How to read and treat online public discussions among ordinary citizens beyond political mobilisation.

Empirical evidence from the Russian-language online forums

YURI MISNIKOV
Independent scholar

Abstract: Online debates among ordinary people discussing current affairs are typically viewed through the lens of political mobilisation and dismissed on various grounds – due to their unintelligibility, incivility, lack of argument or polarisation and fragmentation effects. It is believed that conversational discourses cannot meet the Habermasian conditions of deliberative democracy and therefore have little value, either for decision-makers or political democratisation. By providing empirical data from the analysis and comparison of three cases of real-life public debates that occurred on Russian-language online forums, this paper attempts to dispute the assumption that such discussions are non-deliberative. It is argued that the very conversational nature of online discussions might be their main value as a manifestation of active citizenship from below.

Keywords: Russia, internet discussions forums, deliberation online, Habermas, discursive dialogism, validity claims, active citizenship.

The last decade has witnessed the transformation of the internet from a global source of information and mass communication into a more user oriented medium of social interaction. With this change, internet users have emerged as tangible social personas by acquiring a face and voice (e.g. on *Facebook* and *YouTube*), and by creating their own content independently, in private and by sharing it publicly; more importantly, they have become politically engaged public communicators and civic actors. Such engagement has further com-

plicated the complexity of social structures, processes and relationships within (postmodern) societies of different democratic nature.

These complications have rattled some democratically less mature societies in the Middle East and the ex-USSR. The previous evolutionary phase that witnessed the impact of the internet within the confines of the West is now followed by dramatic revolutions elsewhere, closely linked with social media. Whereas there are sceptics who believe that the ruling elites exploit new media benefits to strengthen their powers (Morozov 2011), many experts argue that 'a cascade of messages about freedom and democracy' generated by ordinary individuals in North Africa and the Middle East through the channels of social media helped shape 'revolutionary conversations' that predicted political uprisings on the ground and raised expectations for their success (Howard et al. 2011: 3-4).[1] For the Freedom House (2011), the Middle East revolutions prove that the internet has become 'a crucial medium' for citizens to mobilize themselves and advance their political cause on their own terms. The notion of People's Power has thus been effectively reborn in the digital age with the end of the state-controlled monopoly over the use of traditional information and communication technologies (ICTs).

It is therefore not surprising that internet freedom has been universally accepted as a new measure of democracy. The European Union begins implementing, as of 1 April 2012, a European Citizen Initiative (ECI)[2] that provides ordinary citizens with an unprecedented (for modern democracies) amount of political power to influence legislators and the lawmaking process. Russia's President-elect Putin[3] too, as if echoing the ECI and emulating the British government's online petition facility, announced a similar initiative that allows 100,000 citizens to propose new legislation that would be mandatory for the parliament to consider officially[4]; almost on the same day President Medvedev held a meeting devoted to his idea of 'open government'.[5] The plan is that all such initiatives will have specific web spaces for public discussions.

On the other hand, the use of internet freedoms for mobilising protest and counter-action has alerted many authorities, including those in the West, as the Freedom Houses warns.[6] It is also democratic states that plan to restrict internet freedoms for individual citizens by, for example, monitoring their use of the web and e-mail under new laws in the interest of national security.[7] Russia, in a postmodern fashion typical for post-Soviet society, where freedoms on the net co-exist with their absence in the traditional print and broadcast media, is no exception. With the rise of civic and political activism facilitated by internet openness, the country faces the uncertainty of this global trend, where new media have become associated, primarily, with the mobilisation aspect of public discourses (Etling et al. 2010).

---

[1] In the post-communist space, Moldova's 'Twitter revolution' of 2008 is the most notable example of such events. The Belarusian campaign 'The revolution through social media networks' should also be mentioned. Whether or not these titles correctly reflect the actual role of technology is secondary in this case. The phrases are indicative of how these extreme forms of civic and political activism are perceived by their participants, organisers and commentators.

[2] http://www.citizens-initiative.eu (accessed 1 April 2012).

[3] Prime-minister at the time.

[4] See, for example, http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2012/03/30/n_2266777.shtml (accessed 20 April 2012).

[5] http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/15057 (accessed 20 April 2012).

[6] http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-net (accessed 4 April 2012).

[7] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-17576745 (accessed 4 April 2012).

The term 'Russia' (*Rossiia*) is used in this paper interchangeably with the term 'the Russian Federation' (*Rossiiskaia Federatsiia*) to denote the country's name. The adjective 'Russian' (*Rossiiskii*) denotes an association with the Russian language and culture in a broad sense, irrespective of the specific ethnicity of Russian citizens; it refers to a resident of the Russian Federation, either current or former. The ethnic background is revealed explicitly when there is a need to specifically address the issue of ethnicity. Only internet forums registered in the Russian Federation's top-level domain under the code '.ru' are considered as Russian regardless of where their participants live; blogs and other social media platforms are excluded from the review in this paper. The term 'citizen' is used in a generic sense and does not indicate legal citizenship. Residents of other countries participating in online discussions on a Russian-speaking internet-forum would be considered citizens as well

Thanks to its democratically public nature and the instantaneous exchanges of communications, the internet has always been a concern for Russian authorities as a potentially dangerous mobilisational tool. Russian media periodically report about the government's intentions to institute greater controls over the internet under the standard national security disguise; for example, it is reported that while the police is contemplating the creation of specialised regional centres to monitor 'extremism' on the internet, the President's office has already commissioned a research into the impact of social media on youth behaviour.[8] The telling fact in this regard is the mobilisation on *Facebook* and *VKontakte* of 22 thousand people, mostly young male Muscovites, whom Suvorov (2012) semi-ironically dubbed 'Anonymous revolutionaries', to discuss and coordinate the preparation of street protests against the conduct of the presidential elections of 4 December 2011.

Yet the discursive, i.e. the relational, interactive side of public communication online in Russia, beyond mobilisation and clusters of political preferences (Etling et al. 2010; Rohozinski 1999; Fossato and Lloyd 2008), is less known. There is no clarity about the democratic value of online discourses among ordinary citizens neither in the Western context nor in other socio-political settings. Christiansen (2004) specifically criticises the mobilisational form of public discourses as non-democratic and unsustainable. She distinguishes it from a more democratically valuable deliberative aspect of discourse. However, in its turn, online deliberations are more often than not dismissed as 'infotopia' precisely on the same ground; that is, due to the lack of deliberative qualities of online public discussions and their epistemic inadequacy (Sunstein 2006; Wilhelm 1999). This makes it difficult for decision-makers to justify the use of citizens' discourses as a source of knowledge in a systemic manner, beyond the vague notion of crowdsourcing. There is no guarantee that such citizen initiatives will succeed.

Other researchers accept online deliberations as inherently democratic in their own right (Graham 2003, 2008; Papacharissi 2004; Wright and Street 2007). Freelon (2010), for example, directly links political discussion online with democratic communication practices. However, the absence of reliable empirical evidence – theoretically grounded and contextualised in specific social settings – prevents an understanding of online discourses as consciously exercised acts of citizenship. There are no established criteria and analytical tools allowing for separating deliberative discourses from non-deliberative ones. We also do not

---

[8] http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2012/03/30/n_2266777.shtml (accessed 4 April 2012).

know how, for example, the purpose of discussions and the forum's type along with its readership base influence deliberative qualities. As a result, it is difficult to define citizens' 'commentocracy' as a politically trustworthy type of public activity and argue that it is an important aspect of participatory democracy. As Sokolova (2011: 29) notes with regret, the prevailing attitude to citizens' participatory culture and creativity on the web is 'snobbery'.

This paper presents an attempt to better understand public discourses online on Russian internet discussion forums as socially motivated discursive practices undertaken by citizens, voluntarily and at their own expense (e.g. time spent on the web is viewed as a resource that could be used differently). It starts with a brief characterisation of the state of online discussion, followed by the description of existing approaches towards studying online discourses. In doing so it justifies a need for a theoretically grounded analytical framework to collect and interpret empirical evidence. It is argued that it is not sufficient to rely on the generic perception of the public sphere concept of Jürgen Habermas alone, which is normally the case when it comes to analysing online deliberations, without a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanism of discursively constructed dialogic communications among public actors. The Habermasian concept of 'basic validity claims', as part of his broader theory of discourse ethics, is used to build a holistic analytical framework consisting of three 'communicative worlds' that participants associate themselves with when discussing public issues. The paper proceeds further by describing the research design, including the introduction of deliberative standards that are used to code the textual content of posted messages. The identification of claims to intersubjective 'normative rightness', among two other types of validity claims, helps reveal and interpret the posts' intended meaning in dialogical and rationality terms. Three case studies are presented and explained. The paper's final part deals with the research findings by comparing the discursive qualities of the analysed internet-forums. It is concluded that, overall, online discussions are sufficiently deliberative and represent a special, alternative conversational form of public discourse in the digital age, which deserves recognition as a form of active citizenship.

The state of online discussions in Russia

By all accounts, the Russian Federation has been demonstrating a spectacular growth of internet-users. During 2000-2008, their number increased by 1,560 percent, which was the fastest growth not only in Europe, but worldwide.[9] During that period, almost three-quarters of all internet users in the former USSR (excluding the Baltic States) lived in Russia. Today, nearly 50 million Russian residents are regularly online. So far, the internet has been largely free of government constraints and intervention. Many ordinary people routinely turn to the internet as their preferred source for latest news, information and peer-to-peer communication. According to the Russian Internet rating agency LiveInternet.ru, over the past two years the web portal of the *RIA Novosti* has had an average daily audience of about 700,000-

---

[9] Based on the data of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) 2009; its statistics is based on surveying the residents of the Russian Federation only and does not account for other internet users visiting the websites registered in the country, see http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Indicators/Indicators.aspx (accessed 27 June 2010).

800,000 visitors and as many as two-three million pageviews.[10] Many of Russia's other web media outlets have experienced similar growth. Politically conscious citizens have enthusiastically adopted new media's interactive and networking properties to discuss current affairs with their peers or to organise street protests.

The exact number of Russian citizens participating in online discussions is unknown; however, the data obtained for this research indicates that it must be significant. The actual readership of online discourses is also not known, except that there are far more readers than discussants (so called 'lurkers' whose role is unclear). In any case, online activism is a new civic and political phenomenon in Russia challenging entrenched perceptions that the average post-communist citizen is apolitical and democratically immature. Many of those who read news online also comment on their content. As elsewhere, online news serve as a catalyst for political discussion (Allan 2006). Overall, the Russian internet is considered culturally special (Rohozinski 1999) and is closely linked with Russian culture and social psychology at large. The role of internet freedoms in Russia becomes even more significant when contrasted against the tightly controlled traditional broadcast and print media.

A question that begs posing is whether mass participation in online discussions can be viewed as a form of active citizenship facilitating the process of democratic socialisation in the age of information. To answer this, one needs to examine whether online political discussions in Russian internet forums can be analysed as forms of democratic deliberation.

Approaches to studying online public discussions

Studying internet discourses and communities is methodologically and empirically challenging. The spread of the internet's world-wide web technology in the 1990s revitalised the old hopes for greater political efficacy of liberal democracy in the form of e-democracy (and e-participation) concepts that were, in turn, built on the earlier ideas of teledemocracy (Arterton 1987; McLean 1989). USENET's discussion newsgroups and other e-mail-based listservs quickly became first objects of academic enquiry from a perspective of political and democratic theory and practice (Hill and Hughes 1997; Rheingold 2000). Since then, a lot of effort has gone into proclaiming that the internet's digital properties can help create a virtual public sphere in the Habermasian spirit (Sinekopova 2006; Schneider and Foot 2002, 2004, 2005; Janssen and Kies 2004, 2005 to name a few), where disparate online communities of citizens can be engaged in democratic deliberations (see, for example, Baym 1998; Coleman and Blumler 2001, Dahlberg 2001; Dahlgren 2005; Berdal 2004; 2003, 2008; Hague and Loader 1999; Jones 1998; Kelly, Fisher and Smith 2005; Kraut et al. 1998; Rheingold 2000; Sudweeks, McLaughlin and Rafaeli 1998; Sunstein 1995, 2006; Papacharissi 2004; Wiklund 2005).

However, while the public sphere has become the most recognised theoretical framework to study digitally mediated political discussions, its conceptualisation has not resulted in a workable analytical framework to process empirical data. Usually, a grounded approach is the first choice rather than purpose-built frameworks of empirical analysis. Furthermore, the very theory of the public sphere (and deliberative democracy) developed by Jürgen Haber-

---

[10] http://www.liveinternet.ru/stat/rian.ru/index.html?period=month (accessed 6 May 2012),

mas is often criticised for its excessive normative and idealised character that cannot match the complexity of real life. Nonetheless, it remains a popular conceptual umbrella for many researchers studying online discussions from a deliberative democracy perspective.[11]

From a discursive perspective, there are two main obstacles that complicate empirical testing of the public sphere. One is the criticism that it is impossible to meet the so-called 'critical conditions' needed for an 'ideal speech situation' that would enable the process of rational argumentation. The other is the difficulty of assessing the rationality and intelligibility of online discourses as key deliberative values. The practical impossibility of 'ideal speech situation' conditions is usually criticised as the main weakness of Habermas' public sphere theory in general. Such an approach implies that the 'impossibility conditions' would make the empirical testing of the public sphere impossible as well. However, in his later works, Habermas has substantially modified these rigorous conditions. The requirement for total participatory equality and inclusiveness was replaced by the more realistic condition of non-exclusion (Habermas 2003). This shift means that the condition to include virtually all citizens capable of participating in discourse is no longer necessary. It should be abandoned in favour of not excluding those who are willing to participate, but may be intentionally prevented from participation. Free and non-coerced participation (external obstacles) and the absence of self-deception as an internal limitation would still stay in place as important 'pragmatic presuppositions' for democratic deliberations (Bohman and Rehg 2009). The real value of these demands lies in the desire to improve the quality of individual discursive standards and self-learning as part of democratic participation. The improved quality of actual discourses can be further perfected by the participants themselves if they are collectively vigilant to prevent exclusions, inequalities and coercion.

If we accept that public deliberations have any democratic value, we need to acknowledge that such discussions have an epistemic value as well, i.e. they are meaningful, contain useful knowledge and relate to social practices (beyond technological properties or discursive metrics). Yet there are serious methodological difficulties of disclosing citizens' knowledge as a meaningful source of expertise (Collins and Evans 2002). For Fischer (2009: 4-5, 107-108), such difficulties are a direct consequence of an excessive reliance on empiricism that ignores the importance of the 'normative social context, in which the empirical is imbedded'. He advocates the testing of 'empirical findings within normative frameworks' instead of the prevailing practice of integrating norms and values into the empirical framework (Fischer 2009: 127-128). Empirical evidence removed from its normative base would remain arbitrary – able to prove or disprove anything. As a consequence, the absence of well-grounded theoretical and analytical frameworks leads to wide-ranging interpretations of the available empirical evidence, which may be limited in scope and circumstances. For example, there is a tendency to generalise offline face-to-face discourse practices as benchmarks for assessing online discourses. Tsaliki (2002: 110) does not agree with likening the internet with the 'old

---

[11] The term 'public sphere' is a popular object of criticism – see, for example, a useful overview of possible critical accounts concerning the Habermasian concept undertaken by Henrike Schmidt and Katy Teubener in '(Counter)Public Sphere(s) on the Russian Internet' (2006). It should be noted that the purpose of this paper is not to assess the theoretical adequacy of the Habermasian perception of the public sphere, but to demonstrate the empirical application of some aspects of his discourse ethics theory.

familiar world of everyday politics'. She does not agree that approaches developed for traditional media should apply to new digital media as well. For Jankowski (2006), this is a result of the legacy of mass communication research, which has a significant influence on the research into online deliberative practices. Mass communication studies focus on 'audiences', 'senders' and 'receivers', which cannot be applied satisfactorily to new digital communities and their discourses. The term 'audience' in the context of new media loses its mass communications certainty, just as the traditional demarcation between 'senders' and 'receivers' changes its meaning as a result of the 'collectivation' of individual experiences into social ones (Hollander, Stappers and Jankowski 2002: 26-27). In the age of electronic communications, mass media have lost their monopoly on informing the public. A lack of innovation in researching public deliberation online is one of the causes of the existing ambiguity and radically opposing views about communicative practices on the internet (Jankowski and van Selm 2005).

At the moment, the available choice is limited – it is either studying the public spaces where such discussions take place or investigating their 'deliberative metrics' (see a useful overview of the models of democratic communication online in Freelon (2010), largely based on Dahlberg's (2001) classification of democratic models). The main object of the study of online (political) discussions has been so far the 'space' itself as a technological property rather than a social practice. Deliberative qualities are typically viewed through the lens of digital properties, such as online objects as texts, links, webpages, sites (Kelly, Fisher and Smith 2005; Schneider and Foot 2005) rather than a discursively constructed social action. A desired goal therefore would be to analyse the functioning of discourse properties in a digitally interactive environment of the virtual public sphere.

Centrality of dialogical 'validity claims' for analysing deliberative quality discursively

This paper offers an analytical framework based on discursively expressed social worldviews. It is built upon Habermas' discourse ethics theory (rather than on a more generic conception of the public sphere) and, specifically, on the process of claim making and validation during public discourses (see more in Misnikov 2010).

In Habermas' discourse ethics theory, 'basic validity claims' are central for understanding communicative action and the functioning of the public sphere in general (Habermas 1987a, 1987b, 1989, 1998). These are the discursive vehicles through which participants connect real-world practices with worldview perspectives communicatively. Habermas' understanding of reason and rationality as discursively manifested social phenomena rather than linguistic structures helps to address the contested issue of argumentation differently. He seeks to expand the boundaries of individual knowledge through collective intelligibility and thus to overcome the limitations of self-based rationality bound by personal behaviour and the ability to interact with others. Reciprocity and dialogism are those discursive instruments that translate the act of individual claim-making into the collective process of claim-validation. In other words, through cooperation in claim-validation, personal reasoning becomes collective intelligence, alongside the transformation of individuals into the citizenry. Habermas argues that to understand a speech act is to understand its indirect, intentional meaning, as well as the associated conditions that are closely related to social contexts. It can

only be done discursively, by means of the basic validity claims 'to know how one can make use of it in order to reach understanding with someone with regard to something' (Habermas 1998: 233). Making validity claims is critical to Habermas' conception of the interplay between pragmatic meaning, argumentative reasoning and mutual understanding. Non-communicative rationality, traditionally centred on individually motivated (rational or non-rational) behaviour, becomes a discursive rationality anchored in dialogically constructed 'world relations'. For Habermas, rationality is in validity, whereas validity is in meaning, which in turn can only be understood communicatively via speech acts. While Habermas (1992) does not clearly spell out the process of claim making and validation, he tends to equate validation to agreement and consent; for example, he writes:

> When someone rejects what is offered in an intelligible speech, he denies the validity of an utterance in at least one of three respects: *truth – validity claim, rightness, and truthfulness* (italics as in the original: YM). His 'no' signals that the utterance has failed to fulfil at least one of the three functions (the representation of state of affairs, the maintenance of an interpersonal relationship, or the manifestation of lived experience) because the utterance is not in accordance with either *the* world of existing states of affairs, *our* world of legitimately ordered interpersonal relations, or *each participant's own world* of subjective lived experience (Habermas 1992: 137).

For the purpose of this research, the meaning of validation has been interpreted to include any justified (by argumentation) response to claims, be it agreement or disagreement. Figure 1 summarises and combines the notions of communicative worlds, validity claims, meaning and, eventually, rationality as the basis of the project's theoretical and analytical framework.

Table 1. Description of Habermasian communicative claim-making worlds

Fact-based OBJECTIVE LIFE-WORLD for all	Value-based SHARED SOCIAL WORLDS for groups	Sincerity-based PERSONAL WORLDS for individuals
Validity Claim 1 Claimed propositional truth about the objective world	*Validity Claim 2* Claimed normative rightness of certain groups	*Validity Claim 3* Claimed subjective truthfulness about personal intentions
Interpretation of objective life-world's background knowledge and facts as a basis for making group-neutral propositions	Construction of intersubjective social solidarities/relations based on shared values as a basis for claiming group-specific interests	Internalisation of objective and shared worlds via acquiring knowledge, competences and values as a basis for claiming personal sincerity
Reproduction of cultural traditions and norm formation	Social integration, interpersonal relations via shared values	Personal development, affiliation and socialisation

Source: Author.

The underlying assumptions of the research project were as follows. First, online discussions often suffer from unequal and uneven participation when a minority of participants dominates a discourse (which is believed to reduce opportunities for participation by others). Second, the prevalence of highly interactive, mostly personal and often uncivil traits in discussions results in insufficient substantive quality and rationality. It is generally assumed by researchers that online political debates in Russia would be more personalised, individually sincere, emotional and oriented towards building shared solidarities with a higher degree of self-disclosure than argumentative, reasoned and impersonal. Bohman (1996), for example, insists that deliberation is interpersonal in principle and, hence, dialogical. While Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) observed significant variations in interactivity levels between online newsgroups in the Western context, there are no systematic studies, beyond anecdotal evidence, investigating the impact of a discourse type on discussion character, including civility and expressiveness. For instance, the differences between discussions that serve local audiences of small towns and those discourses with a national readership base are unclear. Knowing what differentiates discursive qualities would help assess online deliberations more objectively. Thirdly, even though Habermas eased (and then removed) his strict and idealised 'critical conditions' that required discourses to be consensus-based and fully participatory to be considered deliberative, there is still a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the role of agreement and disagreement in deliberation. Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) believe that online discussants prefer to agree rather than to disagree. Meanwhile, Ikeda and Huckfeldt (2001) argue that in partisan politics, citizens' political behaviour is contextualised rather than dependent on personal, group-specific, or cultural values, which may be less impactful. As it is problematic to extrapolate Russia's context to either of these findings, a separate analysis into online polemical and consensual practices using the benefits of validity claim to normative rightness was undertaken as well.

It was also hypothesised that the type, size, purpose, membership base, outreach and location of discussion forums would influence the discursive qualities of discussions; for example, it was expected that discussions dealing with emotional and sensitive issues such as social conflicts will be less argumentative and rational, whereas solution-seeking debates requiring greater accommodation of alternative views would be more civil and reasoned. Finally, this author expected evidence to support an assumption that online discourse is an alternative, non-institutionalised form of civic activism that expands opportunities for democratic participation in public life and encourages responsible citizenship through discursive collaboration and socialisation among strangers.

To find the answers that would support or reject the research hypotheses, a set of distinct discursive standards has been developed to guide the process of content coding. Each standard entails a number of specific empirical parameters designed to reflect upon certain discursive qualities of each post. While the discursive standards already take into account the existing practice of coding online content, e.g. the approaches used by Graham (2003, 2008), Tsaliki (2002), Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1998) and Mabry (1998), the coding process also included additional parameters pertaining to the Habermasian validity claims (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Discursive standards and coding parameters.

Discursive standard	Content coding parameters
Participatory equality and posting activism	1. Participant ID 2. Username 3. Membership status 4. Post ID 5. Participant post ID 6. Post total ID 7. Posting date
Civility	1. Civil (expressly polite/friendly welcoming, not necessarily supportive/can be critical) 2. Normal (ambivalent/neutral, can be both critical and supportive) 3. Uncivil (expressly rude/derogatory/unfriendly, offensive/hostile, not necessarily critical, can be supportive) 4. Other (hard to qualify, mostly a mix between civil and uncivil)
Validity claim-making and consensual practices	1. VC-1 – Propositional truth (Objective world) 2. VC-2 – Normative rightness (Common intersubjective worlds) 3. VC-3 – Subjective truthfulness (Personal worlds) 4. Disagreement (rejection/opposition/criticism/negative/dissent) 5. Disagreement (acceptance/approval/praise/positive/assent)
Discursive inter-activity and dialogism	1. Personally addressed, including use of addressee names, to authors of (a) seed post, (b) 2 preceding posts, (c) 10 preceding posts 2. Impersonally addressed posts 3. Direct references to other participants (including quotes) 4. Explicit responses (feedback) to other messages 5. Quotation of (a) seed post, (b) 2 preceding posts, (c) 10 preceding posts
Argumentation	1. Facts/conclusions/examples/comparisons/logical inferences/generalisations/other evidence presented to prove or disprove viewpoints 2. References to online resources (within and outside thread/forum) 3. References to print and broadcast media

Source: Author.

Each posted message is described by three interrelated unique numerical identifiers: (i) the first figure is the post's sequential number as it is posted in the discussion thread unlinked from the author (indicates the total number of all messages posted by all participants at any given moment); (ii) the second figure is participant-linked and represents his or her unique sequential number assigned chronologically after entering the discussion (indicates the total number of all participants at any given moment); (iii) and the third figure is linked to both the participant and his/her post assigned also in the sequential order of posting by each participant (the last figure represents the total number of posted messages by each participant). Thus each posted message can be uniquely identified through the combination of the three digits to reveal when it was posted and by whom. For example, a post coded as '12-4-2'

means that it was the 12th message on the thread posted by the 4th participant and it was the participant's 2nd posting. Each post was also coded in terms of dominant topics and specific issues pertinent to particular themes. The presence of dominant issues helped identify and code the claimed 'normative rightness' (Validity Claim 2). The availability of specific issues was critical for identifying issue-based positions expressed by participants. Consequently it enabled coding the act of claim-validation through agreements or disagreements (and thus to find out whether or not the latter were position-based). The main objective of coding was to disclose the dialogical character of claim validation and understand the intended meaning of each post.

Case studies: description of three discussion forums

The research analysed the content of 3,098 messages posted by 772 participants who contributed their comments to 25 online discussion threads on three web forums as case studies:

(a) *Izvestia* newspaper – referred to as *Izvestia* discourse (www.izvestia.ru/politic, http://forum.izvestia.ru, www.izvestia.ru/politclub).[12] *Izvestia's* web edition is a popular source of political news and commentaries in Russia. According to the LiveInternet.ru rating agency, in December 2009 the paper's website attracted a daily audience of approximately 100,000 visitors. *Izvestia* has been chosen as one of the three case studies due to its national coverage, recognisable media brand, strong interest in political news production, dissemination and commentary, thanks to its large-scale online discussion forum. Choosing particular discussion threads for content coding and analysis was a challenging task, for the available literature does not provide any guidance to this end. All online discussions on the forum are organised in the form of comment threads based on and attached to particular news articles that generated discussions (not all news items were commented on). Therefore, the content of article-generated discussions was one of the key criteria for thread sampling; another factor was the availability of comments. All 374 political news articles published on the paper's website between 1 April 2009 and 1 March 2010 and commented on by readers were reviewed to select the final sample of thirteen threads.[13] The period was selected to coincide with the discussion of President Medvedev's major political initiatives since he took office. It was found that over 70 percent of all news published during the 11 month[14] period was actually discussed by readers, who posted 13,027 messages. This amount was considered sufficiently high to provide a reliable base for message sampling; it was also an indication of the importance of news commenting for public discussion. As a result, thirteen threads (with a total of 1,073 posted comments) that were thematically relevant to the topic of Medvedev's modernisation agenda and met the typical for the forum criteria were selected for coding. The thread sample is presented below:

---

[12] Unfortunately, due to the recent re-design of the site, discussion threads containing readers' comments are not available for viewing any longer on *Izvestia* website; however, they are available with the author of this article.

[13] Accessed 8 March 2010.

[14] A period of around one year was selected as a sufficiently lengthy space of time to exclude occasional fluctuations and secure maximum diversity of both news and discussions.

1. Dmitry Medvedev: 'Russia, Forward!' (*Dmitry Medvedev: 'Rossiia, vperëd'*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3132919, 448 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very large size, medium duration, very high intensity.

2. President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev: People are capable of change not only by force (*Prezident Rossii Dmitry Medvedev: Narod sposoben meniat'sia ne tol'ko iz-pod palki*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3136967, 139 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very large size, medium duration, medium intensity.

3. To become a society of smart, free and responsible people (*Stat' obshchestvom um-nykh, svobodnykh i otvetstvennykh liudei*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3135284, 113 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very large size, very short duration, very high intensity.

4. Dmitry Medvedev: 'The memory about our tragedies is sacred, just as the memory about our victories' (*Dmitry Medvedev: 'Pamiat' o natsional'nykh tragediiakh tak zhe sviashchenna, kak pamiat' o pobedakh'*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3134893, 80 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, large size, very short duration, very high intensity.

5. Medvedev has begun euro-refurbishment (*Medvedev nachal evroremont*), www.izvestia.ru/politclub/article3133165, 79 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, large size, very long duration, very low intensity.

6. State corporate ethics. 22 criminal cases have been opened following the investigation of the General Persecution Office (*Goskorporativnaia etika. Posle proverok genpro-kuratury vozbuzhdeno 22 ugolovnykh dela*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3135184, 66 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, large size, long duration, low intensity.

7. Russian democracy will be the Russian one, not someone else's (*Rossiiskaia demok-ratiia budet rossiiskoi, a ne ch'ei-to eshche*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3132992, 49 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, medium size, very long duration, very low intensity.

8. Dmitry Medvedev: 'Democracy does not require justification' (*Dmitry Medvedev: 'Demokratiia ne trebuet reabilitatsii'*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3127468/, 30 posted comments; commentary type: Disrupted and broken into 2 parts, short duration (both parts – very short), medium size (1st – very small, 2nd – medium), low intensity (1st – very low, 2nd – medium)

9. On the eve of the 'second wave'. Political system of Russia before a new political season (*Nakanune 'vtoroi volny'. Politicheskaia sistema Rossii v preddverii novogo politicheskogo sezona*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3132643/, 21 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, small size, very long duration, very low intensity.

10. Resetting Russia: the contours of the breakthrough (*Perezapusk Rossii: kontur proryva),* www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3137256, 18 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, small size, short duration, low intensity.

11. A technology to secure democracy (*Tekhnologii obespecheniia demokratii*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3135885, 13 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very small size, medium duration, very low intensity.

12. President to correct the electoral system (*Prezident popravit izbiratel'nuiu sistemu*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3134732, 9 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very small size, long duration, very low intensity.

13. Internet version. The World Wide Web has allowed ordinary citizens participating in the preparation of the President's address (*Internet-versiia. Vsemirnaia set' pozvolila riadovym grazhdanam priniat' uchastie v podgotovke poslaniia prezidenta*), www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3135234, 8 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very small size, very short duration, medium intensity.

(b) Motorists' movement known as 'Freedom of Choice' – referred to as the Motorists' discourse (http://www.19may.ru/forum/index.php). The case describes online discussions conducted on the web forum of the inter-regional non-governmental organisation Freedom of Choice (*Mezhregional'naia Obshchestvenaya Organisatsiia 'Svoboda Vybora'*). From 2005 to 2008, the Freedom of Choice organisation was one of the most active in mobilising and organising protest actions among motorists across Russia. Its main objectives included defending motorists' rights as citizens from abuse by authorities, advocating safe driving and lobbying for state policies governing motoring. In a broader sense, Freedom of Choice was a civil society movement encouraging ordinary people to protest against social injustice and the state's ineffectiveness in dealing with motorists' problems. Freedom of Choice had a strong presence throughout Russia via local branches that operated their own websites and discussion forums. It had a special advantage – its head, Viacheslav Lysakov, was a member of the Parliamentary transport committee and thus could lobby law makers in the interest of motorists. Russian motorists have created a certain type of the culture of civic activism representing a very substantial population of car owners who wanted to express their collective discontent towards the state. The active use of online and offline communication for both self-organisation and collaboration with other similar entities exemplified the type of civic society activism that Bach and Stark (2003, 2004) define as the combinatory logic of 'search, link, integrate' to characterise the impact of ICTs on civil society. The selection of Freedom of Choice's forum as a case study was determined by two main factors. One was the inseparability of its online discussions from offline actions in real life. This was considered to be an advantage, allowing comparison with the exclusively online character of *Izvestia's* less practical discourses. The other reason this forum was chosen was the diversity and intensity of its discussion threads. Between 2005 and September 2010, Freedom of Choice's online forum accumulated 146,000 messages posted to 8,700 discussion themes. Contrary to the *Izvestia* forum, Freedom of Choice discussions were not dependent on the news media: only 5 percent of all discussion threads fell under the news category. A sample of ten threads was se-

lected to form the case study. Each thread reflected upon specific protest action undertaken in 2006-2008. The thread sample is as follows below:

1. Action-10.[15] AGAINST: inflated benzene prices, a 70% share of taxation in the price of 1 litre of fuel, poor fuel quality; FOR: the accumulation of all fuel taxes in the Federal Road Fund to address road related problems, 24 May 2008 (*Aktsiia-10. PROTIV: zavyshennykh tsen na benzin, 70%-go urovnia nalogovogo bremeni v tsene litra topliva, plokhogo kachestva topliva. ZA: akkumulirovanie vsekh 'toplivnykh' nalogov v Federal'nom dorozhnom fonde dlia resheniia dorozhnykh problem, 24 maia 2008 g.*), All-Russia Action 24 May: Car fuel at affordable (people's) price! All tax proceeds from fuel tax to invest in bridges and ROADS! (*Vserossiiskaia Aktsiia 24 maia:'TOPLIVO' strane – po narodnoi tsene! Vse benzo-nalogi – v mosty i DOROGI'!*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=10472, 571 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, extremely large size, long duration, very high intensity.

2. Action-4. Against amendments to traffic rules that outlaw the passenger cars with red side turn signals and yellow identification (gabarite) lights, 28 January 2006 (*Aktsiia-4. Protiv popravok v PDD, postavivshikh vne zakona mashiny s krasnymi povorotnikami i zheltymi gabaritami, 28 ianvaria 2006g.*), Learning lessons (*Razbor polëtov*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=4183, 124 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very large size, very short duration, very high intensity.

3. Action-5. In defence of Oleg Shcherbinskii unjustly accused of the death of Governor Ievdokimov, 12 February 2006 (*Aktsiia-5. V zashchitu Olega Shcherbinskogo, nepravomerno obvinennogo v gibeli gubernatora Ievdokimova, 12 fevralia 2006 g.*), A protest action needed in defence of Shcherbinskii case (*Nuzhna aktsiia protesta po Shcherbinskomu*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=4316, 108 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very large size, very short duration, very high intensity.

4. Action-7. Against unlawful removal of compact parking shells ('*rakushki*') and the planned introduction of payment-based parking in Moscow, 30 September 2006 (*Aktsiia-7. Protiv nezakonnogo snosa 'rakushek' i planov vvedeniia povsemestnoi platnoi parkovki v Moskve, 30 sentiabria 2006 g.*), Mottos for the 'live shields' and the future action (*Lozungi dlia 'zhivykh shchitov' i budushchei aktsii*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=6566, 58 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, large size, medium duration, between low and very low intensity.

5. Action-6. Against privilege-giving roof flashing lights ('flashers'/ '*migalki*'), special privilege-giving plates and other privileges granted to government officials, against anti-car owners amendments to civil laws, 27 May 2006 (*Aktsiia-6. Protiv 'migalok', spetsnomerov i dr. privilegii chinovnikam, protiv antivoditelskikh popravok v KoAP, 27 maia 2006 g.*), Amendments to civil laws – a preliminary position of the Constitu-

---

[15] The Action numbers (e.g. Action-10) appear in the text as they were assigned on the forum's website and differ from the preceding thread numbers assigned by the author for research purposes.

tional Court (*Aktsiia-6.Popravki v KoAP – proekt pozitsii KS*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=5884, 46 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, medium size, between very short to medium duration, medium intensity.

6. Action-8. Against the inflated prices and poor quality of benzene, for allocating oil profits for road construction, 14 October 2006 (*Aktsiia-8. Protiv zavyshennykh tsen i plokhogo kachestva benzina, za napravlenie neftianykh deneg na stroitel'stvo dorog, 14 oktiabria 2006 g.*), Drafting a letter to authorities (benzene and diesel fuel) (*Podgotovka pis'ma vlastiam (benzin i GSM)* http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=6986, 39 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, medium size, very short duration, high intensity.

7. Action-2. Against inflated prices of benzene, car insurance tariffs, transportation tax levels, 30 July 2005 (*Aktsiia-2. Protiv zavyshennykh tsen na benzin, tarifov OSAGO, sravok transportnogo naloga, 30 iiulia 2005 g.*), What you are doing is rubbish... (*Ierundoi vy zanimaetes'....*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=2447, 29 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, medium size, medium duration, medium intensity.

8. Action-3. Against the planned 5-fold increase in transportation tax, 10 December 2005 (*Aktsiia-3. Protiv planov piatikratnogo povysheniia transportnogo naloga, 10 dekabria 2005 g.*), Orange proposal (*Apel'sinovoe Predlozhenie*), http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=3543, 19 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, small size, very short duration, low intensity.

9. Action-9. In defence of the right-hand steering wheel. No to draconian fines, 16 December 2006 (*Aktsiia-9. Zashchitim pravyi rul'! Net drakonovskim shtrafam!, 16 dekabria 2006 g.*), Reflections (*Razmyshleniia*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=7598, 19 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, small size, very short duration, between low and medium intensity.

10. Action-1. Against the government's plan to ban passenger cars with the right-hand steering wheel, 19 May 2005 (*Aktsiia-1: Protiv namereniia Pravitelstva zapretit' ekspluatatsiiu mashin s pravym rulem, 19 maia 2005 g.*), An article in the MK-Mobil' magazine (*Stat'ia v MK-Mobil'*) http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=47, 10 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very small size, very short duration, medium intensity.

(c) The town of Kondopoga – referred to as Kondopoga discourse (www.cityK.ru). Case study 3 analysed two online discussions that took place on a website run by the small Russian town of Kondopoga called CityK (*GorodK*). In late August-early September 2006, Kondopoga gained nationwide infamy as the site of a tragic inter-ethnic conflict between local residents of Russian and Chechen descent (allegedly including members of other nationalities). The unfolding events were discussed in real-time on the CityK discussion forum (as well as many other internet forums across Russia) and attracted a large audience. The events also generated considerable attention in the print and broadcast media.

Kondopoga served as the catalyst for what was perhaps the first truly public debate in contemporary Russian history, although it was an unpleasant one. It is particularly significant that this debate dealt with the very sensitive and inflammatory topic of inter-ethnic relations, which have always been problematic in post-Soviet Russia, but never before been publicly acknowledged through open discussion. Kondopoga's local CityK forum provided the venue for this difficult discourse. It initially began as an effort to share information as it was witnessed first-hand by local residents as events were unfolding. Local information sharing soon turned into a full-fledged national debate dubbed War in the City (*Voina v gorode*). The scale of the discussion was very large; during the first five days from 30 August to 3 September 2006, 2,688 messages were posted on the forum (538 per day), attracting half a million views.

In the Kondopoga forum, War in the City was effectively one very large thread that received thousands of posted messages over a period of many months. The challenge was how to reduce the extremely large number of messages to a more manageable group of around 1,000 posts. While it was not feasible to analyse the entire discussion from start to end, it was reasonable to include as many messages as possible, beginning with the first post, on the assumption that several hundred posts would be sufficiently representative of the entire discussion during its high intensity phase (the first week after the initial violence took place). It was determined that 800 messages would comprise the posting sample for this thread (it was termed Thread 1). This limit was chosen to accommodate the size of another discussion thread of about 200 posts that occurred on the forum one year later and was relevant to the conflict. Thread 2 attempted to understand and learn from the events of August and September 2006, so that the tragedy would not be repeated again. At the time when the sample selection was finalised in 2008-9, the thread included 193 messages posted between 11 July 2007 and 23 April 2008. Thus in total, Threads 1 and 2 accounted for the entire sample size of 993 messages, which matched the sample target of approximately 1,000 posts as a desired standard for all forums. The thread sample is as follows:

1. Kondopoga conflict – War in the city. How it all began (*Voina v gorode. Kak vse nachinalos'*) http://www.cityk.ru/viewtopic.php?t=1700, 800 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, extremely large size, very short duration, very high intensity.

2. Kondopoga conflict – It all is behind us now. Most important that it won't happen again! (*Vse eto pozadi, glavnoe, chtoby bol'she takogo ne povtorilos'!*) http://www. cityk.ru/viewtopic.php?t=6189, 193 posted comments; commentary type: Continuous, very large size, very long duration, very low intensity.

While each of these forums is unique, they share common features. They are unique in that they each address specific social interests and serve different locations: Kondopoga forum represents the local community of a particular town; Freedom of Choice defends civil rights of Russian motorists; and *Izvestia* forum serves a broad, national audience interested in public politics. Common features include the forums' ability to meet the discursive needs of Russia's ordinary citizens. All three forums are independent from authorities, fully public

and accessible to anyone willing to participate in discussion (after simple online registration). Very little pre-moderation was exercised to edit or delete offensive posts; rather, participants usually received a warning from the moderator before content was edited or removed. Technologically, the forums' web interfaces of discussion thread organisation and the way messages were posted were similar. As far as the forums membership and readership base could be judged by reviewing the profiles of registered users and the content of their posts, forum discussants were ordinary Russian citizens. Overall, the true identities of participants are considered irrelevant to the research and no effort was made to learn the real-world identities (including gender) or names beyond known usernames. Contributors' communication actions are more important than their real or virtual identities; for example, Graham (2008) and Wilhelm (1999) consider the knowledge of participants' identities as unimportant for analysing online debates viewed as predominately impersonal public discourses.

Cross-Forum Analysis: main findings

Izvestia discourse. The content of posted messages did not provide any evidence that would suggest unequal participation or coercion of discussants. Even in cases of strongly personal and ideologically motivated disagreements, participants were free to express themselves as they wished and were willing to continue communicating with their opponents. Even uncivil messages did not disrupt the discussion process. However, the analysis of posting activism revealed unevenness in online participation. Discussions were normally neutral in tone. Openly uncivil and polite posts were rare. Intentional (and often exaggerated) civility served as a special type of argumentation, or was used to attract additional attention for other reasons. The level of demonstrated emotion was rather high, with no less than one in three messages using expressive means of communication. Posts that were constructed as speech acts intended to convey instructions or promise action were uncommon, which may indicate that the purpose of the debating community was to discuss issues, not undertake action, which would require a change in the implied intention. Given the predominantly impersonal and public character of discussion, the degree of self-disclosure manifested via Validity Claim 3 was relatively high. While debates were mostly impersonal, many posts contained interpersonal communications. Messages directed at specific participants prompted them to respond in order to maintain an initiated dialogue, often by quoting original posts; the latter served as a manifestation of dialogical responsiveness. The fact that the overwhelming majority of posts containing quotes was concentrated within the ten most recent messages indicated a high degree of dialogical responsiveness. Well over half of all claims were validated via disagreement, with only one-fifth through agreement. Disagreement was the primary means of deliberation through which the substantial ideological and social divisions among participants were reflected. As many as four out of five posts contained some form of reasoning and argumentation. This reflected a highly polemical character of debates; merely behaving emotionally was not considered a successful strategy to win over others' positions. Thematically, discussions were clearly politics-based, focusing on publicly significant issues within the realm of state, government and society.

Motorists discourse. Overall, the Motorists' discourses were focused and disciplined in their efforts to address specific problems. They were also dialogically responsive and friendly. The problem-solving nature of discussions engendered mutual respect among the participants. Otherwise, it would be impossible to solve the problems associated with protest organisation. There was a greater sense of cohesiveness in this community of like-minded citizens as they worked together towards their common goal of protecting the rights of Russian motorists. Another special quality of the Motorists' forum was its moderate level of disagreements, although participants still demonstrated strong argumentation. However, even though the Motorists' case represented a different type of online public discourse – i.e. its very mission was different – many discursive qualities were nonetheless very close to those displayed in *Izvestia* debates. There was little difference, for example, in the distribution of active and passive participants in terms of their posting activism. While some posts were slightly rude, they were never offensive. The leader of the movement played the important role of forum moderator, whose interventions contributed to the smooth, civil and pragmatic discussions. The widespread use of both commissives and directives was a good indicator of the 'mobilisational' character of the Motorists' discourses.

Kondopoga discourse. The analysis of the Kondopoga discourse revealed that in terms of discursive standards, it was not fundamentally different from other forums. Disagreements in argumentation dominated, impersonal character prevailed over interpersonal communications and responsiveness was well pronounced. However, the forum's different purpose and setting, as well as the discussion's underlying cause, led to certain visible differences in the manifestation of such discursive standards as civility, speech act type and posting activity in comparison with the Motorists' and *Izvestia* forums. Moreover, Thread 2 had more in common with other forums than with Thread 1. The latter was significantly less guided and reflexive, serving primarily as a tool for information sharing (at least in its initial phase). Participants from outside Kondopoga town (and the Karelia region at large) were able to hijack the discussion, which prompted local members to assert their ownership and authority over the debate. Still, it was a full-fledged public discussion that was important in its own right, despite polarised views. Discussions not only manifested disagreements which were already in existence offline, but also asserted and re-negotiated them.

Comparing interactivity and dialogism

Discussions in all three case studies demonstrated a prevailing impersonal character, with over half of all posted messages addressing all participants (Figure 1). *Izvestia* and Kondopoga discourses showed almost identical percentages of impersonal posts – 55-60 percent – while discussions on the Motorists' forum were more impersonal with 71 percent of posts directed at the general readership. This was an interesting finding. For a tightly managed, discursive community (many of its members knew one another personally) it would be natural to expect more personalised discussions (which was the case only in few threads). However, on average, the majority of posts avoided interpersonal interaction. Even after excluding the largest threads from each forum's sample, motorists' discussions were still the least personal (with 55 percent of posts classified as impersonal, as opposed to 52 percent for *Izvestia*).

Figure 1. Comparing interpersonal and impersonal interaction (among all posts).
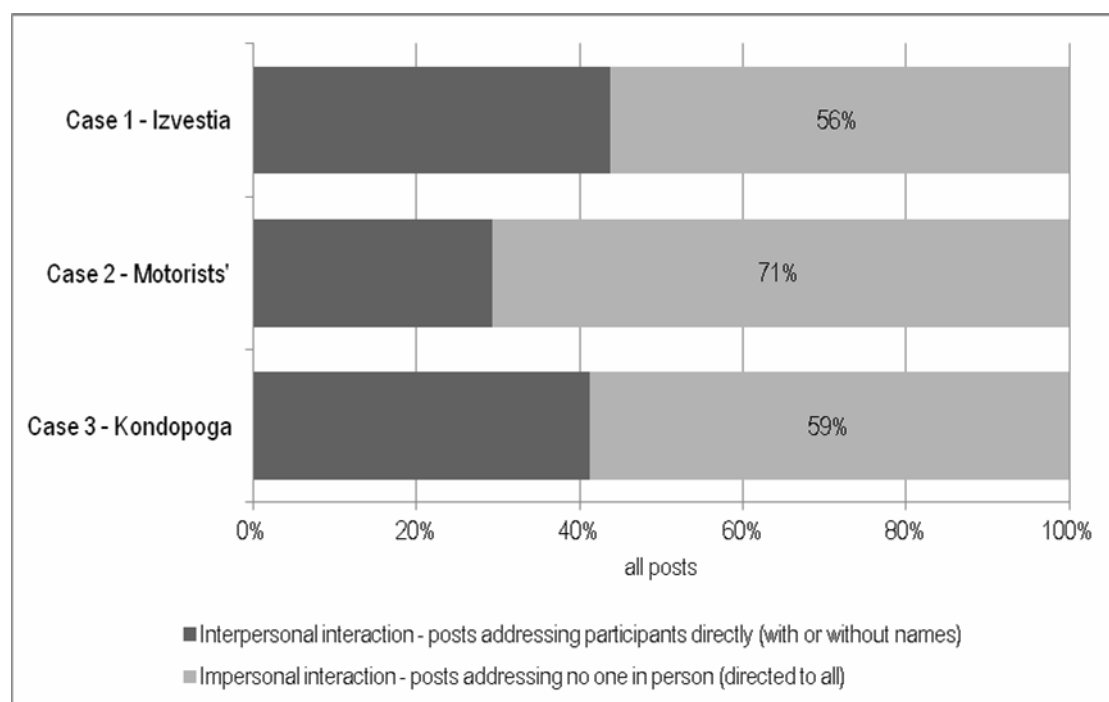
Source: Author.

In all forums, 80-90 percent of all interpersonal communications were consistently concentrated within the ten most recent posts; that is, participants did not read beyond the ten most recent posts and therefore tended to comment only on the newest ones (Figure 2). One out of four interpersonal posts on the *Izvestia* and Kondopoga forums was addressed to specific participants using their proper or online names. The Motorists' site differed in this regard, with a much higher percentage (39 percent) of such posts, even though in general, interpersonal interactions were less frequent in this forum. Posts using participants' names were also typically concentrated within the last ten posts, though this phenomenon was less pronounced in the Motorists' forum, where 63 percent of all interpersonal posts were located within the last ten posts, compared with 85-90 percent of interpersonal posts on the *Izvestia* and Kondopoga forums. The use of names was not essential and served rather to strengthen the already explicit interpersonal character of communication. Generally, all three forums were more alike than different in terms of interpersonal interaction. Participants who used quoted material in their posts represented another form of interpersonal interaction (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Comparing extent and concentration of interpersonal interaction.
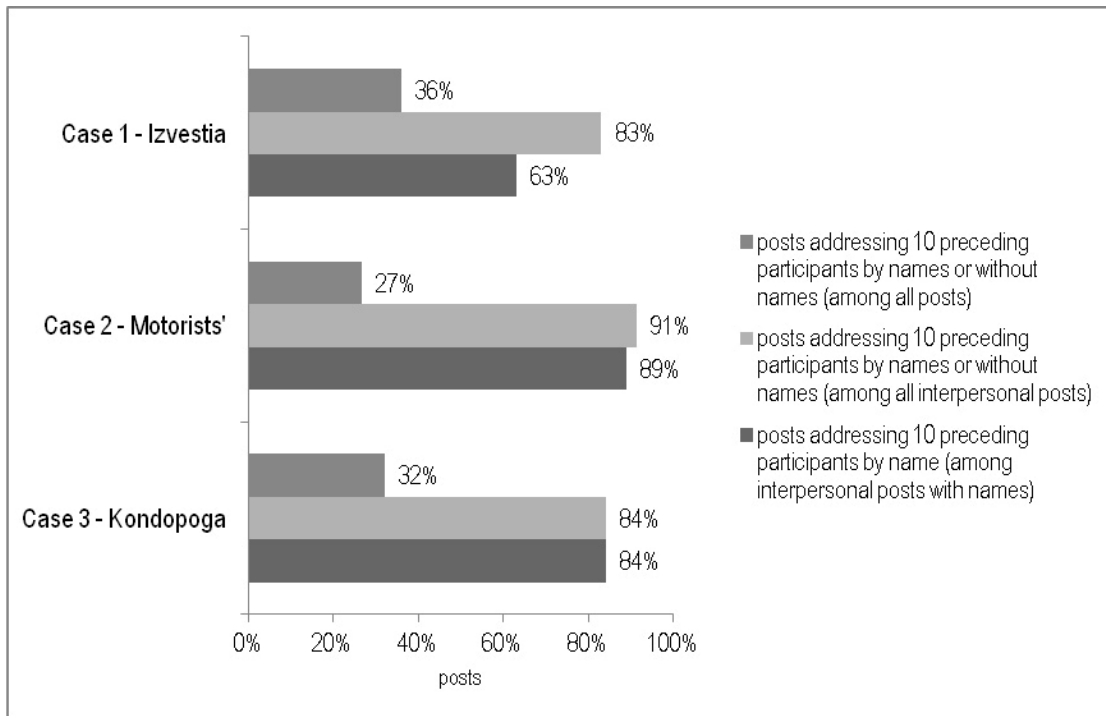
Source: Author.

Figure 3. Comparing extent and concentration of quoted material.
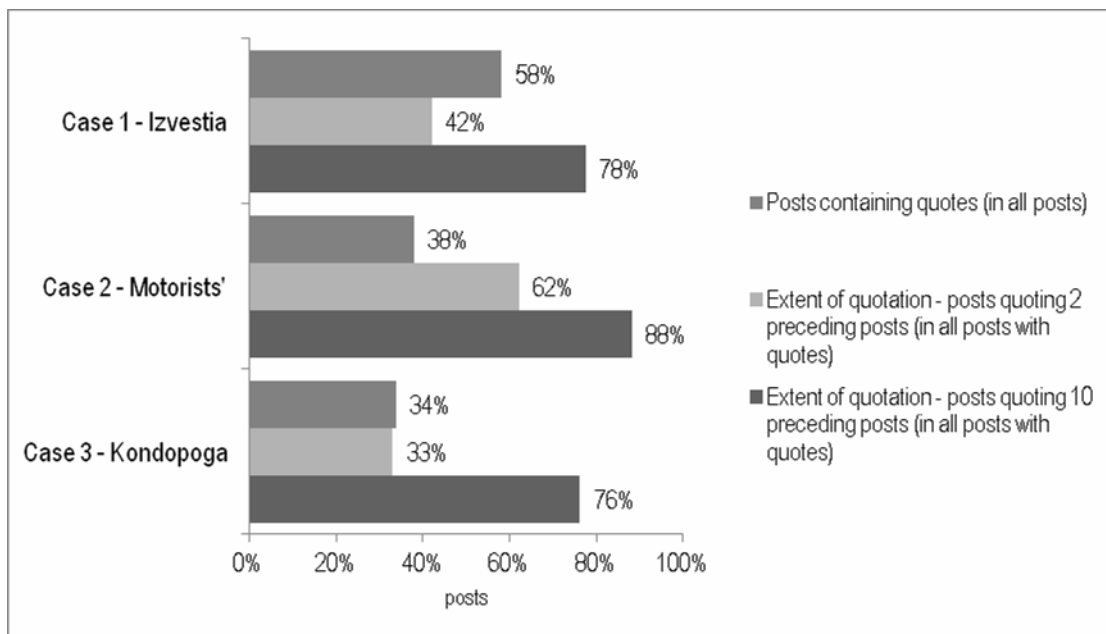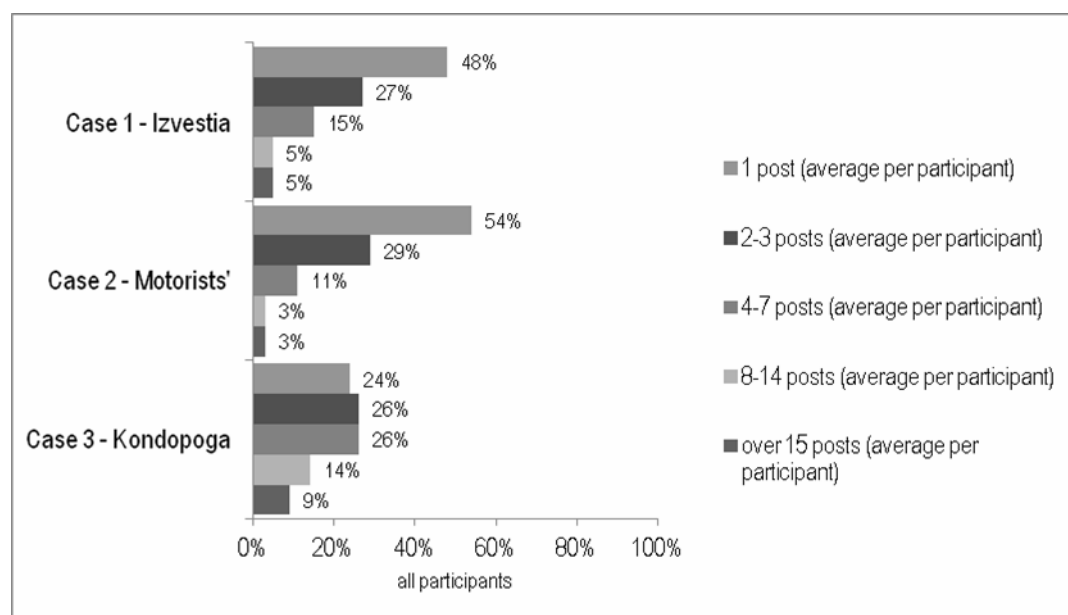

Source: Author.

Quoting previously posted messages was key to maintaining dialogue. At least one in three posts quoted one or more previous messages; on the *Izvestia* forum every second message contained quoted material. As with more indirect interpersonal interaction, participants tended to take quotes from the most recently posted messages; for example, at least one-third of all posts quoted the latest two messages, while no less than two-thirds drew from the previous ten most recent messages.

Motorists' discussions were more dialogically consistent and responsive and almost every message posted received some sort of reaction from the larger community. As much as 62 percent of all quoted material referenced the last two posts and almost nine-tenths focused on the previous ten. This high rate of responsiveness through the use of quotations reaffirms the conclusion that Motorists' discussions possess a greater degree of dialogicality. The importance of quotation as a predictor of dialogical responsiveness is also supported by the evidence from Kondopoga's Thread 2; the latter was more dialogical than Thread 1 thanks to the significantly higher number of responses given to the preceding (i.e. most recent) posts.

Comparing participatory equality and posting activism

Motorists' and *Izvestia* discourses demonstrated similar patterns of activism, with participants from both forums posting with almost identical frequency. As a rule, single-post contributors dominated discussions and accounted for half of all discussants (Figure 4), followed by 27-30 percent of all participants who posted two-three messages each.

Figure 4. Comparing posting activism (frequency of posting).
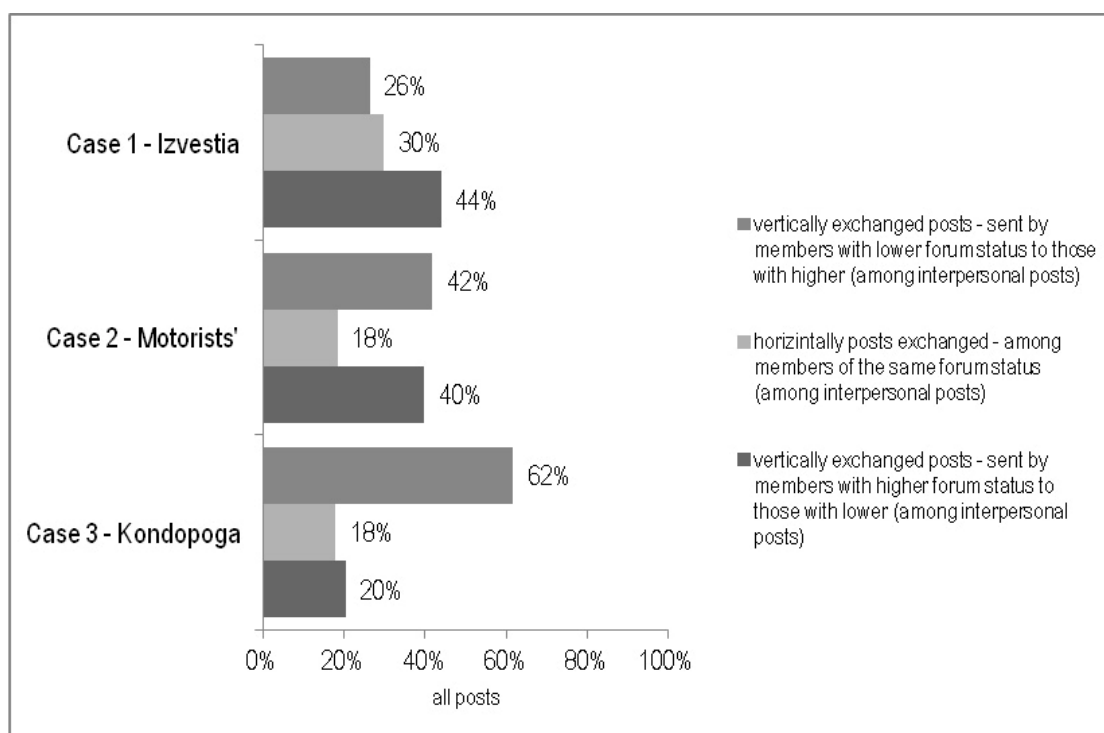

Source: Author.

A small group of the most active participants (3 to 5 percent) sent on average more than fifteen posts each. Kondopoga discussions were visibly different, with more evenly distributed participatory activism. This forum was not dominated by one-post discussants. Single-post discussants participated at the same rate as those who posted two-three and four-seven messages per thread and constituted one-fourth of all participants. Those who posted between four and seven messages composed 26 percent of the Kondopoga group, as opposed to 11-15 percent of the *Izvestia* and Motorists' groups. Finally, the group containing the most active contributors, who posted over eight messages, was at least two to three times larger than in the other two forums. At first sight, this data suggests that activism on the Kondopoga forum is more evenly distributed among its participants. However, this could be misleading, since this forum has a narrower participant base. Each participant was responsible for an average of six posts, while on the *Izvestia* forum, for example, this indicator was four posts, which might have allowed for more participants to take part in *Izvestia* discourses.

The consistently observed unevenness of message posting among participants should necessarily not be considered as an inequality in participatory terms. Instead, it was rather a natural feature of discursively distributed interaction, which was typical for each analysed thread with a statistically sufficient number of posts (at least 30-50) and participants (at least 10-15). It was more important that participants could move across groups from one discussion to another (although this was not the focus of the research).

Posting frequency and the actual content of posted messages did not disclose an inequality of participation in terms of coercion and denying an opportunity to send messages. Everyone could participate freely, regardless of their real-life status and there were no indications (from the posted content) that someone was excluded from debates or forced to participate in them. Although some received warnings from site administrators and discussion moderators to curb (rarely demonstrated) offensive behaviour, not a single one of the 772 unique contributors who took part in the 25 analysed discussion threads was actually expelled for good. Only a relatively small number of offensive messages were deleted or edited by site administrators and discussion moderators. Once participants were warned by moderators, their subsequent posts would carry for some time a badge that labelled them as 'warned' or 'banned'. Throughout the three thousand analysed posts, there was neither explicit nor implicit denial of any participants' right to contribute, even in the most ideologically and emotionally charged Kondopoga discourses.

To obtain additional insights into participation inequality, interactions between participants with different online statuses were analysed (Figure 5). Each discussant on all three forums was assigned a member status that reflected the level of discussion activism including the time spent on the forum. Each forum had its distinctive (though similar in principle) status criteria and definitions visible for everyone. On the *Izvestia* forum, these were Novices ('*novichki*'), Regulars ('*zavsegdatai*'), Old-Timers ('*dolgozhiteli*') and Legends ('*legendy*'). On the Motorists' forum: Guests (the status was in English), Users ('*pol'zovateli*'), Active Users ('*aktivnye polzovateli*'), Participants ('*uchastniki*'), Active Participants ('*aktivnye uchastniki*') and various positions within the Freedom of Choice movement's management structure.

Figure 5. Comparing interpersonal interactions among discussants with different forum member status.

Source: Author.

On the Kondopoga forum there was a more complex system of status acquisition; starting with Guests ('*gosti*'), Strangers ('*neznakomtsy*'), Novices ('*novichki*'), Beginners ('*nachinaiushchie*'), Regulars/Active ('*postoial'tsy/aktivnye*'), Old-Timers ('*starozhily*'), 1,000+ (the highest status, which is achieved after posting between 600-1,000 messages, thus earning authors the right to name their own personal status themselves, in addition to their user names) and Administrator/Moderator.

All three case studies demonstrated a high degree of inter-status equality, which manifested in 70 to 80 percent of all interpersonal posts directed at participants with different statuses. This was especially true for the Kondopoga and Motorists' discourses, where four out of five posts were vertical, inter-status interactions, while the *Izvestia* forum was less egalitarian with approximately as many as one-third of posts being horizontal, intra-status interactions (i.e. exchanges among participants of the same status).

Forums had both differences and similarities with regard to the structure and pattern of within-status interactions. For example, one common similarity was that horizontal communications were in the minority. In the *Izvestia* and Kondopoga forums, such communications comprised the second largest group, while in the Motorists' forum it was the smallest group, accounting for about one-fifth of all interpersonal posts. Kondopoga's largest thread was especially different. Close to two-thirds of all posts were sent by lower status members to those of higher status. Horizontally directed messages accounted for only 4 percent of posts; it was the result of particularly strong activism on the part of the newly registered non-Kondopoga

participants. Kondopoga's Thread 2 demonstrated a more proportional distribution of vertically and horizontally directed communications.

The Kondopoga and Motorists' forums were the most egalitarian. The number of intra-status posts was four times smaller than the number of communications between upper and lower statuses. For example, a group of Kondopoga participants of lower status (comprised of 67 Strangers, 21 Novices and nine Beginners) – two-thirds of all Kondopoga participants, irrespective of any particular thread, addressed four-fifths of their interpersonal posts (164 out of 206) to a group of 40 discussants of higher status (Regulars, Old-timers, 1,000+, Administrator/Moderator). *Izvestia* discourses were also equal in this respect, although to a lesser extent due to the consistently larger size of groups with vertically oriented communications, even if the actual number of participants with different statuses was an important factor that could influence the distribution of cross-status posts. The freedom to post messages was not hampered by differences in the discussants' membership status, or by their actual geographical location.

Comparing civility

All three case studies have similar patterns of post distribution with regard to their civility-incivility dichotomy. While there were differences between the forums, a common feature was the prevalence of neutral messages that were neither civil nor uncivil. The share of such posts was at least 63 percent for Kondopoga and a maximum of 75 percent for the Motorists' forum (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Comparing civility.
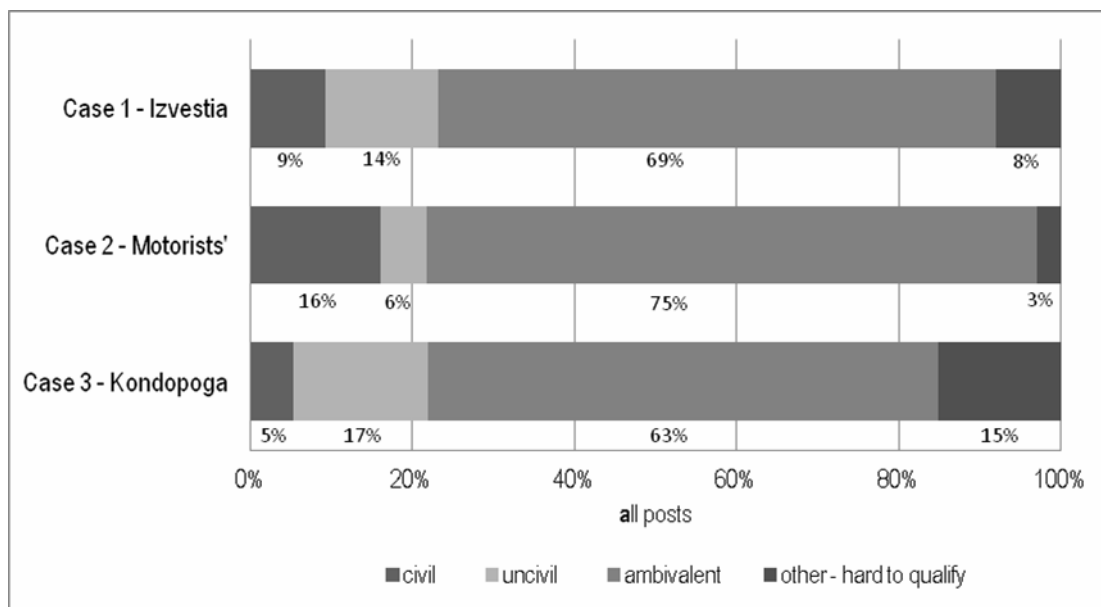
Source: Author.

Another common trend shared by all three forums was that both civil and uncivil messages accounted for 20 to 25 percent of all posts, with the remaining 75 percent of posts being neutral, of mixed and hard to qualify content. The share of such posts did not have a noticeable impact on the overall character of civility and incivility, except in Kondopoga (where more posts were deleted by moderators because of their incivility).

The Motorists' forum stood out as the most civil of the three forums, demonstrating the lowest share (6 percent) of uncivil posts, significantly less than on the *Izvestia* and Kondopoga forums (14 and 17 percent respectively). By the same token, the Motorists' forum enjoyed the highest share of civil posts (16 percent of posts), compared to Kondopoga's 5 percent and *Izvestia*'s 9 percent. The latter two forums shared more common attributes when compared to the Motorists' forum case study. This fact highlights the qualitatively different character of motorists as a cohesive community who shared common views and were willing to organise themselves to take further action. Shared ideology and a strong sense of community influenced discursive behaviour: it would be impossible if group members were not friendly and respectful to one another.

Kondopoga discussions were motivated by local events. Many forum participants knew each other personally and communicated offline as well. It was a community united by a shared physical location and a common willingness to communicate. Thus, it would be logical to expect that discussion threads would reveal a similarly cohesive debating community. However, this was only partially true. Thread 1 was effectively monopolised by external participants who displayed more hostility towards (ethnically) non-Russians, which in turn led to lower civility. The excessive rudeness exhibited by outsiders in this thread diminished a sense of community. In contrast, Thread 2 was a discussion conducted largely by local residents. While this thread addressed the same sensitive issue of inter-ethnic relations (albeit one year later), it was significantly more civil, with almost one out of ten posts expressing cordial, friendly, or supportive sentiments.

It was not easy to explain the higher degree of incivility on the Kondopoga forum. Higher expressiveness and more emotion did not necessarily lead to rudeness. Unfriendliness and hostility between participants holding diverging views did not seem to play a major role either, for even among like-minded participants the use of relatively or openly uncivil language (but not necessarily impolite in relation to participants) was not exceptional. Perhaps a higher degree of incivility could be partly explicated by the exceptional character of the tragic events. It could also partly be due to the casual manner of communication that is typical of every-day talk, especially among a tightly-knit, geographically identifiable community of peers. The active participation of non-resident discussants holding extreme and often xenophobic views could be another reason for the use of uncivil language. They did not see themselves as members of the Kondopoga debating community and did not possess any responsibility in this regard. Their communications were not restrained by ethics or friendship, and were therefore more prone to incivility. Finally, the virtual character of digitally enabled communications coupled with anonymity might have also been a contributing factor for higher levels of tolerance to incivility (it would seem unlikely that the same participants could use similarly uncivil vocabulary when communicating face-to-face in public). Digital construction of texts helped realise the widely practiced strategy of masking derogative language through word alteration, which often involved reshuffling letters to make a word less

recognisable in order to avoid being banned for the open use of uncivil language. In addition, the digital properties of online communication also facilitated the use of emoticons to express incivility as a way of being disrespectful without using rude words. It must be noted, however, that the use of rude expressions was rarely directed at participants themselves. It was rather a more typical way to express anger towards events, institutions, or communities. External participants, who were not part of the Kondopoga forum before the conflict, were visibly more rude and discourteous.

Despite higher instances of incivility, Kondopoga discussions should not be discarded as useless or meaningless. Content analysis of posted messages proved that online discussions played a very important social role for forum participants, particularly local residents. During the War in the City conflict, discussants (and also those who read posted messages, but did not post them) lacked objective information that would have been otherwise provided by independent media (many discussants complained about government propaganda and information blockades). Moreover, authorities could not offer credible reconciliation mechanisms or alternative methods to relay and discuss public grievances. In the absence of formal, institutionalised forms and channels of public communication and information exchange on the part of authorities and the media, online discussions filled the void by providing an opportunity for citizen-to-citizen communicative cooperation.

One of the major lessons to be learned from Kondopoga's online discourses is that civility (or rationality for that matter) could be less essential to citizens than sincerity, openness and collaboration, especially in special circumstances when online interaction is the only option for true public communication regardless of individual political preferences.

Comparing argumentation

On all three forums, participants actively used various forms of reasoning, including comparing cases and contrasting various examples, drawing conclusions and making generalisations, presenting figures and facts and proposing recommendations and solutions. The primary objective of reasoning was to persuade, convince, defend and dispute positions. In that respect, many discussions were sufficiently rational. This was a surprising outcome, given that these discussions were not debates among experts who were expected to be intentionally argumentative. However, it was clear from the post content that discussants were conscious of the need to be convincing in the eyes of others. As a result, while individual posts – and also entire threads, especially small ones – varied substantially, the overall level of argumentation was high. Nearly two-thirds of all posts contained at least one form of reasoning, including the presentation of facts, figures and dates in 20-30 percent of posts (Figure 7). Communicative rationality is effectively a form of interactive reasoning that involves multiple participants. Each participant is not required to present an exhaustive set of formulaic reasons in their messages. Argumentation is an interactive and dialogic process – in the Habermasian truth-tracking spirit – when posts are intertwined and dependent upon one another. Every new post has the potential to raise new issues and offer new argumentation, thus creating new opportunities for future reasoning. It is an infinite process.

Figure 7. Comparing argumentation.
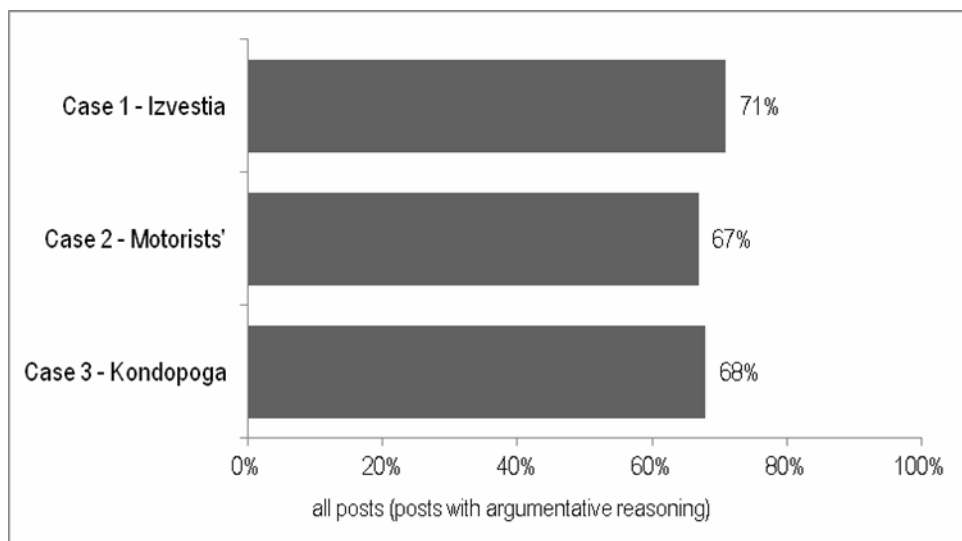
Source: Author.

Expressiveness also played an important role in reasoning. Content analysis of individual messages demonstrated that while discussants always appreciated a good argument, the main reason they chose to participate in public debate was the opportunity to take part in a discussion with their peers. In other words, participation in a discussion could be no less essential than its purpose. It was an integral part of communicative activity. The force of argument was not absolute. Argumentation was distributive and relational. It mattered insofar as it was discursively accepted (manifested through claim-validation). Arguments could also be ignored.

Comparing validity claim-making and consensual practices

The interpretation of online discussions as the discursive process of claim-making and validation helped reveal the internal communicative machinery of discussion in language terms. It also served to describe discussion semantically, as a discursive mechanism for claiming one's own positions and validating others' views. Through claim-validation, it became possible to raise discourse issues, take positions and assess them in terms of agreement or disagreement.

The quality of argumentation was inseparable from its acceptance or rejection by participants. Argumentation itself relied on the preceding discursive history between communication actors, especially on the history of mutual claim-validation. To be in agreement or disagreement could have different meaning depending on the discursive context. For example, agreeing with a viewpoint from the previous message could mean disagreeing with a position communicated earlier by another participant, which, in turn, could be an agreement again, but in relation to some other post or participant. Points of validation (based on agreements or disagreements) maintained the dialogue and moved the entire discourse forward.

There was certain regularity in the distribution of validity claims and consensual practices. All case studies showed a similarly high level (over 90 percent) of claimed propositional truths (under Validity Claim 1). These referred to objective background information and public knowledge (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Comparing validity claim-making and consensual practices.
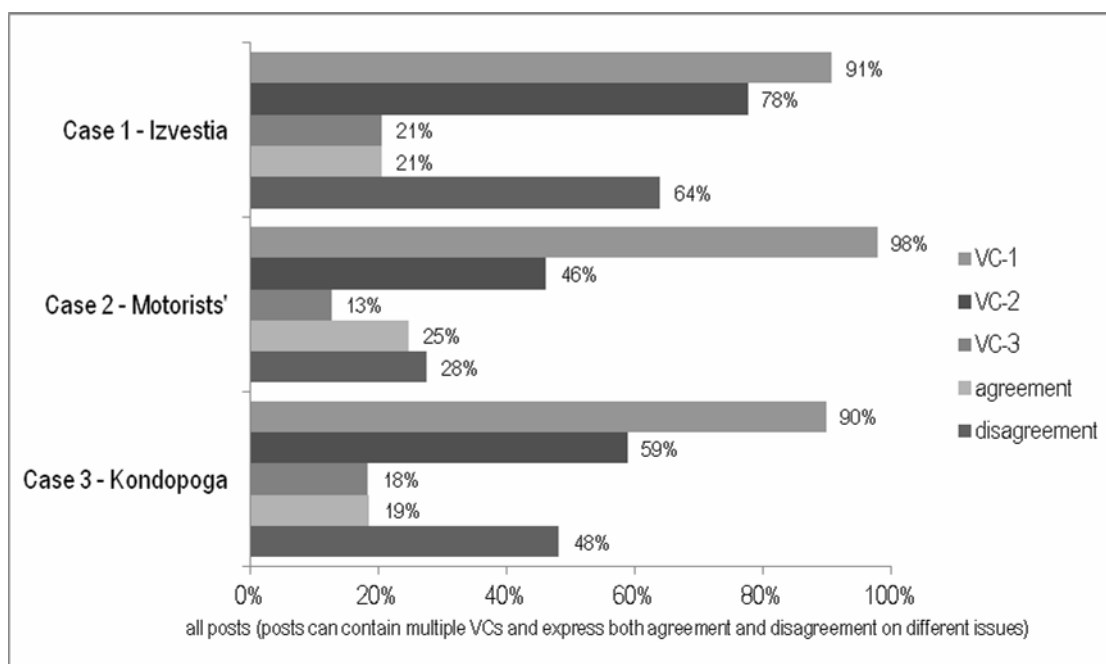
Source: Author.

The most polemic posts appeared on the *Izvestia* forum. Over two-thirds of all messages raised an issue, expressed a viewpoint, or validated a position (that is, they were classified as VC-2, the domain of Habermasian 'normative rightness'). On the Kondopoga and Motorists' forums, this percentage was significantly smaller, but still substantial – 59 and 46 percent respectively. *Izvestia* discussants were the most disputatious: they raised more issues, took sides more often and frequently disputed the positions of others. Disagreements and agreements were instruments through which participants could validate claims made by others. The more the participants disagreed with one another, the more claims they had to make to produce new arguments. For example, 78 percent of VC-2 on *Izvestia* was matched by 64 percent of posts containing disagreements, which was by far the highest compared with other forums. As participants were more consensual, the number of VC-2 decreased, as Kondopoga and Motorists' discourses demonstrated. Apart from being more personal and open, the Motorists' forum was the most consensual, where the number of disagreements was on par with agreements. There was only a 3 percent gap in favour of disagreement, while in the most polemical *Izvestia* forum this gap was the largest at 43 percent. Kondopoga discourses were less polemical (thanks to Thread 1). This was an indication that the discourse organisation, type and purpose were key to its qualitative characteristics.

Claims regarding subjective sincerity (VC-3) were the least utilised type of claim-making, constituting 10 to 20 percent of all posts. However, by all accounts there were high

instances of personal disclosure on all three forums. The Motorists' discourses demonstrated more openness; it was not unusual for discussants to share common views and goals, which created a sense of community among like-minded participants who trusted each other to be personally sincere. However, in general, there was not much divergence between all three forums.

Conclusions

The research demonstrated that the Habermasian theory of discourse ethics is more than an important conception of democratic communication. It can be translated into an effective analytical framework. Validity claim-making has been a useful empirical tool for analysing the argumentative, consensual and dialogic character of online discourses. Additionally, this approach helps to focus more intensely on the social properties of communicative actions as civic practices, rather than on the internet's technical artefacts or on the linguistic parameters of posted messages (which are, of course, indispensable for discourse analysis).

The research has produced evidence in support of the hypothesis that citizen-to-citizen public discussions can be dialogical and thus deliberative. Such a discursive dialogicality is based on the iterative process of claiming and validating the ethically justified intersubjective 'truths' (claims to the validity of 'normative rightness' – VC-3). By doing so, participants offer to validate the content (i.e. issues and positions) of their messages, which in turn validate the previous content offered by other participants. Discursive dialogism is not only a reference to past messages; it is also an anticipation of future reactions. In this way the message content is constructed intersubjectively, dialogically and ethically.

Whereas most of the posted messages were impersonal, the percentage of interpersonal communications was substantial; however, these were not personal messages per se, because they usually addressed impersonal, common for the entire discussion, matters. Accordingly, the dialogic character of a typical discussion was more issue-based than participant-focused. In this respect, discussions were sufficiently dialogical thanks to the high degree of interactive responsiveness that was motivated by the readiness to validate claims made by participants. Deliberative interactivity becomes dialogical, for it prompts either acceptance or rejection of certain truths. This is an important observation in relation to the role of a 'distant', impersonal trust towards the 'generalized other' among interacting strangers, using Putnam's (2000) terminology. Coleman, Anthony and Morrison (2009) link the importance of impersonal interactions with the broader issue of public trust. The latter, they stress, is vital for the society's very stability, since it is essential to have an 'impersonal, abstract trust between distant actors who cannot form direct perceptions of one another' (Coleman, Anthony and Morrison 2009: 3).

Putnam's (2000) 'fair play' towards the stranger can be measured through the civility of discussion. Whereas participants were typically critical towards one another, they were also willing to recognise and accept other positions without necessarily agreeing with them; that is, to validate them. On the one hand, this is a sign of substantial divisions among discussants in terms of shared norms and values (i.e. the degree of social polarisation). On the other hand, it would be unrealistic to have discussions where participants agree all the time. Even if certain exchanges were ruder than others, they rarely contained open swearing or were bla-

tantly uncivil (incivility was usually protested by participants). The prevailing tone was neutral; that is, neither civil nor uncivil. Well-organised exchanges with clear objectives between participants who share certain values were significantly more civil and consensual. Clearly articulated politeness was usually intentional and aimed to attract additional attention or make a point stronger and more convincing (that is, used as an argument). The prevailing tone was expressive, with discussants actively using emoticons, internet slang, shorthand and other textual and visual instruments provided by the forum interface.

Cross-forum comparisons demonstrate that it is possible not only to reveal the deliberative quality of online discussions through their discursiveness and dialogicality, but also to discern differences and commonalities between discussion threads. The fact that many key deliberative parameters (such as frequency of posting, the level of argumentation and the use of consensual practices, the degree of civility and the spread of impersonal communications) have been more alike than different, is an indication that the forum type, location and size do not have a decisive impact on discursive performance. While it may require additional research to prove it statistically, the first reading of the obtained evidence shows that public discussions do not vary substantially in their core deliberative quality. Specifically, it was observed that:

- Size was important in very small and very large threads only; very large debates were dominated by fewer active participants; very small threads were unstable and impractical.

- The commonality of purpose and the availability of an organised structure behind the discussion had strong impact.

- Location was important in terms of the participants' profile.

- Debates that relied on information sharing to report on real-life events had strong impact.

- Argumentation, interactivity, the use of quotations (including the extent of their dialogical concentration), were among the most stable discursive parameters and were relatively independent from discourse type.

What mattered more than anything was the discussion purpose and, partly, the way it was managed (moderated). The clarity of purpose and the presence of the like-minded participants increased the number of agreements, while the main engine of discussion was disagreement. The availability of a specific organisation that propagates certain goals and unites people with similar worldviews behind them was also essential for smooth debates – that is, more civil and less rhetorical and eventually more deliberative. It is interesting that the level of argumentation did not vary much across the studied discussions. That may be a signal that, contrary to the prevailing assumptions, rationality is an inherently internal quality embodied in the very fact of participation; there is an understanding that one must use a sufficient amount of reason in order to be heard. Also, the availability of a trustworthy and skilful moderator is key to the effectiveness of discussions. At the same time, each forum had its own advantages and limitations which might be conditioned by their particular membership and readership base (which may be dependent, in its turn, on forum location and discussion pur-

pose). For example, it would seem unlikely that the type of discussion that occurred on the Motorists' forum would be repeated on the Kondopoga forum. If anything, it would most certainly be a different discourse in terms of quality, scope and impact.

All in all, the above characteristics create an image of a particular sort of online discourse; the one that resembles an everyday, casual talk realised collectively and dialogically, in particular socio-political circumstances of shared values and subjective preferences. This is a novel non-conventional channel of active citizenship, which deserves greater recognition as a tool of civic socialisation.

In addition to intersubjective motivational factors and objective conditions, prospective participants need to possess a certain resource base and the capacity to exercise civic activism. The formula of successful participation proposed by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) can be valid in the digital context as well. The realisation of such activism in practice by those citizens who have both the motivation and the capacity to become involved also presumes the public availability of specific forms and channels of participation that political systems can offer. Activists need certain entry points of engagement to function as 'networks of recruitment through which requests for political activity are mediated' (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995: 3). There is evidence that (especially) young people are prepared to actively participate in political and civil life via unconventional and alternative means when such opportunities arise and can make important contributions to political processes (Ganuza and Francés 2008; Tereshchenko 2010; Beachain and Polese 2010).

In the same vein, the availability of various types of online discourses and resources expand engagement opportunities and further strengthen the motivation of civic activism. Yet participation in discourses on various digital platforms is not tantamount to offline interaction. The lack of social cues, relative anonymity, the ability to manage and exchange personal private and public identities, as well as the freedom to choose subject matters, addressees and posting times constitute a special discursive environment that requires from its participants mastering a different range of communication and social skills (e.g. the competency of impersonal interaction with 'distant' strangers).

The absence of visible and recognisable signals of public communication (which are normal in most macro, 'close-up' face-to-face interactions) in online discussions prompts participants to look for other methods of expression. Dialogicality gains a particular importance for making discussion a meaningful deliberative practice in a virtual mode, where participants need to be especially reciprocal when communicating with unknown people in order to make their point and look trustworthy in their eyes with a hope for a return reaction. The process of argumentation changes accordingly. It becomes discursively interactive (and emancipatory) allowing for more opportunities to display reasoning as long as it is necessary. Online incivility among fellow discussants has its boundaries too, as it is typically subordinated to the demands of the dialogical reciprocity of speaking and being heard, which is the main intention behind making contributions to the discussion voluntarily. In an impersonal but not necessarily anonymous virtual environment, participants are not obliged to respond unless the message merits a reaction on substantive or other grounds. Online mobilisation can also be discursive, as the Motorists' discourses demonstrate.

If online discourses among lay citizens can be qualified as a legitimate 'conversational' branch of online political deliberation, and if the citizens' voluntary involvement in it can be

regarded as active citizenship, then the networked space of social media can be considered a source of the entry points of civic engagement. As such, political and civic mobilisation through technology is not an entirely new phenomenon. Stark and Bach demonstrated (2003, 2004) that the use of photocopying and faxing for the Polish *Solidarity* movement in the 1980 was as important as the internet's today logic 'link, search, interact' has been transformational for civil society organisations in Eastern European countries two decades later. There are signs that the involvement of lay citizens in virtual political discussions could have potentially a similar transformational effect to create new civic cultures of democratic socialisation and political participation. But whether the democratic potential of today's alternative civic cultures of political socialisation online can become a mainstream practice within a broader ecosystem of political culture, media and citizenship of tomorrow is an open question in Russia and elsewhere.

References

Allan, Stuart (2006). *Online News: Journalism and the Internet*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Arterton, Christopher (1987). *Teledemocracy: Can Technology Protect Democracy?* London and New Delhi: Sage.

Bach, Jonathan and David Stark (2003). 'Technology and Transformation: Facilitating Knowledge Networks in Eastern Europe' in *Technology, Business and Society*. UNRISD Programme paper number 10. Geneva: UNRISD. <http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005 BCCF9/(httpPublications)/35352D4B078518C0C1256BDF0049556C?OpenDocument> (accessed 5 March 2007).

Bach, Jonathan and David Stark (2004). 'Link, Search, Interact: The Co-evolution of NGOs and Interactive Technology'. *Theory, Culture & Society,* 21 (3): 101-117.

Baym, Nancy (1998). 'The Emergence of On-line Community' in *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community,* edited by Steven G. Jones. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage, 35-68.

Berdal, Simon (2004). *Public Deliberation on the Web: A Habermasian Inquiry into Online Discourse*. Hovedfag Thesis. Dept. of Informatics, University of Oslo. <http://www.duo. uio.no/publ/informatikk/2004/20535/SimonBerdal.pdf> (accessed 24 June 2009).

Bohman, James (1996). *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bohman, James and William Rehg (2009). 'Jürgen Habermas'. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/ entries/habermas> (accessed 13 July 2009).

Calhoun, Craig (1993). *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Coleman, Stephen and John Gøtze (2001). *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation*. London: Hansard Society. <http://www.bowlingtogether.net/ bowlingtogether.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2009).

Coleman, Stephen (2005a). 'New Mediation and Direct Representation: Reconceptualizing Representation in the Digital age'. *New Media & Society*, 7 (2): 177-198.

Coleman, Stephen (2005b). *Direct Representation: Towards a Conversational Democracy.* London: IPPR.

Coleman, Stephen and Ildikó Kaposi (2006). *New Media, New Democracies: What's New?* Tallinn: e-Governance Academy. <http://www.ega.ee/files/Coleman_handbook.pdf> (accessed 2 August 2008).

Coleman, Stephen and Jay Blumler (2009). *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collins, Harry and Robert Evans (2002). 'The Third Wave of Science Studies: Studies of Expertise and Experience'. *Social Studies of Science*, 32 (2): 235-296.

Dahlberg, Lincoln (2001). 'Democracy Via Cyberspace: Mapping the Rhetorics and Practices of Three Prominent Camps'. *New Media & Society*, 3 (2): 157-77.

Dahlgren, Peter (2005). 'Internet, Public Spheres and Political communication: Dispersion and Deliberation'. *Political Communication*, 22 (2): 147-162.

Downey, John and Natalie Fenton (2003). 'New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere'. *New Media & Society*, 5 (2): 185-202.

Etling, Bruce, Karina Alexanyan, John Kelly, Robert Faris, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2010). 'Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization'. Berkman Center Research Publication, No. 2010-11. 19 October 2010, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Public_Discourse_in_the_Russian_Blogosphere_2010.pdf> (accessed 19 March 2012).

Fairclough, Norman (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fairclough, Norman (2003). *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London and New York: Routledge.

Fischer, Frank (2009). *Democracy and Expertise: Reorienting Policy Inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fossato, Floriana and John Lloyd with Alexander Verkhovsky (2008). *The Web that Failed: How Opposition Politics and Independent Initiatives are Failing on the Internet in Russia.* Oxford: University of Oxford, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Fraser, Nancy (1992). 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun. Cambridge Mass.: MIT press, 109-142.

Freedom House (2011). *Freedom on the Net 2011. A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media*. Washington, D.C.: Freedom House. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN2011.pdf>, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-net> (accessed 20 April 2011).

Freelon, Dean (2010). 'Analyzing Online Political Discussion Using Three Models of Democratic Communication'. *New Media & Society*, 12 (7): 1172-1190.

Ganuza, Ernesto and Francisco Francés (2008). 'Rethinking the Sources of Participation: A Case Study of Spain'. *European Sociological Review*, 24 (4): 479-493.

Gorny, Eugene (2006). *A creative History of the Russian Internet*. A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Goldsmiths College, University of London. <http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/library/texts/en/gorny_creative_history_runet.pdf> (accessed 24 September 2010).

Gornyi, Ievgenii (2007). 'Russkii LiveJournal: Vliianie kul'turnoi identichnosti na razvitie virtual'nogo obshchestva' / 'Russian LiveJournal. The Impact of Cultural Identity on the Development of a Virtual community' in *Control + Shift: Publichnoe i lichnoe v russkom Internete,* edited by Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener and Natal'ia Konradova. Moskva, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 109-130. <http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/library/texts/ru/control_shift/Gorny.pdf> (accessed 24 September 2010).

Graham, Todd (2003). 'In Search of Online Deliberation: Towards a New Method for Examining the Quality of Online Discussions'. *Communications*, 28: 73-204.

Graham, Todd (2008). 'Needles in a Haystack: A New Approach in Identifying and Assessing Political Talk in Non-Political Discussion Forums'. *Javnost – The public*, 15 (2): 17-36.

Habermas, Jürgen (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society.* Volume 1. Boston: Beacon.

Habermas, Jürgen (1987a). *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1987b). *The Theory of Communicative Action. Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason.* Volume 2. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1992). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1996). *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1998). *On the Pragmatics of Communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (2003). *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (2006). 'Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research'. *Communication Theory*, 16 (4), pp.411-426.

Hague, Barry and Brian Loader; eds (1999). *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age*. London: Routledge.

Hill, Kevin and John Hughes (1997). 'Computer-Mediated Political Communication: The USENET and Political Communities'. *Political Communication*, 14: 3-27.

Hill, Kevin and John Hughes (1998). *Cyberpolitics: Citizens in the Age of the Internet*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Hollander, Ed, James Stappers and Nicholas Jankowski (2002). 'Community Media and Community Communication' in *Community Media in the Information Age: Perspectives and Prospects*, edited by Nicholas Jankowski. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 19-30.

Howard, Philip, Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil Hussain, Will Mari and Marwa Mazaid (2011). *Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?* Project on Information Technology & Political Islam (PITPI). <www.pITPI.org> (accessed 21 January 2012).

Ikeda, Kenichi and Robert Huckfeldt (2001). 'Political Communication and Disagreement Among Citizens in Japan and the United States'. *Political Behavior*, 21 (1): 23-51.

Jankowski, Nicholas (2006). 'Creating Community with Media: History, Theory and Scientific Investigations' in *The Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs,* edited by Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 55-74.

Jankowski, Nicholas and Martine van Selm (2005). 'Epilogue: Methodological Concerns and Innovations in Internet Research' in *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, edited by Christine Hine. Oxford, New York: Berg, 199-208.

Janssen, Davy and Raphaël Kies (2005). 'Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy'. *Acta Politica* 40 (3): 317-335.

Jones, Steve; ed. (1999). *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Joinson, Adam (2003). *Understanding the Psychology of Internet Behaviour: Virtual Worlds, Real lives*. Houndmills, Hampshire and New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kelly, John, Danyel Fisher and Marc Smith (2005). 'Debate, Division, and Diversity: Political Discourse Networks in USENET Newsgroups'. [Conference Paper]. Second Conference on Online Deliberation: Design, Research, and Practice DIAC'05, Stanford University, May 20-22, 2005. <http://www.online-deliberation.net/conf2005/viewabstract. php?id=27> (accessed 6 October 2008).

Kraut, Robert, Michael Patterson, Vicki Lundmark, Sara Kiesler, Tridas Mukophadhyay and William Scherlis (1998). 'Internet Paradox: A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-being'. *American Psychologist*, 53 (9): 1017-1031.

Mabry, Edward (1998). 'Frames and Flames: The Structure of Argumentative Messages on the Net' in *Network and Netplay: Virtual Groups on the Internet*, edited by Fay Sudweeks, Margaret L. McLaughlin and Sheizaf Rafaeli. Menlo Park CA, Cambridge MA, London: AAA Press / The MIT Press, 13-26.

McLean, Iain (1989). *Democracy and New Technology*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Misnikov, Yuri (2010). 'Discursive Qualities of Public Discussion on the Russian Internet: Testing the Habermasian Communicative Action Empirically' in *From e-Participation to Online Deliberation, Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Online Deliberation, OD2010*. Leeds, UK, 30 June - 2 July, 2010, edited by Fiorella De Cindio, Ann Macintosh and Cristian Peraboni. University of Leeds and Universita Degli Studi Di Milano, 60-74. <http://www.od2010.dico.unimi.it/docs/proceedings/Proceedings_OD 2010. pdf> (accessed 24 February 2011).

Morozov, Evgeny (2011). *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World*. London: Allen Lane.

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

Ó Beacháin, Donnacha and Abel Polese (2010). ''Rocking the Vote': New Forms of Youth organisation in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13 (5): 615-630.

Papacharissi, Zizi (2002). 'The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere'. *New Media & Society*, 4 (1):9.

Pateman, Carol (1970). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Putnam, Robert (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rafaeli, Sheizaf and Fay Sudweeks (1997). 'Networked Interactivity'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* 2 (4). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol2/issue4/rafaeli.sudweeks.html> (accessed 17 October 2009).

Rafaeli, Sheizaf and Fay Sudweeks (1998). 'Interactivity on the Nets' in *Network and Netplay: Virtual Groups on the Internet*, edited by Fay Sudweeks, Margaret L. McLaughlin and Sheizaf Rafaeli. Menlo Park CA, Cambridge MA, London: AAA Press / The MIT Press, 173-190.

Rash, Wayne (1997). *Politics on the Nets: Wiring the Political Process*. New York: W.H.Freeman.

Rheingold, Howard (2000). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* Revised Edition. Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press.

Rohozinski, Rafal (1999). 'Mapping Russian Cyberspace: Perspectives on Democracy and the Net'. *UNRISD Discussion Paper No. 115*. Geneva: UNRISD. <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN015092.pdf> (accessed 17 October 2009).

Schmidt, Henrike and Katy Teubener (2006). '"Our RuNet"? Cultural Identity and Media Usage', *Russian-Cyberspace.org.* <http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/library/seminars/Russian_Cyberspace/info/info_intro.htm> (accessed 24 September 2010).

Schmidt, Henrike and Katy Teubener (2006). '(Counter)Public Sphere(s) on the Russian Internet' in *Control + Shift: Public and Private Uses of the Russian Internet*, edited by Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener and Natalja Konradova. Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 51-72, <http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/library/texts/en/control_shift/Schmidt_Teubener_Public.pdf> (accessed 24 September 2010).

Schneider, Steven and Kirsten Foot (2002). 'Online Structure for Political Action: Exploring Presidential Websites from the 2000 American Election'. *Javnost – The Public*, 9 (2): 3-60.

Schneider, Steven and Kirsten Foot (2004). 'The Web as an Object of Study' in *Society Online: The Internet in Context,* edited by Philip Howard and Steven Jones. London: Sage, 137-154.

Schneider, Steven and Kirsten Foot (2005). 'Web Sphere Analysis: An Approach to Studying Online Action' in *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet,* edited by Christine Hine. Oxford, New York: Berg, 157-170.

Sinekopova, Galina (2006). 'Building the Public Sphere: Bases and Biases'. *Journal of Communication*, 56 (3): 505-522.

Sokolova, Natalia (2011). '"This is Your Show!" Massovye Kreativnye Praktiki v Transmediinykh Proektakh' / '"This is your show!" Mass Creative Practices in Transmedial Projects'. *Digital Icons. Studies in Russian: Eurasian and Central European New Media*,

6: 1-33. <http://www.digitalicons.org/issue06/natalia-sokolova/> (accessed 2 April 2012).

Sudweeks, Fay and Sheizaf Rafaeli (1996). 'How Do You Get a Hundred Strangers to Agree: Computer Mediated Communication and Collaboration' in *Computer Networking and Scholarship in the 21st Century University*, edited by Teresa Harrison and Timothy Stephen. SUNY Press, 115-136.

Sudweeks, Fay, Margaret L. McLaughlin and Sheizaf Rafaeli; eds (1998). *Network and Netplay: Virtual Groups on the Internet*. Menlo Park CA, Cambridge MA, London: AAA Press/ The MIT Press.

Sunstein, Cass (1995). 'The First Amendment in Cyberspace'. *Yale Law Journal*, 104: 757-804.

Sunstein, Cass (2006). *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Suvorov, Gleb (2012, 20 March). 'Obshchestvo anonimnykh revoliutsionerov' / 'The Community of Anonymous Revolutionaries', *Slon.ru*. <http://slon.ru/russia/obshchestvo_anonimnykh_revolyutsionerov-765700.xhtml> (accessed 25 April 2012).

Tereshchenko, Antonina (2010). 'Ukrainian Youth and Civic Engagement: Unconventional Participation in Local Spaces'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13 (5): 597-613.

Tsaliki, Liza (2002). 'Online Forums and the Enlargement of the Public Sphere: Research Findings from a European Project'. *The Public*, 9 (2): 95-112.

Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wilhelm, Anthony (1999).'Virtual Sounding Boards: How Deliberative is Online Discussion?' in *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age*, edited by Barry Hague and Brian Loader. London and New York: Routledge, 153-178.

Wiklund, Hans (2005). 'A Habermasian Analysis of the Deliberative Democratic Potential of ICT-Enabled Services in Swedish Municipalities'. *New Media & Society*, 7 (2): 247-270.

YURI MISNIKOV – e-governance practitioner and researcher, with a special interest in the social impact of new digital media, viewed from a citizen-centric perspective. He obtained his PhD in Media and Communications from the Institute of Communications Studies (ICS) of the University of Leeds, UK. He is a member of the Centre for Digital Citizenship at the ICS. In the past, Misnikov has held a number of managerial and professional positions with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). He serves as a member of the Supervisory Board of the e-Governance Academy in Tallinn, Estonia, and of the Advisory Council of the Ukrainian e-Governance Centre in Kiev. He has authored and coordinated several publications on a broad range of issues concerning information society, e-governance and participation. [yuri.misnikov@gmail.com].