post-totalitarian control of the bourgeois arenas of debate, as in many post-Soviet states? The historical cooption or violent dispersal of civic impulses under totalitarianism leads to a continuity of circumspection before any kind of involvement in quasi-public communication—even as seemingly innocuous (to a non-

⁴⁴ Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, "Introduction: Reconfigurations of the Public Sphere," in *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Asen and Brouwer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 7.

Russian) as posting a political comment (or even pressing “like”) on a social networking profile wall. The private/public distinction remains important in a society like Russia and this impacts the semi-public spaces of virtuality. Participation in political and civic discourse continues to be a serious *political* act in Russia and so often interpreted *oppositionally* by authorities and the public alike. Private discourse, in the kitchens and drinking places of the seemingly silent majorities, is robust, unflinchingly political, and scathingly critical of the status quo. As Dmitri, the key informant of the beginning of this article, said, when asked about the video of the derelict school, “What did he need to do that for, everyone who has open eyes can see the problem.” The real is self-evident; why should the virtual sphere replicate the depressing anti-politics of daily life? “He’s stupid to put his face there. Too stupid. No one can take him seriously for that,” continued Dmitri. The very openness and earnest nature of the video raised suspicions. “Perhaps, someone has put him up to it after all,” he continued. Dmitri not only illustrated the extreme cynicism of the marginalized in the face of *any* politically marked discourse in the public or virtual public domain, but also expressed a common sense of radical doubt about the possibility of a counterpublic online. This well founded doubt predicated from the direct experience of indifference by power to the plight of the weakest in society is in stark contrast to the middle-class narratives of online activism elsewhere (whether Moscow or abroad). The possibility of a “counterpublic” will always be treated with suspicion by those with the fewest weapons of defense. Perhaps this is why they are the most circumspect before the spectacle of the so-called power of the virtual. In the specific cultural and social context of Russia, trust communities offline are only partially reconstructed in the virtual sphere. The reasons for this are practical—offline networking of network members is often more efficient in the compressed social and professional geography of (blue-collar) workers; offline is more secure—participants can be more confident of who their interlocutors are in the works canteen and on street corners over a beer. Finally, I echo the point made by Baudrillard about the misreading of the “silent majorities” so-called political indifference. The seemingly humdrum and purely recreational use of the internet and social networking by informants—the “petty perversions” of games and music videos as a form of withdrawal from politicized public spheres—“could well be a *direct defiance of the political*.”⁴⁵ This of course is a political act and not without significance in terms of new media scholarship’s search for online counter-hegemonic strategies.

I end this article with a coda on Russia’s urban margins online and the possibility of civic discourse. As part of the fieldwork for parallel research carried out, I made numerous contacts with automobile factory workers in Kaluga, where inward investment from multinational companies in recent

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 39.

years has been significant. Many locals flocked to what seemed like good blue-collar wage-earning opportunities in good “Western” style manufacturing conditions. However, soon it became clear to many informants that, while the wages were marginally better than in some local manufacturing enterprises, they fell far short of what these employers paid in their Western European factories (or even in South America or Central Europe), and the so-called “European” working conditions were predicated on highly flexible labor practices, very little in the way of enterprise benefits, and the increasing use of zero- and short-term contracts rather than permanent work. Rather quickly, workers started to join the Interregional Union for Automobile Workers Union. The organizers of the Kaluga branch were extremely active on VK, with their own group and pages. At first I was very impressed by the detailed content on shop-floor problems and proposed solutions by the union—online community members (in 2013, over five hundred) were able to ask very specific questions about the basis of bonuses, and in particular the situation around the use of casual labor at the plant. Over some time, however, in reviewing the content of this and similar groups, new media use by the union as a counterpublic is disappointing. While there are so-called discussion threads within the group on topics such as “Should workers dictate the development of policy of the whole state?,” the important highlighting of the casualization of the work force, and the dilution of living wages, overall the discussion group is dominated by two highly motivated union organizers with minimal involvement of ordinary members. The circumspection of the mass of five hundred members is, once again, striking, considering the multiple issues they face. As part of a separate line of research, I engaged in online discussion within VK with one of the chief union organizers. He welcomed my interest, but in answer to each question I put to him within the online messaging service about shop floor relations (most of them of the most mundane sort) his answer was “that’s a question for a face-to-face meeting [*pri lichnoi vstreche*].” As of this article’s writing (February 2013), the latest topic for discussion online is the victory of the organizers in persuading the management of the Logistics Assembly shop to install a “drying area for clothes and shoes, and also to change winter shoes for less slippery footwear.” The civic potential of social networking could do worse than begin with the smallest of human affordances: somewhere at work to change one’s shoes.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Such focus in the union pages online on mundane issues such as everyday working practices could be seen as a valid tactic of “parochialization.” This is the process of creating and exchanging information that contributes to a sense of commonality among a group of people in public space. See Lee Humphreys, “Mobile Social Networks and Urban Public Space,” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 5 (2010): 763–78. This in turn could be part of a strategy of engaging rank-and-file members more politically.

Conclusions

Three distinct aspects of technology–society mediation in the field are worthy of remark. Firstly, while social network use is strikingly other-regarding, it is communicatively circumspect in the way described: it is both less individualistic and less dialogic in scope. Secondly, the local physical context of users was very important: the sense of shared place was strongly felt and articulated by social networks. These two aspects are due to a redundancy of online social media as a technological affordance facilitating in-depth social network maintenance. The mobile phone remains supreme in this regard in Russia, particularly outside the highly educated circles and metropolises.

Social circumspection of new media users in the field site extended to civic issues in the locality—the eerie apoliticism in the everyday online identified. Informants articulate the paradox of apolitical social networks in Russia online as a space of civic politics, which is seen as redundant in the face of the presence of the overwhelming and insurmountable real and local issues. While in the case of the social “nodding” this redundancy reflected the overinscription of the real by social discourse, in comparison to the saturation by the imperative to sustain everyday social networks the real of politics is a desert. Civic action is seen as so difficult to articulate beyond the impotent daily rage at the withdrawal of the state, at petty and high-level corruption, that its presence online is seen as almost laughably irrelevant. Where it appears leaking into the non-political domain of the social networking sites, it is almost always carefully ignored by users—unless it is a source of humor or amusement (for example videos of road accidents or police incompetence). The online union groups of workers reflect a possible way through the political impasse of social media in Russia: incrementalism. By engaging concretely with real issues that require no reification, social media can serve as a building block in the wider development of civil society.

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