Reports and Commentaries

3.7.5. NEW MEDIA IN NEW EUROPE-ASIA
by Natalia Rulyova

New Media in New Europe-Asia, the two linked one-day workshops funded by CEEL-BAS (the Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies), explored the new media phenomenon and its landscape in Russia, Eurasia, Central and South-East Europe. The first workshop was held at CREES (the Centre for Russian and East European Studies), the University of Birmingham, on 30 March 2010, and the second workshop took place at SSEES (the School of Slavonic and East European Studies), University College London, on 28 May 2010. The workshops were co-organised by Seth Graham (SSEES, UCL), Jeremy Morris (CREES, Birmingham), Natalia Rulyova (CREES, Birmingham) and Vlad Strukov (SMLC, Leeds).

The workshops aimed to explore the phenomenon and landscape of new media across Russia, Eurasia, Central and South-East Europe from a range of qualitative, quantitative, comparative, disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches. The organizers also wanted to provide a platform for discussion among academics, new media practitioners and policy-makers. A comparative aspect was particularly sought after, as there are single pieces of research about new media technologies in various concerned regions but there is not a comparative assessment of the state of new media development and its use in the above mentioned area. Among workshop research questions were the following: 1) Does the Internet provide liberation from socio-political norms or is it conditioned by them? 2) What tactics do governments apply to use and control the Internet and new media? 3) What is the role of social media? 4) How does the specific political and cultural context of the region inform the function of web-enabled media? 5) What is the future of the mass media in the age of digital technologies: popularity versus authority in societies with 'managed democracies'? 6) How does the convergence of old and new media take place in different parts of the region? 7) Have the effects of the globalisation in communications been comparable in Russia, Eurasia, Central and South-East Europe? 8) How do new media affect Internet users' relationship

with their local communities? 9) What impact have new media had on pop and celebrity culture in the region?

The workshops attracted an audience of over 50 participants including eminent academics, journalists, media practitioners and government officials from the UK, the EU, the USA, Canada, Russia and Kazakhstan. The two keynote speakers, one at each workshop, were media practitioners: the Secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists Nadezhda Azhgikhina, and the Freedom House Consultant on New Media for Central Asia and blogger Yelena Jetpyspayeva. They opened the workshops with engaging presentations discussing the development of new media in Russia and Eurasia, and raising concerns about the freedom of speech, government control, harassment of journalists and bloggers in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. These speeches demonstrated yet again that a discussion of new media and government, the Internet and the public, social media, the relationship between the mass media and new media, globalisation, local communities and the Internet was due and necessary, especially in the case of Russia, Eurasia, Central and South-East Europe. Such discussion leading to the in-depth analysis of new media in the concerned regions was precisely the task that the two workshops had aimed for and successfully achieved.

Speakers were mostly academics doing disciplinary, inter- and multidisciplinary research into new media; they represented a range of qualitative, quantitative and comparative approaches to the study of the Internet and digital technologies in Russia (Floriana Fossato, Sarah Oates, Robert A. Saunders, Olessia Koltsova, Stephen Hutchings, Jeremy Morris, Natalia Rulyova, Dimitry Jagodin, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke), Bulgaria (Maria Bakardjeva, Orlin Spassov), Ukraine (Galina Miazhevich), Finland (Markku Lonkila, Boris Gladarev), Central Asian countries (Claire Wilkinson) and Armenia (Katie Pearce). The workshops particularly focused on comparative dimensions of the use of the Internet. For instance, Oates compared the use of the Internet by political parties in Russia and in the UK. Informative comparisons were made during the discussion following Bakardjeva's paper, in which she discussed the use of the Internet by citizens and civic movements in Bulgaria; it appears that the voice of Bulgarian civic society has grown stronger, and with the help of the Internet has been able to penetrate the sphere of formal politics on occasion, with important consequences. Fossato who analysed civic engagement in Russia has come to more pessimistic conclusions: Russian bloggers are active but atomised, and civic activism is almost non-existent on Runet. This led to some interesting discussions about the differences in the ways that new media have an impact on society: the Internet does not lead automatically either to democratisation or to the strengthening of civil society.

The workshops were interdisciplinary, as the study of new media requires multiple and diverse approaches from all angles and disciplines including political science (Oates), cultural studies (Miazhevich, Rulyova), media and communications (Kuntsman, Hutchings, Calvert), ethnographic (Morris, Pearce), literary studies (Ryazanova-Clarke), and gender studies (Goroshko). Inter- and multidisciplinary exchange helped explore the themes of both workshops in greater depth. Further exploring new media and civic activism, the media scholar Koltsova focused on a case study in St Petersburg which involved organizing protests against the closure of the European University. Her conclusion was that new media tools of communication are only supplementary to more traditional ways of communication, such as personal contact. Sharing her personal experience as a blogger, Wilkinson, on the other hand,

showed that the use of new media and blogging, in particular, can and does lead to the mobilization of public resources and is crucial to the development of civil society, especially in near- or totalitarian regimes, like those in Central Asia. Pearce's ethnographic approach to the use of mobile phones by young people in Armenia demonstrated that in a country where Internet use is still low it is replaced by peer-to-peer content sharing via mobile devices. The examples considered in the above papers demonstrate that global technology fulfills different functions in different parts of the world; its use is applied to local needs and adjusted to the stage of societal development. Saunders came to a similar conclusion by analysing the relationship between new technologies and the legacy of the past. He examined how Soviet-era power dynamics and ideological orientations (the 'ghost') influence political relations in post-Soviet 'new media zones' (the 'machine'), from cyber-attacks to social networking to nationalist rhetoric on the Internet.

The global and local in identity construction, another key theme of the project, was examined thoroughly in the second workshop. Morris presented some insightful ethnographic observations and analysis of the role of new media in everyday practices and in the formation of the identities of Russian working class people in a provincial 'mono-town'. Russian workers put a strong accent on the 'informative-educational' role of the Internet in the domestic sphere, and in particular on sustaining practical skills of 'make do and mend'—an indicator of continuing narratives of self-reliance and DIY, if not 'exitism' from consumption. In their case, global technologies were used to serve the needs of local community. Another approach to online identity construction on the Bulgarian-language Internet has been offered by Spassov, who investigated a conflict between the Cyrillic and Latin scripts where the former is presented as a marker of authentic identity in the Latin-speaking globalized world and the latter as the 'Western' alphabet, a sign of opposition to the official national culture.

Drawing on communication theories, Calvert examined the construction of identities by more sophisticated Internet users, i.e., *LiveJournal* bloggers in Nizhnii Novgorod, especially those involved in anti-capitalist, anarchist and/or environmental protests. Calvert identified that their online identity construction strategies are designed with the global in mind, i.e. they apply strategic essentialism, or the boiling down of oneself and others to certain characteristics of online interest. Approaching identity construction from a cultural studies perspective, Rulyova focused on the strategies and tools used to form immigrant identities, in particular Chinese, by Russian-language bloggers. Drawing on gender theories, Goroshko zoomed in on the gender aspect of online identities. The latter three papers revealed similar online identity construction strategies at work, including schematic representation and simplification based on the stereotypes and expectations of online readers.

Continuing the theme of identity construction and its manifestation in Central European and Russian pop culture, Miazhevich focused on the Eurovision contest. She identified a 'double voiced' act that self-consciously parodies Western imaginings of an exotic, yet sexually promiscuous East (hence the frequent inclusion of ethnic 'pastiche' alongside sexual excess). Her insights into parody and humour were developed further by Ryazanova-Clarke who focused on the linguistic and visual aspects of the Russian-language show 'Rulitiki' posted on YouTube, by contextualizing it within the development of political satire in post-Soviet Russia. The last two papers revealed the specificity of post-Soviet humour, as it is represented in new media.

Communication flows and their impact on society were explored in Toepfl's paper which aimed at accomplishing a series of case studies of major scandals on the Russian Internet during the past three years. Relating these case studies to various theories of 'scandalization', the paper revealed how publicity on the Internet changed the relationship between the public and private, and how the Russian government had been adapting laws and rules to come to grips with the challenges presented by new media. Information flows between new media and the mass media were examined in depth and at length by Hutchings who concluded that the 'elephant' of the mass media treats new media as: a) a source of alternative narratives, b) a channel for dissent, c) a tool for recalibrating preferred meanings, d) a weapon of authentication, e) a means of localisation/globalisation, and f) a site for identity negotiation.

All papers stimulated abundant discussions and fruitful exchange between speakers and other participants. Most participants found the workshops useful and timely. For example, Stephen Ennis, a media analyst of BBC monitoring, said in his brief interview that a wide range of presentations gave him new ideas, such as the interaction between state TV and the Internet. Another participant, Luc Levy, a representative of the French government working on soft power and the Internet, said that the workshop would help inform policy.

All the information about both workshops including confirmed speakers, programmes, paper abstracts, research questions, planned publications, and feedback from some participants can be found on the project website <http://eurasia.vladstrukov.com/>.

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