2007

Russia, LiveJournal, and the implications of national usage of social blogging for information exchange and dissemination

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Exchange and Dissemination

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Especially in the last two to three years, blogging as a social phenomenon ahs been a focus of much academic interest. One topic that has not been explored in great depth, however, has been the international angle, and in particular, international differences in uses of particular blogging services. This paper looks to at least partially fill this gap, by presenting a case study of the role of one particular service, LiveJournal, in one particular country, Russia (with some discussion of usage by Russian-language users who are not necessarily based in Russia). Specifically, it will argue why the Russian-speaking community adopted LiveJournal as a preferred mode of online communication, describe how the social perception of LiveJournal differs from its place in the US, and specifically, show how it is used in a unique way that has broad implications for understanding the nature of information dissemination and public discource in a particular society.

Blogs are commonly defined as "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence." (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004) This concept has rapidly gained importance throughout the realms of politics and political commentary, journalism, and personal expression. According to many commentarors, the blog is the next iteration of the personal site or homepage that was prevalent in the mid to late 1990's, with very specific consequences for online community-building, information dissemination, and user interaction. In fact, the first blogs are frequently seen to have been indtistinguishable from, or certainly very similar to, users' homepages, and plenty of this heritage can still be seen in the standard definition.

However, as blogs and blogging matured, at least in the US, popular perception of them has consistently favored a particular type – that which Susan Herring calls the "filter" blog, the purpose of which is to allow a blog author to redirect readers to specific content elsewhere on the Web, comment on it, and solicit feedback. As Herring demonstrated, at least anectodally, the mass media has consistently focused on filter blogs, and has essentially priveledged this type. (Herring, Scheit, et al., 2007) One potential reason she presents is that filter blogs are simply deemed more "newsworthy", since they explicitly interact with the larger world. Thus, while blogging itself may be a relatively new phenomenon, the concept of the filter blog can be connected to the long-standing and entirely comfortable tradition of the letter to the editor or opinion column. However, an unindentend but crucial factor to this is the fact that a majority of filter blogs are written by a group that comprises a distinct minority of, if not Web users, then certainly blog authors.

Furthermore, as this distinction was being established, other scholars, for example, Sandeep Krishnamurthy, elaborated on it to not merely favor the filter blog, but moreover, to start arranging blogs on a set of axes, from topical to personal, and from individual to community. (2002) This kind of normative arrangement made explicit what was largely already implied – that not only were filter blogs (which Krishmanurthy also identifies as "enhanced columns") more readily embraced by the media, but that the journal-type blog could be dismissed as basically irelevant to discourse, especially in comparison with the more "serious" kind.

The effect of this situation has been a bifurcation of the Western-language "blogosphere" into two largely unconnected communities. The first is composed of "A-list" blogs – a small minority that is consistently identified by various blog census tools as being the most popular, and an almost infinitely wider number, a significant percentage of which do not fall into the filter blog category. At the A-list end of the spectrum, bloggers' methods of operation, concerns, and ways

of interaction with their audiences essentially become similar to those of established newspapers. (Thompson, 2006) The other end of the spectrum is seen as largely irrelevant to the concept and practice of blogging, and perhaps even not really fit to qualify as "blogging" in the first place.

Beyond this distinction, the two sectors are served largely by different service providers. Although conceptually, blogging grows out of pure website maintenance, one of the points that many definitions include is that blogs depend on a proprietary software package or interface for updates. In the "social blogging" (or, to use Herring's terminology, "personal journal") space, easily the most popular of these is LiveJournal. Founded in 1999, initially as a way for its founder to update friends on the going-on in his life in college, Livejournal currently claims to have hosted over twelve million individual users and communities. But, the perception remains: LiveJournal is the home of a stereotypically self-contained teenager's online diary posting on topics of no interest to anyone but themselves and a close circle of friends. Although commercialized, it was never able to achieve quite the level of financial success as MySpace and various other Web 2.0 sites. At least in the US, it remains just one form of online social interaction, but by no means the dominant one.

But it need not be so. Orkut, a social networking site run by Google , while never particularly popular in the US, because of a variety of social factors, has been throughly embraced in Brazil. (Kugel, 2006) And similarly, LiveJournal, especially after the service allowed posting in languages other than English, found a unique place for itself in what is commonly known as the "Runet" – that is, the Russian-language segment of the World Wide Web.

As of mid-2006, LiveJournal was by far the most popular blog hosting service in Russia, with almost 350000 registered users (about 230000 of which were "active", i.e., updated at least once in the last three months,) according to figures provided by Yandex, the leading Russian search

engine. (Yandex, 2006) The first effective Russian-language LiveJournal was started in early 2000 by online journalist Roman Leybov, who immediately proceded to promote the service among his friends, most of whom were, like him, public intellectuals, essentially at the forefront of the community of Russian internet users, and thoroughly unlike the typical Western image of the LiveJournal user.

Being associated with an essentially elite segment of the Russian society, LiveJournal was very soon prominently featured in various media. Unsurprisingly, this has led to a progressive expansion in the size of the user base, while at the same time, changing its profile to some degree. Nonetheless, the majority of Russian LiveJournal users are older than the majority of LJ users in the US, and there is a significantly higher percentage of older (over 30) users in the Russian community. This is primarily explained by the fact that personal, at-home use of the Internet in Russia is still in its infancy. Access is relatively expensive (although this is changing), and, especially outside Moscow, St. Petersburg, and several other major cities, still largely limited. Up to 58% of Russian Internet users are only able to gain access from an office computer. (Gorny, 2004) And, even as the user base itself expanded, there remained a core, composed of several hundred closely linked and extremely popular journals, that largely mirrored the social makeup of the pioneers of the Russian LiveJournal.

So, then, the question: what was it about LiveJournal that made it so appealing to Russian users? In answering it, Gorny (2004) outlines several major factors. The actual LiveJournal architecture, unlike other similar services, was from the very start designed to support multiple languages. The community aspects of LiveJournal, including the friend and friend-of lists, the comment trees, and various serch functionalities, were also built in from the very start. A different reason was the fact that initial – perhaps accidental – use of LiveJournal by an elite attached an aura of legitimacy to the entire concept; the media spotlight only exacerbated it. In a society that is just

entering the world of competition, all activities become competitive. Another factor he mentioned is the simple fact that LiveJournal is independent of Russian jurisdiction, thus both allowing users a degree of freedom, or least lack of fear, in expressing opinions, and taking it outside the context of post-Soviet Russian economics. As Evgeny Morozov (2006) notes, "Many Russians would not trust a Russian company to handle their personal information like passwords and credit cards." But it is the next factor, the one that is perhaps hardest to define and most open to debate, that he argues plays a key role. Gorny's (2004) theory is that Russian national character has a direct influence both on the ways Russians use the Internet in general and on the success of LiveJournal in Russia in particular. Specifically, by allowing for interconnection between journals, for commenting, for belonging to communities, and for aligning as readers of particular authoritative journals, LiveJournal corresponded directly with "collectivism" and a preference for group, rather than individual, self-identification.

Writing in 2004, Gorny was not able to predict the fifth factor of LiveJournal popularity in Russia. As Natalya Konradova (2005) argues, the "blogosphere" remains one of the last areas in Russian society where open debate is allowed; more so, it specifically fills the traditional deficit of a space that is explicitly outside government control. The question of freedom of expression in post-Soviet Russia is extremely complicated, in no small part because outwardly, and especially compared to even twenty years ago, expression is certainly vastly more free. According to But for whatever reason, as the government has either actively or effectively stifled independent speech, while at the same time promoting the outward appearance of freedom, mental resources were channelled into this one remaining avenue.

According to Gorny, the inevitable end result of the development of the Russian LiveJournal has been its devolution from a community to a service – the reverse of the evolution of LiveJournal proper. Regardless, it will continue to play a valuable role as an agent of "glocalization," that is,

of a means of maintaining a particular unique space despite the pressure of integration into the global economy and international media networks.

But, the reality, as Anna Arutunyan (2007) shows, is different. Because the Russian LiveJournal is now a service more so than an defined community, it is being used to spill out into the "real world" by assembling critical masses. One of the major issues in the development of viable civil society in Russia, given both the sheer geographical scale of the country and the historical lack of community organizations, is the need for some sort of system of horizontal connections between interested groups of people. Initiated by the elites, then adopted by a more mass audience, LiveJournal provides this system, and now, has been revitalized as something else entirely from what its original creator ever intended or expected.

Moving beyond the specific case of Russia, the experience of LiveJournal adoption in one particular country holds valuable lessons for information services worldwide. The most basic of these is that an online social network or service that is accommodates users outside its country or language of origin may be if not hijacked, then certainly coopted. The key premise of LiveJournal is interconnectivity; yet, as demonstrated recently in a comparative analysis of four foreign-language user communities, Russian LiveJournal users interact almost exclusively with other Russian LiveJournal users, and their contact with the wider community is minimal. (Herring, Paolillo, et al., 2007) This became an issue of particular concern when the LiveJournal Abuse Team, the US-based function for dealing with terms of service violations and resolving conflicts between users, had to become involved in what quickly became apparent as political in-fighting between various Russian LiveJournal communities, many of them with real-world or off-line components. The intricacies and technicalities of some of the disputes, and even the language barrier, made effective resolution impossible. (Arutunyan, 2005) And the solution SixApart, the current corporate parent of LiveJournal, arrived at – to essentially outsource the

management of the Russian-language segment of LiveJournal to a Russian company for its part went directly against one of the major reasons Russian users had been turning to LiveJournal in the first place.

At this point in time, the simple inertia and self-sustaining nature of LiveJournal users and communities means that this transition, which took place in November 2006, is not immediately likely to affect the nature of the service. But it does, nonetheless, highlight the simple and self-evident fact that information services in the Internet age are shaped by information users far above and beyond their creators' expectations.

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