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# The Changing Face of the RuNet

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## Abstract

How has the Russian Internet developed since its origins in the early 1990s? This article examines the growth of RuNet from an end user perspective, drawing together disparate data on the prevailing economic, technical, social and political conditions to create an overview of network development. The experience of two groups of users, the *cognoscenti* and *chainiki* (“teapots” or new-comers) is contrasted.

The conclusion is that the RuNet has developed from an élite club into an integral part of the modern Internet, but one that retains qualities characteristic of wider Russian society, such as censorship concerns and an emphasis on mutuality.

## The teapots are coming

“We’re following the developed countries – the quality will rise, the prices will fall, and everything is going to be all right”. So → **Maksim Moshkov**, founder of Lib.ru, the most substantial online Russian-language library [Biblioteka Moshkova 2005], asserted in 2000 when asked about the future of the RuNet [c.f. IREX 2000]. The aim of this essay is to explore the reality of the process so optimistically predicted by Moshkov: that of the RuNet’s development from an élite club into a mass medium.

Worldwide, early adopters of network technology tend to be technically educated. The increase in accessibility that comes with the development of user-orientated software leads first to a trickle and then a flood of users with limited or no IT skills: people known as *chainiki*, or “teapots”, in Russian online slang. However, the RuNet has been, and is likely to remain, subject to conditions that are not shared by the majority of Western

countries, for example geographic immensity, a traditional disrespect for copyright, favouring instead, a specific interpretation of intellectual property, and a particularly centralized media structure. As a result, logging on in Russia is a subtly different experience from doing so in Europe or America, above and beyond the issues of price and reliability identified by Moshkov.

The influence of factors such as geography on the Russian Internet would themselves be an interesting topic for study, whereas the copyright issue has already been covered, for example by Eugene Gornyj [Gornyj 1999]. Thus, in this brief essay, I propose to focus on the development of the RuNet as a social space, paying particular attention to the process of community building and the tension between élitism and mass consumption.

## The development of the RuNet environment

### The spread of technology

While there was a small number of Internet service providers operating in Russia in the early 1990s [Ellis 1999, 163], the RuNet was known to very few Russians and used by fewer still. It was the introduction of Windows 95, which came with the Microsoft standard for Cyrillic encoding, that vastly increased the desirability of Internet access by enabling the construction of Russian-language web pages without recourse to transliteration [Ulmanu 2001]. This made it possible to see the RuNet as something more distinctive than a mere adapted outpost of American technology.

A detailed statistical account of the development and spread of Internet access in Russia from



**Kursk:** Entrance to the Internet café “Dogout”, male users playing video games.

1991-2000 is given by Jurij Perfil'ev [2002]. In summary, the second half of the 1990s saw Internet connectivity spread outwards from Moscow and St Petersburg; in 1996 75% of the country's Internet users were located in the two capitals but by November 1999 the ratios had diminished to a level where only 64% of all users were located in the major cities. However, at the other end of the scale, only 5% were in rural areas at that time.

One of the fastest increases in Internet uptake occurred during late 1999 and early 2000. A FOM (Public Opinion Foundation) survey of 1,500 respondents found that 3% of the population nationwide was using the Internet in May 1999; when the same survey was conducted in April 2000, the figure had jumped to 7% (these figures include all those who had any contact with the Internet, not just regular users). Additionally, Internet activity began to be considered desirable by communities as well as isolated early adopters, in an urban and even a rural setting. The magazine, *InterNet* reported the residents of apartment blocks pooling their money to obtain dedicated lines or radio modems for their building – citing more than 100 examples in Moscow in 1999 [Ulmanu 2001]. A new sensitivity to the potential of the Internet was demonstrated by the online activity spikes occurring after major events. The Ostankino fire in August 2000 drove many people to consider

the Internet as their second choice for information provision [Bogdanov 2000, 8], while the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in America produced, during the late morning on 12 September, an Internet audience of around 150 million, almost four times the normal daily maximum size [Spylog 2001].

By the autumn of 2002, FOM was reporting that the rate of Internet expansion was slowing: 8% of respondents to their survey reported having used the Internet in the past six months. However, frequency of use was on the increase; FOM reported that 46% of users had accessed the Internet in the previous week in summer 2002, which figure increased to 53% in their autumn survey [Galickij 2002]. The frequency increase was enabled, at least in Moscow and St Petersburg, by the continuing installation of networks in apartment blocks at the occupants' own expense. These “microregion networks” were the first really viable solution to the problem of the “last mile”, the greatest obstacle to domestic Internet access [Perfil'ev 2002].

The reality of these abstract changes was recorded by Marcus Alexander [2003, 7-8], in his writings about the situation in Moscow. Alexander conducted a tour of Moscow's Internet cafés and found various outlets catering to different clientele, including one in the basement of a computer hardware store in an affluent region, frequented mainly by boys aged 7-12 playing games at US\$1



**Moscow:** 24-hour service at “Cafémaxx”.

per hour, another at MGU (Moscow State University) patronised mostly by students surfing for news and writing term papers at US\$2 per hour, and a third, new breed of ‘super-Internet café’ providing special, cheap all-night offers. The Internet had become a familiar phenomenon, at least among the young and relatively affluent.

Commentators have generally estimated that the critical mass – the presence of a sufficient number of users to allow the product to be used to its full potential – for Internet penetration in Russia is between 10 and 15%. According to FOM, the 10% mark was reached in spring 2003, while their most recent survey of 15,000 respondents, the results of which were published on their website in Autumn 2005, found that it had risen to 20% (based on respondents aged 18+ who had used the Internet within the last six months). The Internet has become part of modern Russian life, and has done so at an impressive speed.

## Legislation

A considerable volume of legislation affecting the Internet was passed in the 1990s – the key laws up until 1998 are discussed in detail by Frank Ellis [1999, 149-160] – but little of this was actually tailor-made for the Internet, being designed to prevent, for example, the spread of technological secrets via any mass medium.

The two primary reasons behind fears of an attempt at repression were the intrusive System for Operational-Investigative Activities SORM (1995) and SORM-2 (1999). The first version of SORM allowed the FSB (Federal Security Service) to force Internet service providers (ISP) to install hardware that allowed the FSB to monitor the e-mails and Internet usage of the ISP’s customers. SORM-2 developed this by requiring all ISPs to route their incoming and outgoing data through FSB computers; the FSB was able to force non-complying companies out of business, as it also → **controlled** the government’s ISP licensing procedures. However, it is interesting to note that following extensive criticism the government revised SORM-2 to oblige the FSB to obtain a warrant prior to looking at a user’s electronic traffic. And in recent years it has become clearly apparent that the sheer volume of contemporary Internet traffic makes complete monitoring a logistical impossibility.

The turn of the millennium saw a high point for fear of repression, stimulated by SORM and the accompanying governmental attitude. In 2000, Russian Press Minister Lesin called for legislation requiring the registration of Internet media outlets – in effect, anyone creating a web site on the domains .su and .ru would have to be vetted and pay for a licence [Ulmanu 2001]. This sparked widespread concern, which was given pessimistic voice by Alena Ponomareva, then chief editor of the magazine, InterNet:

It’s hard to predict what might happen to the [Russian] Internet in the next few years of Putin’s reign. My guess is the government will deal with it pretty soon, imposing fierce, China-like regulatory laws on anything published in the .ru domain. They’ve been preparing these laws for more than a year already. [ibid.]

It was not just journalists who were concerned: an Algo.ru poll conducted at the beginning of 2000 found 67% of respondents opposed to governmental regulation of the Internet. [Vassilieva 2000]

This kind of concern, which nevertheless has yet to be fully borne out in reality, is characteristic of the Russian Internet community, which fears the wider repressive ambitions of the Putin government – ambitions which, if genuine, it probably does not have the resources to carry out on a large scale. It should be noted that similar measures to control the Internet have been undertaken in other countries as well, such as the Communication Decency Act in the USA. in 1996. Though similar in intention, they arouse different reactions in the context of differing historical experience. With regard to the the RuNet, the experience of the Soviet past is significant, and this might be seen as the stimulation for strongly-articulated concerns about control.

The Internet community does indeed have such a fear (though, honestly, this is rather a panic). But [...] this is a special kind of community, which is not numerous in comparison with wider Russian society. [Natalja Konradova]

The Putin government's attitude to the Internet has been, on its own terms, very positive. This has often been politically useful, as the identification of → **Putin** with the new technology complements the youthful, energetic image on which he has traded so successfully – for example, at the July 2000 G-8 summit in Okinawa, when he surprised some of the other, IT-illiterate, leaders by suggesting they communicate directly via e-mail [Azrael, Peterson 2002, 1]. At the very beginning of his rule, Putin's ascendance to the presidency and the launch of the new federal government website were implicitly linked together as symbols of a proactive, IT-literate future by the publication of Putin's vision for Russia on the new site in December 1999 [ibid.].

Putin's dissatisfaction with the actual state of the Internet – or, to be more precise its commercial sector – is well documented. "Unfortunately, the level of development in the New Economy

does not yet correspond with its importance for the country," he warned in 2001 [Azrael, Peterson 2002, 1-2]. That view was echoed by other important governmental figures, such as Andrej Illarionov, at that time the Kremlin's chief economist, who predicted that the "abject failure to find markets for [Russia's] high-tech sector" could scupper Russia's economic recovery [ibid.].

The administration's interest in the Internet's role in the economy was expressed in the → **e-Russia** initiative, launched in 2001, calling for a rapid increase in the use of IT throughout society, including government. The plan predicted that 25 million Russians would be online by 2010, and asserted that widespread IT diffusion is "a prerequisite for the development of civil society based on free access to information through the global Internet" [Azrael, Peterson 2002, 2]. That official line, of the Internet as a liberating force, was underscored at "Russia in the Internet Age", a conference hosted in Moscow by IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board) in February 2002 when State Duma Deputy Vladimir Koptev-Dvornikov claimed that "the World Wide Web is the best guarantee against any suppression of freedom, democracy and rights for information, no matter where people may live" [c.f. IREX 2002, 2].

Yet the establishment of high profile government propaganda sites further fuelled concerns in an online media community already made jittery by deteriorating press freedom and State control of television. "It is not a business project," Strana.ru director Marina Litvinovich said [LaFraniere 2002]. "It's a political project. The idea is to support Russian authorities and the Russian president."

All national governments have their own 'propaganda' sites, but non-governmental actors on the Russian Internet media market have been quick to view the e-Russia initiative as a potential overture to actual repression. "Today we do not really feel interference," said Anton Nosik, editor in chief of news site Lenta.ru. "That's because they haven't started yet. Ever since Mr. Putin has

been in the picture, there has been an urge to control the mass media. They are just not ready to come for us yet.” [ibid.] Yet, → **Nosik** himself has been associated with chief Kremlin politologist, Gleb Pavlovskij [see for example Kuznecov 2004, 152-153].

This kind of situation, where government propaganda competes with independent sources in an information market, is described by Marcus Alexander as a new “third way”, between direct censorship and free speech [Alexander 2003, 21], and appears to characterize the current State approach to the Internet, now that the RuNet has become too extensive and diversified to be monitored or taken over in the way that traditional press organs can. However, the persistence of strong and often murky links between the prominent players also affects the status of the ‘independent sources’ which often rely on “political money” [Ivanov 2004].

### **Different Categories of Sites and their Popularity**

The variety of sites available on the RuNet has, of course, grown with time, and by 1999 the online environment had diversified enough to support professional monitoring. In 1999 the group, Monitoring.ru found that 32% of Russian Internet users professed themselves interested in news, 32% in science (nauki)/education, 25% in entertainment, 23% in music/literature, 22% in chats, 20% in business and finance, 14% in information about goods and services, 12% in erotic or pornographic sites, 12% in sport, 6% in purchasing goods and services, and 5% in medicine [Kan 2000, 7]. In this respect, usage of the Internet is a natural extension of users’ interests from the real-world sphere, though the figure for those interested in purchasing goods and services seems, at first glance, unnaturally low. This reflects the lack of e-shops on the RuNet of 1999: these were only just beginning to appear, their existence

made tenable by some of the Internet legislation discussed above. The first, Ozon.ru, opened for business in early 1998, and by March 2000 476 shop sites were listed in the Magazin.ru directory, though an estimated half of them were inactive [Kan 2000, 16].

The share of the Internet audience enjoyed by prominent sites is not influenced by paid advertising to the same extent as is the market share of other consumer concerns. To date, mass media advertising, other than online, has been prohibitively expensive for most websites, and the clustering of users in certain social strata of large cities has made word of mouth of predominant importance, along with the Internet review columns of popular magazines [Kan 2000, 8].

Search engines are in wide use, and were utilised by 96% of Russian net surfers by 2000 [ibid.]. In fact, portals have become the dominant brands: FOM reported in July 2003 that Yandex, Rambler and Mail.ru were “the most popular Internet brands, [...] mentioned most often in answers to the question: ‘When you hear the word ‘Internet,’ what site names do you think of first?’” [Galitsky 2003].

The emergence of Russian-specific portals that supplanted their Western equivalents is recorded in data gathered by ComCon concerning Internet users’ awareness of specific resources in the first quarter of 1999 and again in the first half of 2000. Awareness of Western resources such as Yahoo and Altavista decreased or increased marginally, while awareness of Rambler and Yandex almost doubled, to 63.2% and 46.1% of respondents respectively [Bogdanov 2000, 15]. At the turn of the century, the framework of the RuNet was becoming fully Russified.

### **The RuNet environment**

The FOM surveys consistently present a picture of an online population whose representative member is male, young, urban and affluent. The

number, and to some degree the proportion, of users not possessing those majority characteristics has grown as Internet penetration has increased, but the ‘average’ user has, to date, always been understood in these terms.

### The time of élites

Not all early adopters of Internet technology could belong to the → **élite**, but the concept of such an online class – implying as it does, hierarchy, definition and finitude, a subculture with leaders and a pecking order rather than a limitless expanse – is key to an understanding of the RuNet atmosphere of the 1990s.

The spread of the Internet was therefore not solely a question of physical access. Cost was – and still remains – an obvious factor. Last but not least, there had to be the will and the capability to acknowledge the usefulness of the new medium. Elena Mirskaja’s study of online participation among Russian scholars uses data from the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN), an environment where IT was accessible to all if they wanted it. Interestingly, she found that no new users went online at RAN from 1999 to the cut-off point of the study (2001), nor did the amount or quality of online activity significantly increase in that period: it was instead a time of consolidation and stabilization. She concludes that “the process of inclusion of the élite RAN institutes into the worldwide web essentially took place in 1992-1998” [Mirskaja 2002]. Those who were not using the Internet by 1998 (only 10 to 20% of those studied, depending on institutional affiliation) had ample opportunity but did not want to avail themselves of it. Therefore, until new cadres emerged in academia, no new blood could enter the RuNet from RAN after 1998. The idea that Internet usage is influenced by mentality and social change is also explored by Natal’ja Loseva, now head of the Internet department at the State information agency, RIA Novosti, and

formerly employed by Izvestija and NTV Russian television network as an expert on web representation. According to Loseva, material conditions are not always decisive. They have to be met by individual and cultural attitudes: a kind of rethinking [see Busse 2005].

Outside academic institutions, Internet connectivity was even harder to come by, and in the earliest days was only available to people with the technological know-how and sufficient financial power. In his history of “authorial projects”, Dmitrij Smirnov compares the earliest days of the RuNet – 1995-1996 – to the start of the journalistic tradition during the 18th century, when print runs were tiny but had a disproportionate influence on cultural life [Smirnov 2002]. However, unlike in the case of early journalism there were, with the occasional exception, “no arts types on the Internet, never mind ‘normal’, offline journalists”. Such people simply did not understand why the Internet was important. In general, there were few users and “the more or less notable figures knew each other, if not in person, then by name”.

This image of a closed circle is at odds with the popular perception of the Internet as a free-for-all – which, by the way, has never been fully realized, either in the Western segments of the Internet or on the RuNet. The collision of a seemingly non-hierarchical communication tool and society’s need for ‘order’ and social stratification seems to be a global phenomenon. Nevertheless, against Russia’s specific historic background, the RuNet élite recalls the underground → **intelligentsia** of Soviet times, with its ambivalent status as a social and intellectual network set apart from mainstream academic and political thought. Evsej Vajner of the online Russian Journal described the Russian Internet in January 1999 as being “a variation on the theme of the ancient dream of a republic of scholars, artists and writers” [Vajner 1999].

The above mentioned study by Elena Mirskaja revealed a significant change in the atmosphere of the RuNet during 1999 as the numbers of new

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users from academia had dried up during the previous year. In Eugene Gorny's estimation, his own distinction between the RuNet cultural *élite* and the Western financial *digerati*, current in March 1999, was looking "archaic" by the end of that same year, when it had begun to be said that "the only criteria for a network personality to join the *élite* is financial success" [Gorny 2000]. This shift of emphasis away from cultural achievement to baser concerns had been predicted by Vajner in January, who had gone straight on from eulogising online utopia to say that:

Naturally, soon everything will change for the worst, from the point of view of these three categories of citizens [the scholars, artists and writers]. And as soon as authority takes a serious interest in the Internet, the 'cult and even pathos-inspiring figures of the Russian Internet' will turn out to be not Lebedev, Solov'ev and Moshkov, but Bul'dozerist, Razrushitel' and Boba Rabinovich [writers of semiliterate guest book entries discussed earlier in the interview - A.B.]. [Vajner 1999]

When asked by the Nethistory.ru project in December 2002 to explain what he meant by "the 'old Internet', that has come to an end", Roman Lejbov [2004] defined it as: "the Internet which had little information, but then nobody asked if they had permission to use it." The interviewer, Dmitrij Ivanov, prominent himself as one of the people behind Russian Journal, countered that:

[...] one could say that the ideology of Internet libertarianism, given a soundtrack by you, is today as marginal as the old Internet, which you mourn. It's said that the contemporary Masjanja fan doesn't understand at all, what you are pushing about. The point is, commerce has finally smothered utopia. [ibid.]

By late 2002, in the eyes of a former *élite* become newly irrelevant, commerce and fandom – figured here as passive consumption by unsophisticated minds – had united to smother creativity and subtlety of intellect.

However, the changing nature of the Russian Internet *élite* had as much to do with the social advancement of individual RuNet *élite* members as with the arrival of a wave of financial thugs who

shoved the old guard aside. Eugene Gorny observed in August 2003 that:

[...] most creators of Russian Internet culture have overcome their marginal social status, moved to Moscow as the financial and cultural centre of Russia, reached high social positions and converted their creative experience into money and fame. Now, some of them continue to work on the Internet as experts or top-level managers. Most left and turned their energy to other realms, such as media, politics, business, education and research. [Gorny 2003]

The original *élite* themselves had changed into creatures who benefited from the RuNet's new popularity.

### Arrival of the chainiki

So if the original network *élite* had either become disillusioned and lost interest or transformed into a new media *élite*, what kind of new online order was replacing them?

Even in 2000, most users were still highly educated and professional. A Gallup Media poll conducted that year found that 73.4% of users had post-graduate education, while another 23.4% were graduates. 32.8% were managers and 32.3% professionals, while only 2.9% were workers and 3.9% were unemployed [Bogdanov 2000, 7]. However, the newcomers did not necessarily share the same a priori interest in technology that the first wave of early adopters had, and new kinds of Internet use were observably growing in popularity from the late 1990s onwards. The idea that if you're not on the Internet, you don't exist was catching on, among governmental bodies, NGOs and individuals as well as corporations. For example, in their survey of the political segment of the RuNet, Grigorij Belonuchkin and Ekaterina Mikhajlovskaja report Prime Minister Mikhail Kas'janov's demand in autumn 2001 that all the federal organs of executive power that reported to him should create fully-fledged web sites, "thus expressing the idea that if a ministry has reported nothing new on the

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Internet at the end of a day, then it's probably done no work" [Belonuchkin, Mikhajlovskaja 2002].

At the other end of the scale were projects like the Levashovo village web site, established in December 2000 by local computer programmer Andrej Fomichev, with support from a shopkeeper and a businessman. The site was primarily geared to advertising, but that advertising was mainly orientated on local concerns, like job openings and pork price promotions, and there appears to have been a large element of belief in the potential of the site to become an informational hub for the village. Fomichev believed that "the Internet ensures freedom of speech and information [...] People must know what is going on in the country and the truth in general" [BBC News Monitoring 2001].

Free flow of information was precisely the appeal of the Internet to NGOs. The ability to network with others inside Russia and convey information to potential supporters outside was particularly important to pressure groups such as environmentalists, who were often concerned with corporate operations conducted in remote regions of Russia where local populations were very small. "We are now in the midst of finishing the Eurasia foundation project," Aleksandr Georgievskij, a representative of the environmental information group Ecoline told IREX in 2000. "Its main goal is to create a web portal for a public ecological movement" [c.f. IREX 2000].

All the above were participatory, constructive online activities, rather than the uncritical and semiliterate mass consumption feared by some of the commentators I have quoted above. The key difference between these new activities and their forebears was that they were informational rather than technological: the content and not the medium was the focus of creative and discursive interest.

However, in spite of this, the extent of Internet penetration, or the success of people's attempts to take advantage of it, should not be overemphasized. Many Russian Internet companies, like others across the world, suffered from the non-

materialization of overoptimistic revenue predictions, particularly from advertising, and had to fold or shed jobs as a result of the March 2000 dotcom "bubble" burst [Ulmanu 2001]. Nor was the Levashovo village web site ever the object of much interest from locals – NTV canvassed many people who said the Internet was irrelevant to them, suggested it was "something for the youngsters" or even replied simply, "the Internet – what Internet?" [BBC News Monitoring 2001].

Evidently the possibility of access did not always translate immediately into Internet use, a phenomenon experienced by Georgievskij of Ecoline, who observed that:

[...] in our office we have had Internet access since 1995, and still, people started using the web as a resource only after 2-3 years. This happened even though they had no problems with connection, telephone lines etc. And what about the NGOs in the provinces, where a man needs a lot of time and patience just to connect to his ISP?" [IREX 2000]

The nearest thing to a true incarnation of Vajner's fears would have to be Masjanja, the barrel-bodied cyberheroine, popularly hailed as the Russian answer to Beavis and Butthead, whose army of fans were singled out by Dmitriij Ivanov as symbolic representatives of an uncaring new RuNet generation with no interest in the history or culture of the medium they are invading. Her rise was certainly meteoric: Masjanja cartoons first began to appear on creator Oleg Kuvaev's site in October 2001, and by April of the next year they had made it one of the most visited sites on the RuNet, clocking over 30,000 hits a day [Kuvaev 2005].

Masjanja's appeal was not limited to the young or the ignorant. Oxford University student Maria Artamonova, who grew up in St Petersburg and returns there every summer, describes her own and her family's interest in the cartoon as follows:

[In late 2001 and early 2002] everybody I knew started telling me how funny it was – my friends, my parents, anyone who had access to the Internet. [...]. I think it works just as a good LiveJournal does – probably a

tiny bit “artificial”, with a funny little userpic attached, but sincere [and] non-censored (so that it’s not at all “literary”). [personal e-mail, 2004]

The characterization and fictional experiences of → **Masjanja** and her friends sharply articulated the frustrations of modern urban Russian youth, and often the specific tribulations of Internet users. For example, in the episode “Download” [Kuvaev 2002], she is seated at her computer trying to download a .zip file. Her friend Lokhmatij comes in, and as the download edges towards completion they stare huge-eyed at the screen together, counting down the last few kilobytes and yelling “Just don’t disconnect!” When the connection does fail, seconds before the download is due to complete, Lokhmatij grabs an axe and smashes the PC.



**Masjanja:** *Download error causing computer massacre.*

“Download” was not the subtlest of art but, crucially, it hadn’t been done before, at least not on the RuNet and not in specifically Russian terms. Masjanja was an in-joke that the whole of urban Russia could share. Serious brand potential had blossomed overnight in the → **counter-culture** hinterlands of the RuNet.

### **Perceptions of the RuNet: the media and academe**

This, then, was the new, accessible RuNet. An expanded environment with a lower level of entry

requirement – a situation that was not without its enthusiastic proponents among intellectuals. According to online literary journal, *Setevaja slovesnost* chats and guestbooks, with their complement of Bul’dozerists, are part of *seterature* (set’ = network + literatura = literature) and are a new literary form; in fact online chat is nothing less than “a return to the sources of drama, as at the outset, everyone participated in drama, it was a festival” [Kushnir 2001].

The upmarket, non-academic print media often demonstrated a queasy combination of defensiveness and pride about the RuNet and its users. “Russian Internet users may congratulate themselves on being ahead of their Western counterparts,” enthused *Kommersant Vlast’* in a report about a MASMI Research Group survey [WPS Monitoring Agency 2001]. *Kommersant Vlast’* quotes the MASMI statistics that 68% of Russian Internet users have a college degree (as opposed to 48% in Europe), that Russian Internet users spend on average 49 minutes online per session (as opposed to 41 minutes in Europe) and that over 50% of Russian users do nothing else while surfing the Internet, while Europeans tend to listen to music, talk on the phone or watch TV. All this “clearly shows how our Internet users are better,” asserts the writer rather smugly. Only towards the end of the report is it grudgingly admitted that MASMI’s own interpretation of the data is simply that “the behaviour and demographic structure of Russian Internet users are characteristic of countries where Internet use is at a fairly modest level”.

This positing of technological underdevelopment as a complement of intellectual or spiritual virtue reads as rather defensive, particularly in the decidedly worldly context of a journal like *Kommersant Vlast’*. The diversification of the RuNet, combined with these examples of commentary on its growth, seems, in fact, to imply that, with the possible exception of the approach to domestic news content, differences between the RuNet and the rest of the Internet have gradu-

ally been dropping away, and that the RuNet is simply another backwater of the Internet, fenced in by a language barrier and sometimes subject to mystification by loyal denizens, but not essentially different.

## The RuNet in global context

### Adaptation vs assimilation

As well as deriving much of their technological basis from Western innovations, computer networks in Russia have a history of Western funding – GlasNet, for example, was set up in January 1990 by an American body, The Association for Progressive Communications – and of general openness to Western influences, via the contacts that had been maintained for decades by scholars in the technological institutes from which the network drew much of its early population.

Yet during the 1990s this debt existed alongside a profound suspicion of, and frequently hostility to, the Atlanticist hegemony that seemed to be symbolized by the online dominance of English. The World Wide Web was “[...] the ultimate act of intellectual colonialism,” complained the head of GlasNet, Anatolij Voronov in 1996.

The product comes from America so we must either adapt to English or stop using it [...] If you are talking about a technology that is supposed to open the world to hundreds of millions of people, you are joking. This just makes the world into haves and have nots. [c.f. Ellis 1999, 162]

Both Voronov’s points are interesting in the light of later developments. With regard to physical access to IT, his model of “haves and have nots” retains its currency to the present day. However, the interrelations between Russian users and the English-speaking online population have been far from the series of impositions that Voronov suggests. For example, in her review of a 1998 survey, Elena Mirskaja points out that 78% of the academics canvassed asserted that they got more

out of world science than they put in, and only 4% the reverse. She posits that one of the reasons the Internet is very important to Russian academics is because of the penury of institutions, which means that access to remote information resources has become a vital necessity for Russian researchers; and that a further reason for the popularity of these resources is that Russian academics connect with the world community of scholars “under passive conditions, through the use of information but not real collaboration” [Mirskaja 2002]. Most interestingly, she determines that, in spite of pessimistic predictions, the Internet does not exacerbate the problem of ‘brain drain’, and in fact may alleviate it, as it reduces the need for trips abroad.

One theory that would accommodate both views is Rafal Rohozinski’s suggestion that, particularly in the early days, Russians perceived computer networks primarily as an extension of → **blat**, the Soviet practice of contact-building and mutual aid through the barter of goods and services. *Blat* was a way of circumventing the rigid prescriptions of a planned economy by the exploitation of contacts, and in the same way, according to Rohozinski, users of early official networks like Akademet’ tried to electronically extend their circle of acquaintance and influence in an act of “private subversion and re-colonization of the public sphere” [Rohozinski 1999]. Soviet *blat* in general required reciprocity to function, but the one area to which that did not apply was State property. Collectively owned Soviet resources belonged a little to everyone, and in appearance, if not in legal reality, shared Internet services, from e-mail to Mirskaja’s scholarly databases, are their modern online equivalent. The *blat* mindset of networking with those around you and co-operating, with an aim to extract the maximum benefit from the surrounding institutions, translated very well to online life.

In the RuNet of 2004, with its millions of users, this principle persists, most notably on LiveJournal.com, a site that is based in America but

which has nevertheless come to be regarded as the blogging service in Russia. On 4 June 2004 it had 50,138 users located in the Russian Federation, a number that has been steadily increasing since Roman Lejbov started the first active Russian language journal on 1 February 2001.

LiveJournal is an intensely interactive environment. Users can post comments on each others' writings, and keep up with the latest entries of the other journals they read by syndicating them on their "friends page". Information can be traded with contacts on LiveJournal, much as goods were previously traded in times of economic hardship, as entries can be locked to various levels of security and exclusivity. Indeed, the Internet journalist and historian, Dmitrij Ivanov explains the extreme popularity of LiveJournal with regard to a specific social model that facilitates a tight and complex relationship between users who may simultaneously operate on different levels. This model is valid for the reading of such virtual diaries as well as for their writing. The facility to regulate your number of "friends", to limit who has access to read your posts or to comment on them – all these features, which enable the user to manage access to information, proved to be especially suited to the taste of a Russian audience [Ivanov 2004].

The Russian userbase is mostly adult, and often highly educated. The value of LiveJournal to professionals, particularly academics, is described by philologist Marija Levchenko:

LiveJournal is excellently suited, not only to immediate practical facts (although it's just about perfect for that purpose – you get a quick and precise answer), but most of all to the preparation of works in progress – for example, I can recall discussions which were useful to me personally when I was looking for the application of the formula 'Et tout le reste est littérature'. Members of the community came up with several quotations I'd have hardly remembered myself. [Levchenko 2003]

Eugene Gorny's study devoted to the Russian LiveJournal, in this book, formalises what Russian



## Statistics

### LiveJournal.com Statistics

The following statistics may be interesting for some of you. Note that for speed, most of this page is only updated every 24 hours. However, certain parts are live. Raw data can be picked up [here](#).

### Users

How many users, and how many of those are active?

- **Total accounts:** 8433839
- **... active in some way:** 2571481
- **... that have ever updated:** 5867843
- **... updating in last 30 days:** 1392556
- **... updating in last 7 days:** 869404
- **... updating in past 24 hours:** 291684

### Gender

Are males or females more likely to maintain journals?

- **Male:** 2376139 (32.6%)
- **Female:** 4903167 (67.4%)
- **Unspecified:** 2371838

### Demographics

The following are the 15 most popular countries LiveJournal is used in:

- **United States** - 3961334
- **Canada** - 283026
- **United Kingdom** - 226280
- **Russian Federation** - 214930
- **Australia** - 103166
- **Philippines** - 32639
- **Germany** - 31574
- **Singapore** - 25526
- **Ukraine** - 24558
- **Finland** - 21859
- **Netherlands** - 21140
- **Japan** - 21090
- **New Zealand (Aotearoa)** - 15030
- **Brazil** - 12465
- **Spain** - 12285

**LiveJournal: User Statistics, Winter 2005.**

users themselves had long been saying, namely that LiveJournal is ideally suited to the Russian communal mindset. Russians, for example, often have many hundreds of “friends” listed, in contrast with the much smaller average number among English-speaking users.

Of course, there is a certain resemblance between the *blat* social structure within the Soviet Union and the Russian LiveJournal but this phenomenon is not directly linked to the idea of *blat*. It is an exchange of information (in the broadest sense), and not of services - an important distinction. The aim of personal communication in the *blat* system is to get some material goods. And, last but not least - *blat* is an illegal exchange of goods and/or services. If we extend this term beyond its historic borders, we risk classifying any communication based on the principle of informal networks as *blat*. [Natalja Konradova]

Although its structures were American in origin and apparently uniform, in practice the facilities of LiveJournal have been subtly adapted to reflect many of the traditional concerns of Russian society, from the value of networking to the fear of government repression. Similar results have been reported in recent studies on the Chinese and the Japanese Internet, which are determined in their aesthetics as well as in their political usages, by psychological patterns and historical experience [Bucher 2004; Nakada et al. 2004].

The linguistic domination of English has also decreased over time, against the expectations of Voronov and others. For example, in early 2000, Eugene Gorny found that, in a Yandex search, “guestbook” appeared 77,891 times, “гестбук” 3,665 times and “гостевая книга” 71,466 times [Gorny 2000]. He concluded that the shorter words, in English or Russian, were winning out because they were quicker to type,

and that “гостевая книга” was mainly a formal style. However, when I conducted the same search on 23 May 2004, I found 701,228 occurrences of “guestbook”, 46,177 of “гестбук” and 7,680,090 of “гостевая книга”. In the intervening four years, incidences of the two shorter words had increased approximately tenfold, while instance of “гостевая книга” had multiplied a hundred times, with the result that the longer term now appeared over 10 times more often than the two shorter ones combined. This suggests that in 2004 correct Russian usage is taking precedence over English and neologisms, in spite of the inconvenience of extra syllables. In principle it is now possible to use the RuNet without knowing a word of English.

The RuNet has also been the locus for more active and explicit → **resistance** to the imposition of global (American) cultural values. Supporters of Alena Pisklova, the unglamorous 15-year-old who became the surprise winner of the Internet poll to select the Russian entrant to the 2004 Miss Universe contest, created a web site entitled, “Say No to Barbie Dolls” [Skazhi net 2004], which claimed that “people who voted for Alyona voted against [...] products of the same type and trademark, which are made into cult objects” [BBC News 2004]. Although the Alena phenomenon has been suspected of having started as a publicity stunt by the Rambler company, she received 40,000 seemingly genuine votes to win the poll. According to pageant producer, Ivan Zasurskij, “the reason why the Alyona phenomenon arose is that it was an open choice – ordinary people could vote freely” [ibid.]. Implicit here is the suggestion that the previous month’s presidential election had been a very different affair.

For her supporters, the validity of Alena’s popularity and her value as a symbolic statement were directly connected to her apparently spontaneous online origin, in contrast with the electoral campaigns that had recently played out on the central television stations.



**Alena Pisklova:** *Anti-Barbie becomes Russian Icon.*

## Conclusion

Broadly speaking, the history of the RuNet use is a history of cycles, moving from enthusiastic idealization to suspicion of the technology followed by disillusionment and finally realistic acceptance. These cycles manifest first in relation to the existence of the network itself and then to various subsections of it. The cumulative effect of these processes has been the resolution of a utopian vision into a pragmatic one, as attempts to delineate and cherish an orderly online Russian community have given way to the decentralized building of communities. At the same time, the RuNet has come to be taken more seriously as a cultural and political forum.

Whether or not everything is now “all right”, as promised by Moshkov, is too vague a question to be definitely answered. What can be said is that the RuNet is, in 2005, an integrated part of Russian culture. It has not proven to be merely a highway for cultural imperialism, nor has it remained free of commercial globalization, instead diversifying to accommodate these aspects of modern Russian life among many others – a vast expansion that, in itself, seems likely to be proof against effective interference by the government or other bodies. As for the changing face of the RuNet – The armies of

teapots have arrived, and if they have sometimes brought banality to RuNet, they have also brought stability and the assurance of a future.