



digital icons

Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media

Issue 20: Ten Years of *Digital Icons*: Theorizing Foundations in the Face of Technical Innovation

EDITORIAL

I am pleased to announce the publication of the anniversary issue of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (digitalicons.org). This is our twentieth issue, celebrating a whole period of innovation in research, disciplinary development and capacity building. I wish to use this editorial to reflect on this extraordinary period of change. I start with a note on how the journal had emerged, followed by an assessment of the journal's contribution to research, and finishing with some proposals for future work. As always, I acknowledge all those who have worked on the issue in the final section.

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 focused 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) fi-

nally 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's visual essay 'The Art of Guarding the Russian Cloud: Infrastructural Labour in a Yandex Data Centre in Finland' (20.4). 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, see Ben Peters' essay 'Where in the World is Russian Media Theory' (20.2).

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, see Françoise Daucé's article 'Disguising the Internet? Website Design and Control in Russia' (20.1), 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+philosophy), or what Alyssa DeBlasio's essay 'Philosophy on the Early Russian Internet: 1994 – 2008' has conceptualised as 'the internet as library, the internet as salon, and the internet as a way of thinking' (20.3).

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 resist 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.

The anniversary issue was edited and produced—like our other issues—by the in-house team of editors. Conceived by Andrew Chapman, Gernot Howanitz, and myself, the issue has drawn on the expertise and experience of other editors, namely, Pedro Hernandez, Mykola Makhortykh, and Henrike Schmidt, and our new editors Tatiana Klepikova and Christopher Fort. I wish to thank all other editors as well as our contributors and readers for their dedication, resilience and optimism. Stay safe and stay happy!

Vlad Strukov (London)