Digital Memoirs

TEN YEARS OF STUDIES IN RUSSIAN, EURASIAN AND CENTRAL EUROPEAN NEW MEDIA: STATEMENTS ON THE FIELD

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Issue 20 celebrates ten years of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org) The very first issue of the journal came under a different, title, *The Russian Cyberspace Journal*. As an integral part of this celebratory issue we want to paint a broad picture of the changes that have occurred since the publication of the first issue. We take Runet as a focal point for our discussion; however, its objectives are much broader as we wish to reflect on the changes in academic discipline, research practices and networks.

In order to achieve this goal, we asked leading scholars in the field—among them most of the authors of the journal's first issue—for short statements: Did Runet change in the past ten years, and if so, how? Has this change affected the academic or professional field in which you work? Did the field itself change? Have your methods and theories of study evolved? Based on the answers we received from Olena Goroshko, Tatjana Hofmann, Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk, Sudha Rajagopalan, Ellen Rutten, Robert A. Saunders, Henrike Schmidt, Elena Trubina and Vera Zvereva, we compiled a panorama of ten years of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org). Their responses are placed below after the statement by the journal's founding editor, Vlad Strukov.

As we celebrate ten years of the journal, it becomes apparent how far the journal has come in terms of the growth of the editorial staff, the diversity of issues produced, and the challenges the journal has endured. Operating as one of the few peer-reviewed open-source journals in the field has not been an easy task, as the journal does not generate funding that would traditionally pay for operating costs.

Throughout the journal's existence, we have grappled with how our digital environment might shape the way we publish. The *Digital Icons* site most directly remediates a print journal online, and in this sense is very traditional. We publish written contributions online, producing PDFs of each contribution that include page numbers of a journal that we will never

print and bind. At the same time, we routinely question how the digital environment might shape what we can do as an online journal. Questions such as, 'Why can't we embed a video or a gif into an article?', 'Should citations be clickable hyperlinks?', or 'Should each article have a comment section?' all challenged the traditional format of academic print media. While we have to date operated on the traditional side in this respect, we have also experimented with non-traditional genres in academic publishing, such as 'digital memoirs' and 'visual essays'. Although the digital medium provides numerous opportunities to innovate, the academic world of publishing also presents its own constraints and traditions that limit what we do. Perhaps in the future, *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org) will break out of these constraints of academic publishing, but in the meantime, we are proud of our record in which we feature authors, ranging from academics to artists to clergy, whose insights provide a contemporary picture of how digital media operates currently in Russia, Eurasia and Central Europe. We have been particularly proud that our journal has become a space to highlight the work of early-career scholars alongside established academics.

For our survey, our respondents follow the order of their first contribution in the journal, with some recollecting the first days of the project. As we collected contributions from authors, several key themes emerged. For one, at the beginning of the 21st century Slavic Studies and neighbouring disciplines were still almost exclusively text-centred. As Vlad Strukov puts it, 'I felt that the fields of Cultural Studies and Russian Studies were so focussed on the phenomena of text, power and identity that they could not possibly accommodate research on new media' (p. 67). In a similar vein, Robert Saunders notes how little academic fields in our area of the world focused on the rise of social media networks and how much of an impact they would have. Ellen Rutten forwards this same notion as to how much legitimacy the online world has gained, and how this changes the way in which we think and talk about being online: 'Today, we do not only "go online" when we switch on a computer—but we do so all the time' (p. 72). Tatjana Hofmann notes similarly how this inseparable nature of the internet bleeds into our activity as researchers: 'As for me, I am fascinated by this development. I cannot separate my current research topics from it nor can I separate the Internet from social media anymore' (p. 79).

When the journal started, our contributors admittedly shared an optimistic view of the democratizing potential of digital media. Articles focused intently on the potential of the participatory nature of digital media. New platforms allowed more people to voice social concerns, new online spaces allowed activists to congregate and collaborate, and new tools enabled amateur filmmakers, graphic designers, and authors to become online content producers with wider audiences than they would have had previously. Sudha Rajagopalan notes, like other authors, a sense of hope that pervaded new media studies: 'The overriding emotion that characterised the field was still a stubborn optimism that continued to assert that many Runet cultural practices could be read as acts of citizenship, as strategies to assert belonging, as ways to negotiate the official exercise of power. I believe that Runet scholarship was underpinned by the belief in the potential of Runet production to transform political culture' (p. 81).

As we celebrated so-called liberation through participation, institutions of power in the region, both political and commercial, tracked users' browsing habits, stifled independent online media outlets through various points of pressure, and lastly, muddled the free sharing

of information through coordinated disinformation campaigns. Henrike Schmidt notes that we, as an open source journal, have failed to actively critique the fact that the 'promises and hopes of the digital have not been realized' (p. 74), but nevertheless, rightly insists that simple critiques of naming scapegoats and demonizing individual state-actors are shortsighted.

Self-critique of our own analytical methods seems to be a much more worthwhile endeavor. Our contributors point out blindspots on the methodological level, such as not devoting a dedicated space to the increasingly quantitative, empirical research tools that digital media has provided to us as researchers, which is increasingly important as information flows are manipulated by state actors. On this topic, Vera Zvereva questions how political regulation of the internet might impact future Internet studies, particularly ones that require access to big data: 'Sensitivity about the protection of users' personal data, and legislative responses such as the adoption in the European Union of The General Data Protection Regulation are calling into question to what extent humanities and social science researchers of Runet in the EU will be able to continue using qualitative methods' (p. 85).

As we look ahead to future issues of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org), we hope that the journal can begin to address the many blind spots our contributors have noted, while at the same time trying to document the advances and setbacks that occur in this ever-changing landscape.

Vlad Strukov (founding editor, contributor of first issue)

The journal was conceived in the early 2000s when I was first a researcher and then an Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, USA. At that time I felt that the fields of Cultural Studies and Russian Studies were so focussed on the phenomena of text, power and identity that they could not possibly accommodate research on new media. That feeling, perhaps, had been caused by my own experience of having been unable to realise my own interest in computer technologies in the academic environment of the 1990s. I admit I was looking for a home, but rather than joining an existing household, I created one from scratch. My thinking about the future journal coincided with several personal searches including the decision to return to the UK.

Already in London, after a short period of experimenting with an online journal on contemporary culture, I reached out to my friends and colleagues, seeking their expertise and advice. Eventually, thanks to the incredible dedication of Pedro Hernandez, Katia Lapina-Kratasyuk, Ellen Rutten, Robert A. Saunders, and Henrike Schmidt, a new journal was launched in 2008 under the title 'The Russian Cyberspace Journal'. In 2009, Katia Lapina-Kratasyuk left the editorial team, and I led the process of its re-branding and re-launching until *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org) finally appeared. The new title of the journal reflected the editors' ambition to develop an interdisciplinary, multi-media platform that explores new media as a variety of information flows, varied communication systems and networked communities. In its current form, the journal has been in the public domain for a decade, attracting new authors and editors, pioneering new methods of research and opening new fields of enquiry.

The main goal of the journal has been to disseminate research on new media in the region across global communities of scholars, media practitioners and the general public. The

published items address a broad range of issues, including the impact of digital and electronic technologies on politics, economics, society, culture and the arts in Russia, Eurasia and Central Europe. In the beginning, we worked with 'traditional' topics such as freedom of expression, censorship and political processes. Eventually we started branching out into new areas such as the cross-over between cinema and video gaming. Always at the forefront of research, our editors and contributors have challenged common perceptions of the region, including the countries' digital economies. Back in 2009, we concerned ourselves with questions such as 'How many Russians have access to the internet?' In 2020, we enquire about the impact of Russian data processing facilities based in the EU on global digital economies (see, Julia Velkova in Issue 20). A decade ago, we were interested in digital pioneers, tracing their careers and analysing their projects. Nowadays, we reflect on the role of technologies in formulating, sustaining and challenging societal issues such as gender (in)equality (Issue 19). And we are also searching for 'big media theories' and their astonishing absences in specific contexts (Ben Peters in Issue 20).

If we look over the publication history of the journal, we will note the progress of our discussion, starting with the conceptualisations of the digital turn, moving onto to internet users and fandoms, online activism and digital trauma, and to new media, gaming and visual culture. We have provided cross-country comparisons as well as focused on research of specific contexts such as Bulgaria and the Russian Federation.

Since the launch of the journal we have published 250 items of research authored by 150 researchers. The journal's readership regularly exceeds 5,000 unique users (Google monthly statistics), placing the journal at the forefront of research, experimentation and scholarship. The journal's team includes over thirty experts in media and communication, making the journal one of the most powerful networks in the field. Materials published in the journal are used around the world in undergraduate and graduate courses on media, culture and digital technologies. They have also appeared on digital activists' platforms, in journalistic reports, and government policy documents, thus revealing the impact of the journal on academic and non-academic communities. This compels me to conclude that by 2020, *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org) has evolved into a leading research publication in the field of new media, digital culture, and the internet.

One of the principal values of the journal's team has been to support young researchers. I am so happy to see so many of the journal's editors and authors to have developed intellectually and professionally, securing teaching positions, research grants, and research agendas. There is no way to estimate precisely how publications, debates and informal chats have stimulated these scholars to look for new ways to carry out and present research but the impact is palpable and our community is strong. You have always been our inspiration!

While we celebrate our achievements, we wish to reflect on the areas that are to be developed in the future. A lot of attention has been paid to the Russian Federation. The RF is the largest country in the region and it has a powerful digital economy and a rich digital culture. The journal has provided a platform for a critique of the power structures implemented in the country with the help of new media (Françoise Daucé in Issue 20), challenging existing assumptions about power politics in the country. As time goes, we continue to identify new areas of interest such as Russian 'inter-losophy' (internet+philosphy), or what Alissa DeBlasio has conceptualised as 'the internet as library, the internet as salon, and the internet as a way of thinking (Issue 20).

Research on Russian new media, internet and digital technologies has been our central area of concerns. However, it is evident that as a research network we should pay more attention to other countries in the region such as Georgia, Kazakhstan and Lithuania. This can be realised in country-specific issues and also in transnational and comparative studies. In addition to the East-West approach, we should foster the North-South approach, looking at new areas and arenas of influence and collaboration such as the digital constellation of Georgia, the RF and Turkey. We should also employ a trans-regional approach looking at, say, Sakha (Yakutia) Republic and its digital engagement with Turkic countries and South East Asian countries. And with the Russian Federation—and other countries, too—we should drop the centre-periphery approach and instead focus on global connections emerging in different sectors such as digital animation (e.g., Wizart studio in Voronezh), digital arts (e.g., Cyland in St. Petersburg), digital fashion (e.g., designers in Chechnya, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria). De-westernizing and de-colonizing studies in new media and digital cultures is certainly our priority. These goals can be achieved by breaking the boundaries of Western academia by working in transnational networks and fostering region-to-region collaborations. The use of different languages, not only English, is a way forward. Luckily, the platform of the journal allows this kind of innovation.

Having emerged in the field of Slavic Studies, the journal bears the burden of that field, namely, the tendency to politicize research, including the employed methods, conceptual frameworks and interpretative models, all fossilized in the existing structures of government funding of research. The over-focus on the question 'How does the Kremlin use the internet?' has obscured many important concerns such as the role of digital technologies in enabling access for differently-abled people, or the role of social media in advancing sustainable development, or the role of applications in creating greater freedoms for people with non-heteronormative sexualities. We welcome research that looks at new areas of activity, not the populist agenda of Kremlinology. We continue to work with researchers who are interested in radical experiments within and beyond their discipline.

Similarly, we wish to resists neoliberal approaches to research with their obsession with rankings, whether those are citation indexes or rankings of countries, values, and approaches. By adopting a critical attitude to the symbolic economy and economics of attention, we welcome research that is based on historical analysis and is reflective of ideological structures of knowledge. The journal will maintain its independent status, and as long as possible, will remain in open access. These two values—along with absolute transparency of our procedures and dedication to equality and diversity—are key to our present and future successes.

It is significant that the anniversary issue comes out at a time when the world has gone into a lockdown due to the corona virus pandemic. Unable to go to offices, travel or socialise, people of the world have been compelled to pause and ponder over the future of global society and the future of technology. Indeed, the corona virus crisis has shown that digital networks are to sustain new forms of economics, culture, education and sociality. However, differences will persist, too. Back in 2009 we spoke of the digital divide: those with and without access to digital networks. In 2020, this difference seems less pertinent: access to digital networks is almost universal. However, it is apparent that instead of working as an equaliser, digital networks have sustained social differences. Indeed, during the lockdown, some people use social media to complain about feeling bored; others relay on social

media to make a little bit of money to support themselves. It is early days, but I believe post-corona research will reveal how digital networks had been used to maintain economic dominance over the less privileged and exploit those who are vulnerable. The anniversary issue captures a specific moment in time—just before the start of the lockdown—to give us a sense of perspective when researching and thinking about the world and technology in and after the time of crisis.

With no opportunity to organise a party—as we traditionally do during one of the major conferences—due to the universal lockdown, we hope to find new ways to celebrate the launch of the anniversary issue. So, we welcome feedback and ideas from all those involved in the field. Please send us a message and your feedback will help us achieve our goals.

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Robert A. Saunders (cofounder, steering committee member, contributor of first issue)

'I think we should not control the Internet'.
– V.V. Putin (15 December 2011)

More than a decade ago I was standing in my kitchen in New Jersey when I got a call from Vlad Strukov. He wanted to speak to me about starting a journal focusing on Runet, or Russian (language) cyberspace. It seemed the perfect idea at the time. As a junior researcher focused on how online media influenced national identity in the new millennium, the concept seemed both natural and revolutionary. We agreed that any such journal should itself be online, thus allowing for the rapid and free transmission of scholarship, as well as artistic and other creative interventions which could not be fully rendered in a print format. Over the next year, we began working out the scope of the project, which we decided would focus primarily on internet culture, communication, and politics in and across the former Soviet space, as well as those portions of the World Wide Web where the Russian language proliferated (it is important to remember that at the time, only about one-half of the netizens of Runet resided within the Russian Federation, with a large percentage being located in Western Europe, North America, and other countries outside the former USSR). We then proceeded to recruit three respected researchers in the field to our editorial board (Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk, Ellen Rutten, and Henrike Schmidt). Once the team was established, we formally christened our intellectual offspring with the name *The Russian Cyberspace Journal* and issued the inaugural call for papers. We all soon began to wrestle with the nomenclature, realizing that we had been far too narrow in our approach to the journal that we wanted

to build. With that in mind, Pedro Hernandez, Vlad, and I took a long walk contemplating a new name, and it was in a pub somewhere along the Thames that *Digital Icons* was conceived. With its secondary descriptor 'Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media', the new name more accurately reflected the aims of the project, and the second issue of the journal demonstrated the depth as well as the breadth of scholarship of the topics at hand.

Looking back, I have to admit that we underestimated the importance of the field of study to which we had dedicated our blood, sweat, and tears. Largely, this stemmed from a naïve optimism about the internet as a public good, a force for positive social, cultural, and political change. Our rose-coloured glasses partially obscured the ominous power that was growing in the darker corners of cyberspace (though later issues of DI would certainly plumb these depths). However, with the reframing of the journal's scope, we had serendipitously established an open and versatile framework for the investigation of the myriad uses and abuses of the internet across the post-socialist realm. As the journal changed, so did Runet and its geolinguistic cognates across the Web, creating a complex and confounding world where conflict became the norm. New technologies forced us as researchers to develop new methods. If there has been one constant, it is the struggle to keep up with technology and constantly refine our methodologies and analytical approaches to stay abreast of the rapid change which defines the world that Digital Icons seeks to explore, interrogate, and critique.

When I began my research on Russian-language users of the internet in Kazakhstan and Latvia in 2002, cutting-edge technology amounted to Angelfire web sites and use of forms of instant messaging that users today would find laughable. Censorship was mostly defined by the physical lack of access rather than sophisticated monitoring tools or the capacity of governments to short-circuit popular applications or search engines. Re-reading my essay 'Wiring the Second World: The Geopolitics of Information and Communications Technology in Post-Totalitarian Eurasia' which appeared in Digital Icons 1:1 some ten years ago reminds me just how far things have come, while also making me cringe at how little of the big picture I saw at the time. Since then, social media has transformed how the internet works across the region, while also creating conditions that have global implications—not least of which involves the manipulation of reality via 'fake news' and incendiary posts in places like the United States, Great Britain, and France. Consequently, national governments, which once seemed to be rather weak players in new media, are now partnering with IT companies to make cyber-security a top-level priority, while also using the 'intelligent web' to engage in various forms of surveillance and usage-analysis that seemed the stuff of science fiction a decade ago. Perhaps the one area where we got it right back then was in our vision of the power of the internet in the region to shape the arena of culture. Here we find no shortage of good news as cyberspace has emerged as a vast reservoir for preserving—as well as a canvas for producing—visual and acoustic art and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement.

Looking ahead, I dare not make any claims about what the future may hold for *Digital Icons*, but I am very proud to say that I was there at the start.

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Ellen Rutten (cofounder, advisory board member, contributor of first issue)

In the late 2000s, Vlad Strukov, Henrike Schmidt, and I strolled through Cambridge and dreamt of a brave new journal—one that would unite Slavic studies and the studies of digital media. If someone would have told me then what *Digital Icons* would be today, I would have dismissed the story as utopian. But here we are. It has been a pleasure to first help and then see the journal morph into a rich, stimulating, and inclusive platform for reflection on new media. I really have the impression that the publication manages to make a difference: to date, so many academic journals in media studies keep taking developments in 'the West' or in anglophone world regions as a default. *Digital Icons* takes the field beyond that western bias, with region-based analyses that, for this scholar at least, have often been empirical *and* theoretical eye-openers.

These eye-openers matter more and more, now that digital media have become such an indelible part of everyday life—not only, but also in Central and (South-)Eastern Europe. When the journal started, theorizing digital media primarily meant studying websites, blogs, and online videos. Today, we do not only 'go online' when we switch on a computer—but we do so all the time. I use my phone to check the weather before I leave the house; to app a student when I am late for a supervision; to board a train or plane; et cetera. To understand these ongoing interlacings of on- and offline, several of my students have started using post-digital thinking on (I am citing postdigital theorists David Berry and Michael Dieter) 'our newly computational everyday lives.' I am not sure if I can call myself a full-fledged fan—I am not uncritical of the field—but I follow and appreciate the work that leading voices in postdigital studies do to illustrate how 'digital' has turned from novelty to norm. What I also find helpful is scholarship that critically interrogates thinking about offline and online as a hard opposition. Nathan Jurgenson's notion of 'IRL Fetish,' for instance, and his observation that in the face of digitization, offlineity is unduly fetishized as more 'real' or 'authentic' than 'the online' (which is, of course, not a penny less real than 'the offline').

Around the time when we launched *Digital Icons*, I was following discussions about digital research tools and methods with much interest. That interest thrived with special force when I just started working in Amsterdam: I had high expectations of the University of Amsterdam's exceptionally well-developed, internationally renowned Digital Methods. On that front I have been somewhat disappointed, however—not by the Digital Methods initiative, but by my own ability to master online research methods. Despite several workshops and (longer and 'crash') courses, I have found it complex to implement these methods in my own research. Rather than a personal idiosyncrasy, I believe that this is a generational prob-

lem: more colleagues who finished their studies and PhDs around the same time as I did find it difficult to master digital tools—simply because they started working with them when their career was already in full swing, and teaching, admin, and other duties got in the way. The past years, I have found a partial solution for this problem by following and, increasingly, conducting small-scale digital analyses (with search concordance programs AntConc and Voyant Tools, for instance) together with PhDs and student-assistants. I hope to take those analyses to a new level in an upcoming study of, among other materials, Russian rap and rave music and music videos.

Within Slavic Studies, it has been especially inspiring to see an upcoming generation of scholars pick up and work with new insights and methods in media research—my own students, but also students at a winter school devoted to Digital Mnemonics in Slavic Studies in Freising, Germany, for instance; at Digital Humanities workshops at ASEEES; and, of course, in *Digital Icons*. I look forward to seeing their work and their thinking expand in the coming years.

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Henrike Schmidt (cofounder, steering committee member, contributor of first issue)

In roughly the last decade, a trend has manifested itself in the empirical sciences, especially in economics and psychology, to re-evaluate their own research results and study design ('credibility revolution'). The self-evident fact that scientific progress and scientific knowledge is linked to falsification and (self-)refutation gains new and practical relevance also in the broader field of the humanities.

In 2020 the twentieth issue of the online magazine *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org) will be published. The anniversary provides a good opportunity to look back on more than a decade of scientific debate on the development of digital technology and 'new media' in the countries of Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia. A glance at the titles of the twenty issues reads like a compact research agenda: the politicization of the Internet is, as expected, a central theme that recurs periodically, directly in the first issue entitled 'Virtual Power: Russian Politics and the Internet', but also in Issues 7 'Russian Elections and Digital Media' and 9 'Russian Protest Movement (R)e-Visited'. But apart from these obvious topics, *Digital Icons* has also accompanied and in some cases set new research trends, for example in the areas of digital memory culture, transmedial cultural practices, digital (patriotic) consumption and, in one of the last issues, gender

aspects and feminist readings of media use. Methodological changes have also been and will be addressed, although we have not yet devoted a separate issue to the challenges posed by increasingly quantitative, empirical research tools. A further aspect that also appears to be particularly important (and already proved to be insightful) is the continuous embedding of regional studies into transregional or global comparative analyses. In this way, exoticizing essentialism is avoided and comparative horizons are opened up.

We have not been able to implement all our plans with the same success as the regular publication of thematic issues, for example our digital memoirs initiative, which was intended to transform the website into an archive of digital culture explorations. Much thought has gone into the design of the (maybe over)complex title in order to reflect the post-imperial space of the 'digital East' in as decolonizing a way as possible. In view of the manifold dynamics in this area, this can only ever be done approximately. In a separate issue we have critically questioned the no less debatable epithet of the 'new' in relation to the in effect no longer 'new' media (Issue 15. 'The Rhetoric of the "New": Post-Digital in Cultural Post-Contexts'). We think it is justified in the ever-new challenges that are still being caused by the ubiquity of the digital. However, it is quite possible that this epithet will have to be deleted from the title, if the *Digital Icons* journal has the productive future that I, as a founding member, wish it for the next decade. Many promises and hopes of the digital have not been realized (the Internet as a participative tool and a 'liberation technology'). Against this background, it is a small miracle that *Digital Icons* has published twenty issues packed with scientific analysis of the digital East, partly peer-reviewed and completely open-access, without any external funding.

Finally, how has my own knowledge and perception of the Internet in Russia and Eastern Europe changed in the past decade? In the editorial of our book *Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet*, which I co-edited together with Natalia Konradova and Katy Teubener as early as 2006, we wrote (page 8; updated version 2009, page 5):

> Notwithstanding the political and economic appropriations and 'annexations' of the Internet, the current global networks present, with regard to their comparatively easy accessibility, a challenge to all aspirations for economic and political domination and encourage grassroots individual and collective activities […]. These opportunities for participation, though, are not necessarily used in the sense of an emancipating and 'liberal' engagement […], as the often especially skillful usage of the Internet by fascist, extremist and nationalist movements clearly illustrates. […] We would like to put forward the hypothesis that the Internet in Russia suffers not from its insignificance but from the fact that it has in its early times, in the 1990s, been transformed into a valuable tool of political manipulation. […] The negative result is the predominance of form over content, of discourse over political programmes – and the total loss of confidence in new media as a factor potentially contributing to the constitution of (counter) public sphere. (Schmidt et al. 2006: 8)

The value-driven hope that the Internet could prove to be an ultimately control-free space appears, from today's perspective, to be amusing or naive, depending on the perspective. At the latest since Edward Snowden's revelations about the omnipresence of US surveillance activities, it has become clear that the Internet is the increasingly perfect medium of control. Incidentally, the Snowden case has not yet been sufficiently analysed in its relationship to

Russia. The loss of credibility that the Western world has suffered as a result of the fact that the 'digital enlightener' Snowden finds protection in illiberal, authoritarian Russia of all places should not be underestimated.

The two hypotheses 1) on the dominant use of new media specifically by illiberal groups and ideologies and 2) on the discrediting of the (Russian) Internet as a trustworthy information medium through the massive use of 'fake news' are analytically more satisfactory. From a personal point of view, of course, the persistent relevance of these insights is rather depressing, as they support the thesis of comparative media researchers that Russia is a (sad) avant-garde in terms of advanced control and manipulation mechanisms (see Deibert et al 2010). It is as sobering as it is shocking to look back at the mantra-like discussions about the pros and cons of Internet control in Russia that have been repeated over the years. This shows that the current discussions and legislation on the notorious 'sovereign Russian Internet' are merely the continuation of a decade-long dispute.

Our reflections on the relationship of trust as a delicate psychological resource in its relationship to (digital) media prove to be highly relevant to this day. The Western world has followed Russia's path. The once well-balanced system of media, institutions and political parties has been shaken. And it becomes clear that information is not a pure value that could exist beyond the volatile resource of trust in political representation. It goes without saying that a demonization of Russia must be avoided. From fake news to troll factories, disinformation campaigns can only ever start where they detect a weakness in the other system. They should be seen as a litmus test, a free test of resilience.

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Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk (contributor of first issue)

Ten years ago, our main concern was that freedom of expression would be restricted on the Russian internet. However, the very definition of the Russian internet was not clear; the broadest definition was simply any internet in the Russian language. Russian was spoken primarily in one country, and Russia was less technologically advanced than the USA, Europe, Japan and Korea, so Runet was a sort of elite club, with considerably fewer and older participants than those in other countries' internet communities. Many Runet users were interested in sciences and the humanities, and Runet resources were heavily focused on them. Runet was also used for discussing political opposition, mostly because Russian authorities have traditionally focused on television and ignored the internet, which they didn't understand well either technologically or culturally. In 2000, under the new president, state con-

trol over television-centered media increased, but Runet stayed relatively independent, as only a limited group used it. Thus, in spite of our concerns, ten years ago freedom of expression on Runet really existed and was not greatly threatened by surveillance and prosecution.

Now the Russian internet can be defined more concretely: the law about the 'sovereign internet' became effective on November 1st and Runet may become the 'Russian-language intranet isolated from the global net on the territory of Russian Federation'. Major Russian internet providers will ignore the privacy concerns of their customers for commercial gains from monopolies. Two consequences of Runet's isolation seem important as they may lead to big changes in its culture. Firstly, Runet's isolation will lead to an increase in users dodging the controls with new software and hacking, and the experts who can help them will be in great demand. Secondly, only a few Runet users will manage to not break the law, so practically every Runet user will be in danger of prosecution. It's impossible to imprison the whole community, but it is possible to make everybody feel insecure, which will increase the distrust between the authorities and ordinary citizens. So, the new Runet may become 'double-layered', with a top of legally restrictive technology and a bottom of technologically sophisticated self-help groups.

Over the past ten years, Runet has become more popular (according to different surveys, users have increased by 30% to 50%) and content quality has deteriorated. Ten years ago Runet still seemed a small, cozy space where it was always possible to find people with more interesting ideas than in other public spaces. Today, although it is difficult to overestimate the degradation of Russian television, Runet is no longer in cultural opposition to it. Hate speech, threats etc. have become ordinary, as has surveillance, and many people have been fined or imprisoned for internet posts and 'likes'. The new law that can define an individual, as well as an organization, as a 'foreign agent' escalates the threat to freedom of expression.

As for structural changes, Facebook has conclusively replaced LiveJournal as a space for academics, writers and other cultural figures. Since LinkedIn was blocked in Russia several years ago, a significant difference in audience profiles has developed between the most popular Russian social network VKontakte and Facebook. The former is used more by young people, works better as an advertising tool and is under closer government surveillance, the latter has a more specific, middle-aged community and is a better place to discuss politics, art and literature. Instagram and Youtube seem popular with both audiences.

As surveillance has become a real threat and communication modes have changed with a new generation, usage has migrated from social networks to various messengers, which provide more privacy, as well as easier, more mobile functions. In simple terms, Viber is a family resource, WhatsApp unites small communities, such as the parents of one grade, FB Messenger is used as a business tool and for student-professor chats, but the most interesting recent case is Telegram. The long fight between Roskomnadzor and Telegram has only reinforced Telegram's popularity which, although officially forbidden, is universally used, even by Kremlin propagandists. This paradoxical case of Telegram is a good example of the 'double-layered' future of Runet.

Runet's changes have affected our field. We have always been interested in small, grass-roots communities. But as Runet has become more crowded and the triple revolution of the internet, social networks, and mobile technologies (L. Rainie and B. Wellman) has changed communication, we have become more interested in studying the phenomena of urban net-

works and city digital communities, which are the other side of a smart city technological program. Russian internet studies have also changed, and many young academics research digital anthropology and use digital ethnography as methodology when examining local and non-central internet cases, ethics and the etiquette of Runet.

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Olena Goroshko (contributor of first issue)

Did Runet change in the past ten years, and if so, how?

Yes, to my mind Runet changed drastically in the past ten years and has been still changing since that time. For Russia, 2019 is the 25th anniversary of Runet and the .RU domain. I think that ICT and Runet development trends can be viewed at various levels and time scales. Thus, the observations of academic researchers often determine 'long' trends such as:

- the growing influence of the internet as a source of information, the space of public and political mobilization, the growth of trust on the Net;
- the transfer of many offline social communications (political campaigning, marketing, civic initiatives, distance learning) into virtual environment;
- the strengthening of attempts concerning the legal regulation of the Network by the State.
- the legalization of already existing practices of blocking information resources, pressure and criminal prosecution of members of online protest groups and opposition bloggers. Thus, the main areas of internet regulation in 2018 were: Anti-piracy initiatives, regulation of social networks and content, regulation of the scope of data circulation, and new requirements for telecom operators (Internet in Russia in 2018: State, trends and development prospects, Moscow, 2019);
- the e-government and public e-services development;
- the use of the internet as a platform for the birth of new political leaders;
- attempts by the state to replace democratic political institutions with more controlled internet forms of interaction with society and others.

Additionally the result of Runet development became the emergence of a unique Russian internet economy, the emergence of national IT leaders, a noticeable position in international

markets and in the internet environment. Russia has a powerful ICT-sector providing an excellent basis for creating a digital economy. Today Runet is a full-fledged ecosystem with its platforms and services, key players, and with the audience of 90 million people or 74% of the country's population. Russia is one of the few countries in the world that has its own search services. One can speak about the narrowing of Digital Divide in Russia. In addition, Runet has its own social media, cartographic players, and players in the e-commerce industry. Over these ten years Runet proved that not only such projects can appear in Russia, but they also retain leadership in significant segments of the internet economy. Since the advent of the national segment of the global network in internet governance, Russia has consistently used a multi-stakeholder approach (Internet in Russia in 2018: State, trends and development prospects, Moscow, 2019). The progressive technologies, such as mobile banking, e-government, management of logistics, marketing and even the urban environment based on neural networks and artificial intelligence, have already become a reality for Russian society. High-tech companies, public organizations and government bodies participate in the development of decisions and policies on an equal footing, resulting in the impressive level of penetration of digital technologies in the life of Russian society, and if one could imagine that a quarter of a century ago the internet in Russia was presented by a small number of dispersed sites and services, its current state impresses deeply.

Has this change affected the field you are working in?

I am working in the field of Internet Studies and these changes greatly impacted this research area. Truly speaking they have provided a new field of institutionalized knowledge.

Did the field itself change? Have your methods and theories of study evolved?

Yes, they evolved deeply covering the methodology of research, the new methods of analysis (e.g. Big Data, the blending technologies, methods of visual analysis, etc.) appearance. Also it is possible to delineate a special area of knowledge studying the impact of social media on society. One can speak about e-learning 2.0, linguistics 2.0, sociology 2.0., etc.

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Tatjana Hofmann (contributor of first issue)

From my point of view, we deal less with a certain change of Runet. Rather, we deal with far-reaching consequences of global digitalisation. The possibilities for exchange of knowledge and multimedial representation grow from year to year. The differences between facts and fake facts, between online and offline reality, between experienced and arranged authenticity, between logical reactions and manipulation have blurred—or maybe we are more aware of the problems evoked by this blurring (see, for example, Nathan Jurgenson's book *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media*, London; New York 2019).

Since 2009 a lot has changed: Today, way more people have access to the internet in Russia and abroad. Moreover, the communication channels offered by the internet have transitioned from e-mail and modest text-based websites to relatively cheap multimodal platforms transferring terabytes of data. People all over the world use the internet more excessively in terms of time and data. It has become common practice to set up one's own multimedia homepage. At the same time, we are more involved in interacting with other people online, especially through commenting others' texts. In sum, we turn into hybrids of consumers and producers. After having analysed Russian avant-garde, I realize that after a hundred years the avant-garde media manifestos are turned into practice by Runet (as part of the global internet).

Yet do we already have the instruments to analyze the effects of the new communication era? Not only has the amount of daily exchanged data risen, texts are no longer the primary means of communication; their place has been taken by multimodal content combining texts with photographs, videoclips and interactive features. We do not know whether the pictures and videos are reliable sources or whether they have been changed by montage, Photoshop or by selection; correspondingly, the notion of the documentary is changing as well.

The difference between fact and fiction is being challenged like probably never ever before. Information seems to be more and more embedded into entertainment. The level of tolerance for information accompanied by emotion increases. In the fight for credibility, storytelling which incorporates eye-witnesses gets widespread. Propaganda in its original sense, i.e. convincing others by an affectively performed speech, turns out to fit perfectly into a communication culture where social media dominate information online.

As for me, I am fascinated by this development. I cannot separate my current research topics from it nor can I separate the internet from social media anymore; a process which has started with the first article I have written for *Digital Icons* when I came across the internet's interactive features. I still continue to take social media as an important source of social and aesthetic practices, and I also use it as a resource for research and teaching.

In my opinion the current media development erases Runet—it overflows with the Globalnet. Communities which arise from this development are no longer strongly divided by nation and language but rather by opinions, tastes and policies. Particularly social media like Facebook, VK, YouTube and Instagram allow dynamical group building. As for me, the group comments are interesting to read, for example in the group Krymoustroystvo on Facebook. It helps me to keep up to date concerning Crimea which is still a research topic of mine. Via Facebook and Messenger I have stayed in touch with several stakeholders from the peninsula, because social media seem to be much more convenient for them than email. On this ground I started to film a documentary within the project *Behind Potemkin's Vil-*

lages: Crimea Between Art and Crisis. The results, containing the video-interviews and an essay, will be published online.

Recently, my special interest arose towards documentary genres, e.g. Dmitry Markov's photography: https://www.instagram.com/dcim.ru. Are his photographs, shot with an iPhone, social criticism as he states, and thus, coming from journalism? Or are they well-composed, symbolically arranged pieces of art? I think the challenge is now to develop media theories which help to describe the current processes of fusion on several levels of represented and representation, content and form, of observing and writing, of reading and watching vs. interpreting and judging.

These experiences have affected me considering long running research topics of mine—the cultural life and memory cultures on Crimea—as well as new ones—documentary genres; my communication style by social media; and finally the questions I draw attention to, especially travelogues with their balancing of fact and fiction and their artistic investigation of culture, including the culture of new media.

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Sudha Rajagopalan (steering committee member)

If ever a field were to reflect the vicissitudes of political and social realities in Russia it would be the study of Russian digital media. The field, as the journal *Digital Icons* itself, has had to take its cues from an ever-evolving terrain of digital technology policy, use and access among Russians. It has been a decade of shifts: shifts in political climates, in our own expectations of what new technologies would bring, and correspondingly a shift in the ways we, as scholars, have been compelled to adapt our approach to researching the Russian digital media scene.

Now, ten years later I look back on the early phase, when we worked on the journal but also a LiveJournal blog, with nostalgia; it is nostalgia for a time when optimism and hope underwrote the way Russians envisaged the affordances of the technology and the way scholars like us saw promise and potential in every strategy and utterance on digital media platforms in Russia. I remember a blog I wrote for our Russian Cyberspace blog on LJ (2009) where I wondered, and refused to assert one way or the other, if Medvedev's official video-blog was meant to create an illusion of democratic purpose or if it was the real deal. This was actually meant as an open question! Very soon, driven in part by the emergent studies on participatory cultures and their political potential, much of Runet studies (including DI) was a focus on the various iterations of history, memory, rights, and identity that

pervaded Runet cultures. The overriding emotion that characterised the field was still a stubborn optimism that continued to assert that many Runet cultural practices could be read as acts of citizenship, as strategies to assert belonging, as ways to negotiate the official exercise of power. I believe that Runet scholarship was underpinned by the belief in the potential of Runet production to transform political culture.

Reflecting so many years later, I would argue that the protests of 2011–2012 and the subsequent tightening of new media legislation in Russia did affect the field of Runet studies and facilitated the turn that I saw DI taking over subsequent years. I believe that soon after these protests, it became harder for many like me to speak with undying cheer about the emancipatory potential of new media. New methods became evident as well, as the use of quantitative methods to study new media engagement seemed to take precedence over semiotic analysis of the politics of new media cultures. More and more research emerged that spoke of the ways in which the state itself used new media to shape public opinion, and the focus shifted to this battle of ideas between state and people on new media platforms. This, to my mind, was a radical shift away from the manner in which we had written about digital media until then; suddenly it seemed impossible to wish away the state as the state became a formidable player in the field of Runet, and scholars were beginning to consider the state's role in managing public affect and opinion through this medium.

Since then I have seen a growing chasm between studies that focus on the politics of Runet (do we even use that nomenclature any more?) and those that engage in deep analyses of cutting edge visual practices on new media. There seems to be a separation of the themes of politics and culture in a way that was less explicit in the early years of Runet studies. It would seem there is no more a quest to seek the politically transformative potential of new media. This is a sad comment on Russian digital media. Talk about politics on Runet has become talk about the state, and much less about political subcultures. DI's brilliant pieces on visual and other cultural practices have become predominantly concerned with the sociology or aesthetics of such practices. My own work on citizen participation on Runet has inevitably had to conclude that much of this cultural production becomes complicit in the neoliberal enterprise of the Russian state, without fully realising its democratising potential.

So it would seem that, personally, the affective underpinnings of one's engagement with Runet have moved radically away from the celebratory tone that was common a decade ago to a more subdued, cautious commentary about the political and cultural production of new media in Russia. In a way, as Runet has grown exponentially over the last decade, we have been forced to come of age and recognise the full gamut of transformations it has released both in terms of the unrelentingly creative potential of Runet users, but also with regard to the state's capacity to mobilise new media to its own advantage.

My reflections should not be read as a tragic view of Runet and our studies of it. Rather, it would seem that *Digital Icons* has consistently remained at the forefront of a fascinating field of scholarship, by closely reflecting and anticipating the many vagaries and unexpected turns of Russian new media practices and policy over the last decade.

Congratulations to my colleagues at DI, and here's to many more years of excellent, ear-to-the-ground scholarship!

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A historian and cultural studies scholar, Rajagopalan has researched and published on participatory practices within Russian digital media cultures. Her work on digital cultures can be found in major journals, including Digital Icons, Celebrity Studies, International Journal of Cultural Studies, Journalism Studies, European Journal of Cultural Studies and Transformative Works and Culture. A special edited volume on digital media and political publics, co-edited by Rajagopalan in Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, is forthcoming in 2020. Her publications in history include 'Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: the Culture of Moviegoing after Stalin' (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009), a pioneering, ethnohistorical study of Soviet movie reception of Indian cinema. She is currently working on a book manuscript about Soviet material culture in the Global South. [s.rajagopalan@uva.nl]

Elena Trubina (advisory board member)

Did Runet change in the past ten years, and if so, how?

At the times when the Kremlin controls most broadcast media, particularly TV, and when only a few media (i.e. Novaya Gazeta) attempt to contest state propaganda and publish pieces marked by independent analysis and criticism, Runet increasingly becomes the main source of information. The recent polls (http://www.liberal.ru/upload/files/Vstrechnaya_mobilizatsiya.pdf) demonstrate that trust towards TV diminishes while Runet is justifiably viewed as a more reliable and democratic form of media by virtue of its instantaneity, breadth and audiences engagement. In spite of quite skeptical assessment of the role of Runet in political mobilization (Oates, 2013, 2017), it did become a powerful tool for grassroots organizing as the recent wave of the protests in Moscow, Ekaterinburg, Shies and many other places showed.

Has this change affected the field you are working in?

My main field is urban studies. When it comes to the Russian academic urban studies, unfortunately, I don't see much work reflecting on the changes in the information consumption, cultural consumption, education, and political mobilization stemming from the increased influence of the Russian segment of social media and social networks. More alarmingly, even in Internet Studies, when it comes to the articles published in Russian, it is obvious that the peak of interest towards Runet is over: the majority of the publications on it appeared more than ten years ago (see a screen grab of 'elibrary'—the results of search with 'Runet' as a key word).

Did the field itself change?

Scholars working in the field of urban studies (and related ones) have been variously examining global internet developments. Four things are particularly interesting: (1) the change in the attitudes toward the 'smart city': from its promotion as the path to well planned, technologically progressive, green and socially inclusive city to a growing skepticism stemming from the realization that the smart city discourse and visions, however ubiquitous, serve the interests of the urban and transnational elites by creating new assets for the circulation of capital. In Russia specifically, this discourse has been actively used in the national programs and municipal projects to create the façade of hypertechnological advancement; (2) the on-going investigation of the political economic tendencies in technological and infrastructural developments combined with sociocultural factors determining the specifics of the internet design and use in various contexts, including the national ones. One sees the recent articles on the Chinese internet (Li 2017, Zhen et al.2015) which, among many things, look at the spatial patterns of the internet industry in China but we, unfortunately, don't see comparable (and recent) articles summarizing the changes in Runet, its political economy and sociocultural specifics; (3) the growth of research on online practices of various groups of population, from elderly people to the inhabitants of suburbs. The concept of networked individualism (Hampton and Wellman 2003) seems particularly useful here since it allows to examine the changes in the ways communities function today: one can work out one's social network regardless of location. Distance barriers thus become less detrimental; (4) the virtual city problematic is exciting, too. Commonly understood as a computer-based 3D graphical representation of a city often accessible over the internet, the virtual city is not only an endless source of fun (i.e. Cities: Skylines) but is used in web-based resources that inform users about various sides of the city or allows to visualize the results of historical research by way of creating elaborate historic reconstructions.

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Vera Zvereva (steering committee member)

Over the past 10 years, Runet, and with it the study of Runet culture, have changed significantly, in line with global and Russian technological and political changes, and socio-cultural developments in the sphere of digital media itself.

In Russia, the internet has become a mass technology: the audience of internet users aged 16+ exceeds 90 million users; among 16–25 year olds, internet penetration is 99%. The digital divide may have narrowed, but internet penetration is still geographically uneven,

with Moscow and the big cities very different from Russia's more remote regions. Runet culture has changed with the social and political composition of its users; boundaries in the mass perception of online and offline have been blurred; and the fact of digital mediation has, due to its ubiquity, become invisible. We have also seen rapid growth in digitalization of Russian culture.

Technological innovations, not unique to Runet, but bringing to life new cultural forms, include: the emergence of big data and technological capabilities for its analysis; the appearance of artificial neural networks, machine learning, object recognition technology, etc. The widespread use of mobile internet access via smartphones, and the corresponding growth of mobile only audiences—has transformed user behaviors, served as a technological basis for 'digital' protest movement, transformed the urban environment of 'smart cities' and influenced the markets for digital products and advertising. One should also mention: the advent of blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies; the rapid growth of social networks, which have become the main mechanism of socialization on Runet; audience fragmentation; the deliberate withdrawal of the youth audience from social networks; the development and adoption by the youth audience of instant messengers such as Telegram and more private direct communications; all of which have made it harder for researchers to access data for the study of digitally mediated communication.

Political changes: for governments around the world, including Russia, the internet has become a source of national security concern and an object of political regulation. In the 2010s on the global internet and Runet in particular, the illusion of anonymity disappeared, thanks to widely published evidence of political international surveillance, cyber attacks, and attempts to influence the politics of other countries through social networks and the targeted political advertising they enabled. This resulted in an increase of user interest in encryption technologies and VPNs, and an increase in users' technical literacy. In Russia, the protest movements of 2011–2012 provoked a reaction from the government: the Duma enacted an unprecedented number of 'laws against the internet', designed to establish control over Runet. The Russian authorities are developing technologies for creating a 'sovereign Runet' or disconnecting Runet from the internet, if necessary. The criminalization of reposts and comments and the widening scope for interpretation of 'extremism' allows Russian law enforcement agencies to selectively apply the law to internet users involved in politics. The political polarization of Runet users was reinforced by Russia's annexation of Crimea. Power structures and the Duma inflicted heavy blows on Russian internet businesses. In 2019 the Duma enacted a Law on Individuals as Foreign Agents, effectively erasing the distinction between authors and distributors of content on Runet.

Given the technical complexities of exercising control over digital media, a new digital propaganda system is being built in Runet whose function is to appropriate (buy or seize) various types of sites and communication channels, saturate them with 'ideologically correct' content, and make them attractive to internet users. The current, populist strategies of political communication employ the forms and language of popular culture to spread political messages. The spread of the state message in Runet is facilitated by third party players: for example, the troll army allegedly sponsored by Yevgeny Prigozhin, which undermined the basis of user communication in Runet on topics even remotely related to politics. The latest trend is the transformation of former 'troll factory' sites into respectable media registered by Roskomnadzor, such as FAN and now the Patriot media group.

Sociocultural changes: the infrastructure of social networks stimulated the volunteer movement, which is important for civic solidarity in Russia, and network activism (including Navalny's political projects). Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding became widespread for various types of projects. In education, there were developments in open lectures, MOOCs and projects promoting knowledge, intellectual culture and study of the past, among which three notable examples are 'Arzamas', 'Prozhito', and 'History of the Future'. In Russia's regions, there has been intensive development of regional digital media, whose effects on regional identity offer prospects for study. We have also seen the rise of digital television; the channel 'Rain'; online platforms delivering video content; and efforts against digital piracy as a possible step towards normalization and integration of intellectual property rights.

Runet users have been increasingly willing to cross the digital border, to the global internet, with online translation technologies helping to overcome linguistic barriers. Horizontal peer-to-peer communication between Runet users and the global internet is thriving in the fields of travel, fashion, beauty, healthy lifestyle, popular culture, consumption and exchange of goods and services. Runet users are taking full part in prosumer art practices, global 'challenges', and the circulation of memes.

Some changes for Runet research: The field of Runet research has become more complex and specialized. Quantitative methods for studying digital data have become more popular; attempts are being made to make sense of big data. The field has become more crowded, with internet studies now attracting the whole range of socio-humanitarian disciplines. Political regulation of the internet is creating obstacles to the study of internet communication. Sensitivity about the protection of users' personal data, and legislative responses such as the adoption in the European Union of The General Data Protection Regulation are calling into question to what extent humanities and social science researchers of Runet in the EU will be able to continue using qualitative methods.

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