

iRhetoric in Russian: Performing the Self through Mobile Technology

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Abstract: The conference *iRhetoric in Russian: Performing the Self through Mobile Technology* focuses on the new networked ‘extensions of man’ (McLuhan 1964) and their consequences for the way we represent ourselves, and thus our selves, online. While this process is global, it is worth concentrating on the Russian-language internet (Runet), where, after the end of the normative Soviet identity, questions of identity/identities are especially relevant. By combining the traditions of rhetoric with the performative turn in the humanities we seek to understand better the highly topical field of discursively constructed virtual identities. Relying on participants’ diverse knowledge in various disciplines such as Internet Studies, Media Studies, Cultural Studies and Autobiography Studies, the conference gains insights into the digital performances of the self, the process of identity construction and their mutual dynamic interdependence.

Keywords: rhetoric, (auto-)biography, performing the self, mobile technology, Russian language.

When the Arpanet – the internet’s military ancestor – came into being in 1969, it was accessible only via cabinet-sized machines. Since then, technological progress has led to an astonishing miniaturisation of computers. Nonetheless, only recently has the internet managed to break free from the stationary desktop PC – at first via laptops and Wi-Fi, then via smartphones and 3G. This mobility introduces a plethora of new possibilities and challenges. Along with mobile internet access, apps and new technologies (e.g. QR codes or NFC) are reshaping the way we interact with both our virtual and physical surroundings. Although the divide between ‘offline’ and ‘online’ has not vanished completely, it is becoming more and more permeable. This has been demonstrated in the events of the Arab spring in

2010/11, or the anti-Putin rallies in 2011 where demonstrations were planned and coordinated by means of using mobile technologies.

Nowadays, when browsing the social media landscape, one might quickly form the impression that the internet is full of show-offs, egocentrics and other self-promotion experts. Andy Warhol's famous *bon mot*, 'In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes', has now become 'In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen people', as Scottish artist Momus has put it. But the internet's transformation into a space for self-performances is not a recent one: American psychologist Sherry Turkle outlined the mechanisms of the Life on the Screen as early as in 1995. Now, nearly twenty years later, a great deal has changed. As recently as 1995, the World Wide Web was still in its infancy, and online activities revolved mostly around chats and Multi User Dungeons (MUD). Although small handheld computers became available in the mid-1980s, and 1993 saw the advent of handheld devices with a touchscreen, it is only the recent combination of handheld devices being available for a general public with reasonably fast mobile internet connections that has paved the way for another revolution: the internet has become mobile, thus further blurring the boundaries between life on the screen and real life (RL). Nowadays a broad range of different devices offer internet access: laptops, netbooks, subnotebooks, tablet computers, smartphones, feature phones, handheld gaming devices, wearable computers and e-book readers. Thanks to these devices it is possible to construct one's identity 24/7, and 'always on' has become the dominant mode de vie. Following Erving Goffman's ground-breaking 1959 study *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, one could argue that the (theatrical) performance of the self has now gone online, as discussed by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak in their book *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (2014). But the idea of performance implies a physical body as a producer of meaning – so where is this body in the realm of the virtual? It is the bodily contact with communication gadgets which makes it possible to 'include' the device in the personality and to become part of the self-representation – both physically and virtually. Thus, the famous 1965 vision of Marshall McLuhan has been turned into reality, (new) media have indeed become 'extensions of man', or – to combine Turkle and McLuhan – extensions of the self.

We seek to raise interest in the study of the rhetoric of online self-construction through the lens of mobile technology. Our focus lies on the time period from 2000 onwards. Therefore, mobile technology includes smartphones, tablets, laptops and other gadgets that can be carried around, such as the recently launched Google Glass. *Rhetoric*, on the other hand, harkens back to the ancient art of persuasive impact on others through the orator's effective verbal (self-)presentation. Performing the self can be achieved by the oldest communication device in human history: language. Then again, the internet is a multimedia sphere, which facilitates digital 'remediations' (Bolter/Grusin 2000) of content. Images, for example, can play a crucial part in constructing and representing the self. In order to study these remediations, one has to keep in mind all the different communication genres from the World Wide Web (social networks, blogs, video and news portals and websites), which in addition might also provide different versions of content targeted at a specific access device. Thus, *iRhetoric* is the updated version of the classic art of rhetoric, which takes into consideration technological circumstances.

Moreover, the term *iRhetoric* tries to describe rhetorical strategies of self-construction. Thus, the small ‘i’ of *iRhetoric* becomes the capital ‘I’ of (auto-)biography, updating the traditional theory of (auto-)biography for the new technologies involved. As these technologies reach their (preliminary) culmination in today’s hand-held devices, the theoretical frameworks of performativity and cultural practices, as suggested above (Goffman, Turkle, Poletti & Rak 2014), become especially important. When the self is shaped by using an actual device in one’s hand(s), physical performance is a key process that should not be overlooked.

A community consists of individuals who might be interested in creating and communicating not only a specific image of their respective group(s), but also specific images of themselves. Of course this individual self is implicitly also part of a larger, national community, which heavily influences the ways the individual identity is constructed. The conference seeks to outline the interdependence between the online individual and the various communities of which it is part, and to describe both individual and superindividual digital rhetoric. By combining the qualitative methodology of humanities with the quantitative methods of computer linguistics and statistics (data mining, text mining/analysis, web mining etc.), we intend to study self-performances mediated through mobile technology. The result will contribute to the emerging research field of digital humanities such as Lev Manovich’s study of ‘selfies’, i.e. self-portraits taken by mobile phones (see <http://selfiecity.net>, accessed 27 April 2014).

Whereas the process of self-performance on the internet is a global phenomenon, all sorts of local variants surface as soon as one looks beyond the dominant Anglo-American sphere, as was pointed out by Gerard Goggin and Mark McLelland in *Internationalizing Internet Studies* (2009). To a certain extent, the internet is global only in principle. As the example of the Russian-language section of the internet (Runet) indicates, more local – but at the same time still transnational – communities are tightly sealed in language-dependent self-isolation.

The Runet is accessed via smartphones in Moscow and Vladivostok, on tablets in Kiev or Almaty, on laptops in Baku and Minsk. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 empowered people to quench their thirst for freely available information, as well as to embrace previous restrictions on individuality and non-conformity. At the same time, the normative concept of Soviet citizenship ceased to exist, and all sorts of different national, cultural and individual identities were either created on the fly or re-established in a hurry. Therefore, identity construction permeates all strata of post-Soviet life offline, and has persisted online with the coinciding evolution of technological capacity. Moreover, the vast dimensions of Russia, the spreading of families across the CIS countries and work migration within those countries have fuelled the desire for easily accessible online communication. Together with the mobile phone and other gadgets seen as fairly accessible status symbols, there is a highly communicative community with a special focus on online representation and questions of identity. External circumstances such as the weakness of offline media and state-administered internet censorship in Russia also play a decisive role, as the former promotes netizens’ self-performances as sources of reliable news, and the latter fuels the desire for camouflage, i.e. the spoofing of online identities.

This highly specific Russian use of new media and mobile technology can only be deciphered by combining knowledge of Slavonic literary and cultural studies and media studies.

The outcome of the *iRhetoric* conference¹ will therefore prove vital to further study of current developments in Russian civil society.

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¹ The conference programme is available here: <http://www.phil.uni-passau.de/slavische-literaturen-und-kulturen/konferenzen/irhethoric-in-russian.html> (accessed 7 June 2014)

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