



On Making Presence: Blind Authors' Digital Storytelling in Russia

SVETLANA BORODINA

Columbia University

Abstract: This article argues that blind people's digital storytelling in Russia constitutes a contemporary grassroots tool of unearthing their public presence. In writing and sharing their stories, they seek (and forge) coalitions and connections, instead of claiming agonistic independence vis-à-vis the nondisabled. Accessible to the broader public on social media, experience-based blind authors' stories work against the stereotypical rendering of blind people as absent, uniformly tragic, incapacitated, unable and isolated (see also Hartblay 2020). Instead, projects such as *Tipichnyi Nezriachii*, reviewed and analysed in this article, host narratives of diverse, relatable and community-embedded blind persons. The presence of such authors and their stories enriches the public imaginary about culturally exceptionalised people (Rapp and Ginsburg 2011; Wool 2015), contributes to the emergent shift in Russian society towards de-escalating the catastrophic emotional impulse typically associated with blindness and opens up new possibilities for inhabiting a shared world for blind and sighted people alike.

Keywords: blindness, Russia, storytelling, disability, presence, community, postsocialism, inclusion, digital, social media

In Spring 2020, I read 113 blind people's life stories publicly available on Runet. Among others, the following story caught my attention:¹

I was not taught to cook. Most sighted people find it hard to even imagine their blind child [*slepen'koe chado*] picking up a knife, walking up to a hot stove or taking some-

¹ I extend my gratitude to Aliia Nurullina and the authors of *Tipichnyi Nezriachii*, for sharing their thoughts and experiences with me. I would like to thank Ellie Vainker for her invaluable help with writing this piece. For their insightful and thoughtful comments, I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers as well as the special issue's editors Tatiana Klepikova and Cassandra Hartblay. My work on this article was made possible with the generous support of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University, the Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship, the Social Science Research Council, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and Rice University.

thing out of the oven. And our [blind people's] pace of work at the training stage leaves much to be desired—not everyone will have enough patience.

But when you study on your own, everything is much simpler: no one rushes you, breathes down your neck or gets in the way. I really appreciate it. And even now, in fact, there is still a thing that irritates me—when the sighted observe my culinary efforts. I am glad that it rarely happens in my life, that there are no strangers in my kitchen. My own mess, which I created, is carefully maintained, and when something disrupts it, I swear loudly and for a long time.

I started cooking in the dorm. There was no kitchen. I mean, there was, of course, a common one, but I preferred to cook in my room. [I had] a neighbour's multicooker (not the best multicooker in my life) and a microwave. In the latter, I boiled dumplings. But only once, due to distraction, I dressed them not with mayonnaise, but with condensed milk. Eh, for a long time I scolded whoever came up with an idea of condensed milk in a bag [which has similar packaging to mayonnaise] (and whoever bought it, by the way, too). Anyway. The dumplings were saved by washing (Filatova 2020a).

This is an excerpt from Regina Filatova's story on *The Typical Blind* [Tipichnyi Nezriachii, hereafter, TTB], a vibrant digital Russian project² dedicated to publishing blind people's life stories. This particular story recounted Regina's journey of learning to cook as a blind person. An administrator of several culinary-themed public group chats on WhatsApp, Regina told me in an interview that she loves cooking and does it well, despite a common misconception that blind people would struggle.

To a sighted reader, like me, her story might come across as simultaneously quotidian and intriguing. Regina discussed familiar matters from a position of an unusual narrator—someone who has been stereotyped in Russian popular discourse as unable to deal with basic everyday tasks such as taking care of their own meals due to their disability—an impossible subject, in a way. In her casual narrative, Regina's personality shone through—I chuckled at her self-irony and jokes (those dumplings with condensed milk must have tasted quite strange!), found myself attuned and attentive to the moments of struggle, admired her patience and got annoyed at how the sighted persistently manage to do more bad than good under the guise of wanting to help. I then moved on to read her other stories available on TTB, where I learned about where she grew up, what moved her, how she experienced pregnancy and then, finally, motherhood. Her stories made it easy for me to relate. And the feeling of an unbridgeable gap between us, a blind author and a sighted reader, subsided.

However, her stories—and other blind authors' life stories on TTB—do more than just create an opportunity for sighted readers to relate to a blind writer. These stories provide a virtual window into a social world where blind persons have always been and will remain present in the world of the sighted: they grow, play, struggle, love, learn, care and work side by side, despite sighted people's common beliefs otherwise (see also Garland-Thomson 2015). If for the sighted, blind people's presence as co-participants in this shared world often comes as a discovery, for blind people, it is a daily reality they have learned or have to learn to navigate. In this article, I examine the specific ways in which blind authors foreground their presence in the shared (ableist) world to themselves, their blind peers and the sighted

² TTB's materials are available on three platforms: VKontakte (<https://vk.com/tipicalblind>), Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/tipicalblind>) and their website (<http://tipicalblind.ru/>).

audience—namely, through writing and publicising digitalised narratives about their lived embodied experiences.

TTB is a grassroots project that is entirely dedicated to sharing life stories written by blind authors. Although it was launched as a platform to host Aliia Nurullina's (the chief editor) reflections on her life as a blind person in 2018, in 2019 TTB was reframed and opened for contributions from other blind people. Everybody involved in the work of TTB is a volunteer: neither the authors nor the editors receive any compensation for their work. Among other online platforms in Russia that feature content by or about blind people, TTB stands out by the sheer number and diversity of life stories and authors it offers. Once or twice a week a new story appears, enriching TTB's growing archive. Although topics range widely, most often they discuss biographical trajectories or offer reflections on ableism-driven³ experiences of exclusion and possible tactics to promote inclusion.⁴ Any blind person who wishes to share their story may become an author on TTB. The project's editorial team, which consists of two blind and one sighted young women, assists the authors in preparing their manuscripts for publication: the editors ensure texts' adherence to the spelling, punctuational and stylistic norms of the Russian language while attempting to amplify the authorial voice as much as possible. Upon publication, the texts are available online to the broader public. Although anyone can read the materials, commenting is restricted to registered users of VKontakte and Facebook.

Interested in the experiences and aspirations of blind authors to engage in public digital storytelling, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with the authors and editors of the project. I asked them about what moved them to narrate and digitalise their life experiences, how they did so and what effects this digitalisation has had on their lives in contemporary Russia. I supplemented the interview transcripts with published stories and publicly accessible readers' comments, to build an archive that helped me address the question of how packaging, narrating and digitalising one's own lived embodied experience contributes to the constitution of blind people as publicly present subjects in contemporary Russia. Finally, this essay also relies on insights gathered during field research I conducted between 2014 and 2018, when I worked with a network of loosely connected blind persons in Russia united in their goal to promote disability inclusion.

This essay argues that digital content generated by blind people on social media platforms, and narrated life stories in particular, constitutes a contemporary grassroots tool of unearthing a public presence of blind subjects. This tool enables blind people to assert their subjectivity in ways other than the familiar tools of liberal rights-based politics. In writing and sharing their stories, they seek (and forge) coalitions and connections, instead of claiming agonistic independence vis-à-vis the nondisabled. Accessible to the broader public on social media, experience-based blind authors' stories work against the stereotypical rendering of blind people as absent, uniformly tragic, incapacitated, unable and isolated (see also Hartblay 2020). Instead, projects such as TTB host narratives of diverse, relatable and community-em-

³ I use ableism and disableism (further in this text) in the sense captured by Lydia X.Z. Brown: '*ableism* might describe the value system of ablenormativity which privileges the supposedly neurotypical and ablebodied, while *disableism* might describe the violent oppression targeting people whose bodyminds are deemed deviant and thus disabled' (Lydia X.Z. Brown in Scuro 2019: 48; emphasis in original).

⁴ Importantly, the topic one would hardly find on TTB is non-Christian religions or forms of spirituality, nor texts critiquing Christianity. Such a Christian-centric policy was established by the project's founder, Aliia Nurullina, who self-identifies as a Christian.

bedded blind persons, who offer their accounts as possible and occurred, yet not necessary or exhaustive, life scenarios. The presence of such authors and their stories enriches the public imaginary about culturally exceptionalised people (Rapp and Ginsburg 2011; Wool 2015), contributes to the emergent shift in Russian society towards de-escalating the catastrophic emotional impulse typically associated with blindness and opens up new possibilities for inhabiting a shared world for blind and sighted people alike.

To make this argument, I proceed as follows. In the first section, I discuss scholarship on disabled people's digital presence, with special attention to postsocialist representational strategies and tactics that delineate the contours of this presence. Then, as I contextualise the situation in which authors and readers come to TTB, I turn to an in-depth analysis of TTB, to show why they stay. To this end, I analyse published materials and collected interviews with the platform's authors and editors. I argue that digitalised autobiographies available on TTB work as a tool of making presence in a tripartite way. First, by presenting multiple possibilities of being blind and showcasing the diversity of blind people, they push back against ableist stereotyping of blindness. In so doing, they enrich the pool of public imaginary about blindness (see also Rapp and Ginsburg 2011). Second, this platform provides opportunities for a narrative construction of the self and a reclamation of one's experience as a valid and valued experience, against the backdrop of social devaluation of blindness and its assumed absence from social life. Finally, the open, yet moderated, online format allows TTB's authors and editors to have difficult conversations about ableism and disability exclusion among sighted and blind participants, in a safe and respectful environment of a cultivated online sociality.

1. Parameters of disabled people's digitalised public presence

Anthropologists have begun to explore the politics and pedagogies of public appearance of disability in various national contexts (Friedner 2017; Hammer 2019; Zoanni 2019). As a form of difference that has been an object of systemic discrimination across the globe (Ingstad and Whyte 2007; Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2013), disability has been imbricated in local contestations of who belongs to public spaces, in what way and on what conditions. This essay approaches blind Russians' digital narratives not only as forms of public appearance but as forms of public *presence*, signalling their aspirations and actions to claim time and space, their own stories and tools for configuring the terms of their social participation.

I choose *presence* over *appearance* intentionally. Hannah Arendt (1998: 50) defines appearance as 'being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves'. Through action and speech, she argues, human beings express who they are and participate in the political. As Tyler Zoanni (2019) argues, Arendt's concept of appearance challenges liberal identity politics and rights-focused frames of action. Although in the sense that I use here, *presence* is conceptually adjacent to Arendt's *appearance*, the former exceeds the latter's semantic range in important ways. First, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2015) distils in her analysis of Harriet McBryde Johnson's 'Case for My Life', narrated embodied disability presence makes the case for sustaining people with disabilities more fully. First-person disability narratives assert the author's subjectivity and claim their presence through foregrounding the materiality of their lives. Further, with its analytical capacity to grasp the significance of multiple

forms of relationships among subjects vis-à-vis each other, *appearance* fails to incorporate the *historical* sharing of the same world as well as the resolute intention to continue sharing this world. To the contrary, *presence* allows me to capture the fact that my blind interlocutors and other blind people have always already been part of the political and intend to do so in the future, whether the sighted recognised it or not. They have already devised strategies of life and survival, in the world that was not designed to support them, and they educate others (both sighted and blind) about these strategies to ensure the presence of other blind people in the future. As blind authors share their life stories, one or several, they assert their (historical and prospective) presence to themselves, to other blind members, who gauge their own experiences in comparison with the narrated stories, and to the project's sighted readers. At the same time, as they carve out their presence in the shared world, they are also enmeshed in the fraught dynamic of informing and educating the sighted about this presence. This simultaneous inhabiting the space carved out by ocularcentric exclusion and in attempt to dismantle this exclusion characterises the position from which my blind interlocutors speak, from which, in Saskia Sassen's terms, they 'make presence' (Sassen 2013). Finally, my interlocutors' first-person accounts provide a platform to express their voices and continual, lived embodied realities, albeit curated and amended with the help of editors yet finally authorised by the authors themselves (for a discussion of other forms of mediated co-presence see also Madianou 2016). In this sense, they present themselves to the audience, thus challenging conventional and often ableist forms of disability representation in Russia.

Blind Russians' public presence is mediated by a plethora of fraught symbolic frames: disablist stereotypes and rhetorical moves that fuel negative public attitudes and low expectations abound. Here, Sarah Phillips' work (2010) offers a helpful overview of post-Soviet strategies and devices of disability representation. She identifies four genres of disability representation that dominated Ukraine's mediascape in the 2000s: the Symbolic (narratives that use disability as a symbol of broader social phenomena and issues), the Sensational (grotesque and graphic depictions of hardships and anomalies associated with disability or, on the other hand, stories of miraculous recovery), the Critical (critical accounts of violations of the rights and freedoms of people with disabilities, often in comparison to the West), and the Personalizing (portrayals of individuals with disabilities focused on their life story and experiences). She underscores that these accounts are profoundly melodramatic; they tend to display people with disabilities as 'monstrous, invisible, and nonhuman' (Phillips 2010: 146). Rendered as such, people with disabilities are used as symbols and tools of dehumanisation and pathologisation of related phenomena and populations.

While the genres Phillips identified are commonly present today in Ukraine as well as in Russia, the changed political climate and the increased access to social media and digital platforms for people with disabilities themselves have introduced new elements to the representational landscape. Since Russia's signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008 and its subsequent ratification in 2012, public discourse about disability has been changing (Arsent'eva 2017; Verbilovich 2013). Scholars have documented more frequent contestations of framing people with disabilities as incapable, useless, morally defunct or social burdens (Arsent'eva 2017), the proliferation of advocacy and discursive tools to protect the identity of people with disabilities (Toepler and Fröhlich 2020) and the emergence of diverse media platforms and genres designed and equipped for the sub-

version through comedy (Hartblay 2014). More stakeholders have sufficient social, cultural, economic and political resources to challenge publicly reproduced stigma associated with disability. Finally, increased access to digital media and the growing importance of social media in setting up trends and hosting public conversations about socially pertinent topics serve as important factors. In other words, although autobiographical accounts authored by people with disabilities are not new (Nosenko-Stein 2018a), their digitalised circulation and availability to the broader public is.

Digital outlets, and especially social media-based platforms, have offered new opportunities to people with disabilities (Ginsburg 2012). On the one hand, research shows that digital platforms enable participatory creation of networks and communities (boyd 2014; Gonzalez-Polledo 2016), digital places (Boellstorff 2019), digital selves (Davis & Boellstorff 2016), and cultural attributes of disability (Ellis 2019: Chapter 5). On the other hand, digital mediation presupposes a sensorially and corporeally unique way of social encounters (Hartblay 2019), which may be enabling or disabling in different circumstances. In this sense, to understand better the opportunities opened up by digital tools of making presence, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the multiple possibilities for inclusion *and* exclusion that are embedded in digital technology. Namely, privacy and access to the internet and personal devices with accessible hardware and software as well as one's skills of manipulating digital technology should not be taken for granted (Newman et al. 2017). With this in mind, I approach TTB as an example of a digital platform that works toward asserting a more prominent public presence of blind persons online *and* offline, with their own stories, diverse experiences and sociality of mutual support.

2. Why TTB?

In telling her story of becoming a reader and then author on TTB, Sof'ia Didina brings the reader to the moment of dramatic vision loss that she experienced in her twenties. In that moment, Sof'ia found herself wanting a supportive community of people with similar experiences. She found TTB as the result of an intentional search:

Once, on the pages of a public group about the life of disabled people, I saw an article by Aliia Nurullina, which was published on *The Typical Blind*. Of course, I immediately went to the public group [TTB] and began to look through other materials. The more I read the notes, the more my heart rejoiced: 'This is it! I have really found what I have been looking for!' For the first time in my life, I took great pleasure in reading articles written by blind authors, in which they wrote not about how bad their life is and how everyone else is to blame, but about how wonderful life can be—even without sight—and how you can overcome the greatest difficulties and just live, enjoying life. I seemed to read all day, forgetting about everything else. The lives of blind people opened up to me from various angles. Something surprised me, something else delighted me. I never thought that the life of a blind person can be so multifaceted! It turns out that even being blind myself, I did not know so much about the lives of the same people (Didina 2020a).

Sof'ia Didina's account of the joyful discovery of how diverse the lives of blind people could be is not singular or exceptional—various other life stories on TTB feature the same twist.

Remarkably, as evidenced in comments, stories and my interviews, several people found the content and interactions on TTB resonant and helpful in the quest of coming to terms with their own blindness or with the blindness of their loved ones. It also helped them to carve out new paths for development *with* blindness.

But why? Why did these stories work for Sof'ia Didina and others? Why were they the kind of stories she searched for? And why couldn't she find them elsewhere? To answer these questions, I offer a brief contextualisation of Sof'ia Didina's and others' search for a supportive community of like-minded blind people online or offline as a common experience of blind adults in post-Soviet Russia. In what follows, I provide an overview of the existing public infrastructures available to blind people, the opportunities they offer and the kinds of sociality they support and encourage.

To its documented blind residents with a recognised disability status, the Russian state provides subsidised access to public infrastructures of habilitation (to those who were born blind) and rehabilitation (to those who lost their eyesight later in life). The habilitation system includes schools with specialised curricula, equipment subsidies and welfare benefits; the rehabilitation system includes rehabilitation centres, vocational retraining programs, welfare benefits and assistive technology subsidies. Through these infrastructures, blind people and their families tend to have access to resources, specialised knowledge and people with similar experiences. Regardless of the quality of their services and provisions, these infrastructures provide resources to help blind people *adapt* to a life in the ocularcentric world. In this sense, their support has a clear end point—they are not tasked with assisting in the life-long formation of blind persons as they grow, change and develop new interests. As students graduate from such schools or blind adults complete their training programs, their connectedness to other blind and low vision people becomes a choice, rather than a circumstantial given. In this vein, despite having had access to habilitation and rehabilitation infrastructures, several authors shared that their offline network of friends did not comprise any blind people or that they had grown up without coming across any other blind person at all. Thus, the needed long-term support and community of people with similar experiences comes to be found in self-organised digital sociality—an example of which is TTB.

Another gravitational centre that attracts blind people and serves as a vehicle of community formation is non-profit organisations. The All-Russian Society of the Blind [Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Slep'ykh, hereafter VOS], with its wide network of regional and municipal branches, has historically been the most prominent among other relevant non-profit organisations. One of the first organised societies of blind people in the USSR (opened in 1925), VOS has outlived the Soviet Union. However, along with substantial financial challenges that VOS faced upon the dissolution of the USSR, the society also experienced a decline in popularity among younger blind people. During fieldwork, young blind adults provided me with various explanations of their lack of involvement in their local VOS branches. Some were driven away by the substantial unemployment rates among blind people seeking and ready for employment (for which VOS as the main lobbyist for the interests of blind people was held accountable). Some critiqued the society for its failure to equip its members with the skills that are commensurable with, and in demand in, the contemporary capitalist economy.⁵

⁵ Although there are branches that cater to the needs of young members and that serve as stellar examples of advocating for the needs of its members, they are currently rather rare.

Others sought to dissociate themselves from the society whose advocacy for the needs of its members has been perceived to be insufficient. Still other young blind interlocutors chose not to join VOS or otherwise not to actively participate in the society's activities due to the perceived discrepancy between their cultural expectations and the cultural conventions at their home VOS branches. As a result, as an offline platform for community building and public presence, in the late 2010s VOS did not meet every need or desire for community among younger blind people.

Now in 2020, accessible digital content and practices of social connection available to blind people and people with low vision have developed significantly. New digital outlets for social presence and participation have mushroomed, providing an alternative to more traditional offline community spaces. Social media, accessible through screen reader software on personal devices, have offered access to sociality at a convenient time and space, bypassing the problem of urban mobility and the need to go somewhere to socialise. Although access to computers or smartphones still serves as a barrier that not everyone is able to cross, the free training on the use of digital technologies available to blind people at local specialised public libraries addresses some of the barriers to access digital platforms and communities.

Formats, forms and content of digital sociality have diversified, enabling blind people themselves to take an active part in shaping narratives and representations of blindness. Thematically diverse *pabliki* [public groups] on VKontakte and Facebook, grassroots visual media description projects, journalistic projects with content about and with the participation of blind authors, blogs, YouTube channels, mailing lists and thematic group chats on WhatsApp and Telegram offer digital opportunities for connection and information exchange. The internet content generated by blind users for the consumption of other blind users has offered a variety of diverse forms of participation and involvement: from observation to authoring posts and materials or managing the platforms. Importantly, blind users' digital presence often bleeds over to their offline life and presence too—through practising learned patterns of participation in various in-person contexts, through meeting virtual acquaintances offline or through trying out information and life hacks they learned online.

Before I proceed to discuss what makes TTB a unique and valued digital platform, I need to identify another aspect that contributed heavily to Sof'ia Dinina's (and others') prolonged search of a digital social space. To do this, I turn to a story of Roman Pavlovskii, one of TTB's authors. Roman Pavlovskii writes about his previous experience with chat groups for blind persons that left him unsatisfied and lacking a sense of belonging. After graduating from a special school for blind students and a music college, Roman Pavlovskii lost connection with other blind folks. He writes about his journey as follows:

And then one day I noticed a voice chat group, where mostly blind and visually impaired people gather. Then I suddenly realised how much I missed communication with people like me. But I was deeply struck by the cruelty and anger expressed towards everything and everyone, which overwhelmed the members of this community. My sighted friend entered this chat and literally two days later said that he could no longer endure such communication and that he could not imagine so much senseless aggression in our world. Yes, seeing how one humiliates the other is not the most pleasant sight. I decided to give it up. Since then, for a long time, I barely communicated with the blind (Pavlovskii 2019).

This was the beginning of Roman Pavlovskii's search for a community of other blind people. I am not bringing his experience here to discredit other communities or pass judgement on whether they are or were truly unpleasant. After all, digital bullying and trolling is a phenomenon that transcends any thematic communities and groups. Additionally, such groups may provide an outlet for expressing social critique. Instead, I use Roman's narrative as an example of a trajectory intimately familiar to many blind people, especially of younger age, when they search for a community that resonates with their own interests, preferred forms of subjecthood and patterns of communication. His experience, along with the experience of Sof'ia Didina and others, points at the pitfalls and risks endemic to navigating online spaces and resources. On TTB, Sof'ia and Pavel found an affectively and intellectually resonant sociality that provided opportunities for sought-after sameness (Friedner 2015) and for establishing bridges with others.

3. Ordinary faces of blindness

The media often say either 'Oh, the blind are so poor, so unfortunate! How bad everything is!' or 'How cool they are! They conquered Everest!' Both approaches are far from reality. We want to show living people—with problems, with failures, with ups and downs. Then readers can see that the blind narrators are just like them, with the same problems and also trying to do something about it. So that they have some kind of motivation, some model to follow. (Nurullina 2020b)

In her interview, Aliia Nurullina, TTB's blind founder, chief editor and administrator, counterposes TTB to other digital and media platforms that deliver content about blind people. She critiques the popular stereotypical rendering of blind people as tragic persons or overachievers, with no ground in between—what in academic literature is known as supercrip narratives (Kafer 2013; Schalk 2016). The supercrip narrative stands for a portrayal of people with disabilities as heroic overachievers who live impossible lives and in doing so 'overcome' disability. This impossibility materialises either as outstanding accomplishments such as climbing the highest mountain on Earth, or, on the opposite end, being able to go about the most mundane tasks. Moreover, supercrip narratives also evoke feelings about its protagonists and their disability, typically pity, sympathy or admiration, all of which are united by an assumed devaluation of disability. As a result, consumers of supercrip narratives—abled and disabled people—learn to perceive and address people with disabilities through this emotional and conceptual framework as well as to assume that people with disabilities do not belong to the world of the ordinary.

To distinguish TTB from supercrip narratives and to provide a platform for *people*, as opposed to stereotypes or *figures*, Aliia Nurullina and two other editors carefully curate their published materials. They help the authors express their own experiences, including struggles, emotions, victories and failures, both small and large; although the editorial team provides editing services, they are committed to preserving authorial voices. Their orientation away from supercrip stories is captured in the project's name, too: *The Typical Blind* connotes an ordinary blind person, showing the editors' commitment to real and relatable stories.

Aliia insists that it is the living person [*zhivoi chelovek*] with their ups and downs, bright and dark moments, their narrated and lived experience that matters to the audience.

On the pages of TTB, I find a story of a blind high school student who found it difficult to take their final exams; a life story of the now grown up professional whose father would not accept his daughter's blindness and would instead subject her to what seemed like an endless range of 'eyesight exercises'; a life story of a man who lost his eyesight later in life as a result of an accident and developed new communication skills and hobbies; stories of athletes, craftspersons, professionals, mothers. I also read about how they change during the different stages of their lives. The more I read and the more variability of human lives I discover, the more difficult it becomes to pinpoint who exactly is 'the typical blind person'. These stories accentuate the dynamic variation and versatility of experience among blind people across different periods of their lives. Some people walk with mobile apps, others are proponents of using solely a white cane, yet others prefer to move around using both or none. Some people use Braille, while others do not ever learn to read or write in Braille. Some try to pass as sighted; others advocate strongly for the use of a white cane and sunglasses to signal their blindness to passers-by. Some seek social contact with other blind persons, whereas others attempt to distance themselves from the blind community (which they sometimes associate with so-called 'blindisms', or stereotypical behavioural patterns attributed to blind people). This diversity of features, preferences and resources is rarely shown publicly. TTB, along with several other digital platforms, provides a curated space for such variability to exist publicly and openly.

The diversity of stories narrated by blind authors resists the culturally strong temptation to exceptionalise blindness and blind people in particular. In this way, by cultivating and nurturing the space where *a* story cannot and does not become *the* story, TTB provides an opportunity to avoid heroization or upholding one particular narrative as the right or the more representative narrative.

Through telling their stories, writers on TTB not only diversify representation, they also shape the contours of possibilities that blindness opens up and forecloses—within different stories about blindness there may be different ways of living it, too. In other words, these stories bring about material effects and changes in the daily lives of their readers, crossing the imagined borders between the digital and the embodied. One example here is the use of a white cane. Gabriella Mogyldan, one of my interviewees, shares her experience:

Using a white cane is difficult, especially in post-Soviet countries. A cane attracts lots of attention. People express many emotions, pity and so on. Visually impaired people often decide to walk with more risk on the street, simply to avoid using a cane. I also went through such a period. When I reassessed it, I read these texts [published on TTB]. The young women wrote that for a long time they were very afraid of the reactions [to a white cane], but when they began to walk with a cane they realised that they had been creating problems for themselves for so many years. And of course, reading that helped me too. (Mogyldan 2020)

Gabriella Mogyldan says that reading about hard experiences and decisions that other female writers had in relation to using a white cane helped her start using a white cane. They shifted

her thinking about using a white cane as a woman, a task that in Russian stereotypes often goes hand-in-hand with internalised stigmatisation and defeminisation.

Besides offering motivation to develop a skill or try a new hobby, the stories have even more intimate effects. Consider Sofia Dinina's words:

I am convinced that if there were no *The Typical Blind* in my life, with its nonfictional stories about the lives of nonfictional people, I would have struggled with my difficulties for a long time. I am sincerely grateful to those authors who wrote about their life experiences, about their difficulties and achievements. If it weren't for [TTB], I don't know how much more time it would have taken me to make changes in my life (Didina 2020a).

Sofia Didina acknowledges the platform's significance in instilling self-confidence and encouraging her to deal with her deep-seated fears, internalised stigma and struggles. Sofia is far from being an exception in facing such learned insecurity: as anthropologist of disability Elena Nosenko-Stein writes (2018b: 103), internalised stigma associated with disability is common among people with disabilities in Russia due to disablist social pressures and the negative perceptions of disability and people with disabilities. Several other stories feature reflections on the feeling of shame associated with being blind, reclaiming the validity of one's experiences and rights and the difficulties of responding to overt ableism and exclusion. In private messages and comments, according to my interviewees, they find comments that these texts give strengths to live, to learn new skills, to process difficult emotions and to bring about long-needed changes.

4. Beyond banality: owning the authorial voice

The apologetic tone for writing something potentially banal reverberates across many stories: 'who needs this [text], who is interested?' or 'I hope that someone may find my story interesting' reappears from one narrative to the next. Olga Serebrova (2020) puts it so: 'I tried for a very, very long time to write this article, but I always stopped myself, believing that such material would not be of interest to anyone and that what I want to tell has long been known by everyone'. The author captured the tension that other interviewees repeated in our conversations: although they felt they had experience, they were not sure what exactly from this experience could be made into 'interesting content' or a 'story worthy of someone's time'. Gabriella Mogyldan, one of the editors, suggested that this reaction may be linked to the perceived risk of appearing self-aggrandising: in a community where authors and readers are invited to be present for each other, self-glorification may trigger detachment, a lack of engagement and demotivation among its readers. Without determining the causal factor behind the authors' hesitation about the value of their experience, it suffices to say that becoming an author was not an immediately obvious and easy task. It required additional persuasion and editorial work, which became an integral part of blind authors' making presence.

When I asked Aliia about how they find authors, she laughed and sighed, at the same time. She told me there are two scenarios: the 'good one' and the 'other one'. In the good scenario, people interested in writing for the project send them their materials directly. Or, at

least, send them a message signalling interest. In the other scenario, Aliia contacts people directly soliciting submissions, as she shared in her interview:

The other scenario, the most common one, is when—firstly, I have friends, and secondly, when I am in different programs, in live streams [with other blind people], I am always looking for authors. I realise that I see storytellers everywhere. And if someone’s story, someone’s life is interesting (and I am convinced that every person is interesting and every person is unique, because they are God’s creation and because their experience is unique), I just write and say: ‘Hello, I am the project editor, would you like to write your story for us?’ Very often the answer is that I would be glad but nothing interesting happens in my life. And so our work begins. (Nurullina 2020b)

The need for persuasion work was predicated on the mismatch between potential authors’ expectations of public texts and TTB’s administrator’s valuation of blind people’s ordinary experiences captured in a narrative. Some authors expected public texts to have more grandeur and pathos, while Aliia Nurullina sought authenticity. When describing a good text, she says in an interview:

A good text is where there is simply the author’s experience, their life, rather than where it is ‘look how cool I am’. It may be perfectly written, but if it’s ‘look how cool I am’, I don’t like that text. I’d rather work for two days on a text that is a dictation, that is honest, than this cool well-rehearsed, polished text, where a person engages in narcissism. And sometimes you have to publish it anyway, because formally there is no reason to refuse it. But as editors, we are unified in the belief that it is better to collect the text bit by bit, bit by bit, and it will be good, honest, there will be a living person evident, rather than it being some kind of a dead text, where the person is so cool all over. (Nurullina 2020b)

Aliia Nurullina’s distinction between texts that are alive or dead signals her preference for an authorial presence of a particular kind—unembellished and unapologetic presence that highlights both the ups and downs of a blind individual’s lived experience. This is starkly juxtaposed with the alienating effects of exceptionalising stories, success stories and other forms of supercrip narratives, which reproduce practices of isolation and impoverish potential social connections for blind people. In contrast with such narratives that fail to establish a connection between the reader and the narrator, TTB’s modus operandi of authenticity opens up the possibility of commensurability and relatability.

Once the authors agree to write a post, they are encouraged to write about whichever segment of their lived experience they choose. As the editors receive the first drafts, they provide feedback: suggestions to elaborate a point or two, grammatical corrections and requests for clarification. Sometimes the editorial work is heavier, especially when the author has little to no prior writing experience. After a few rounds of exchanges and polishing the text, the final draft, approved by the author, goes to the editor and then gets published.

The task of packaging their memories, experiences and emotions into a coherent text produces a series of collateral effects. Several interviewed authors mentioned that phrasing and building their written story triggered or accelerated the processing of their experience. Regina puts it as follows in her interview:

For me it was such a moment of introspection, I analysed my deeds, my actions, while writing. Because when you write, it's still a different way of looking at the situation. I wanted people to be engaged, so that they reached their own conclusions. That is, I was ready to receive criticism, people saying I was wrong... And I was also ready to receive supportive comments such as 'you did well', 'you are great' ... I learned to open up, not to be afraid, not to think 'Who'd be interested in my story?' or 'I'm not the only one like this'. Both Aliia and the project [TTB] taught me that every author has a unique story and that someone may really need that story. (Filatova 2020b)

Regina Filatova found the exercise of putting a string of events and memories into a single narrative to be enriching—as an experience of learning from her own story, figuring out her ethical stance and engaging with her fear of public judgment. She learned to claim her own presence: as a blind person and as a blind narrator. For blind authors who repeatedly face infantilising treatment and distrust from the sighted regarding their ability to take responsibility, such an exercise has the potential to positively contribute to one's ability to stand one's ground in the face of disablism.

One of the forms of engagement that TTB affords blind people is becoming an author. A seemingly simple request—to share a part of one's life story—turns out to involve work on the self through processing the author's experiences and packaging them for the broader public, with the assistance of the editorial team. In a Foucauldian sense, it involves the work of self-cultivation, bringing oneself forth as a subject with their own voice and processing the experience captured in writing (Foucault 1983), as well as gauging and tweaking this voice's expression according to the broader narrative norms. Many of the authors I interviewed framed their authorial experience as formative—an experience that grants opportunities to position themselves in their stories, attribute responsibility and present themselves as protagonists in stories that matter. In the section that follows, I explore the social aspect of their authorial presence.

5. Cultivating digital sociality

Despite many authors' hesitation and doubts related to the 'banality' of their stories, many stories portray emotionally intense ableism-triggered experiences heretofore unknown to the sighted. These narrated experiences can hardly make the sighted feel good (for a discussion of the use of disability as a marker of the feel-good diversity, see Friedner 2017): on the pages of TTB, readers find stories about parents who never accepted their child's blindness, about depression and crisis that people with recently acquired blindness go through and about the pressures to pass as sighted. They find a repeated disbelief in the abilities of blind persons, a proliferation of hostile social attitudes and widespread inaccessibility and lack of support, among other emotionally and experientially complex matters. Sharing such moments of social critique and vulnerability not only reflects the authors' existing trust in the project, it also further reproduces and demands respect, reflection and trust from the readers. For the sighted, such stories of vulnerability create possibilities for encountering the embodied experience, albeit narrated, of the insidious operations of ableism. In this sense, by sharing their

lived experiences blind authors come to be recruited in the creation of a sociality for mediated encounters with ableism.

One such example is the post *Ashamed to Be Blind?* [Stydno byt' slepym?] written by Aliia Nurullina. *Ashamed to Be Blind?* offered reflections on the feeling of shame she had experienced throughout her life as a blind person. She gave several quotidian examples of the moments when shame creeps in, such as when she would drop a piece of food on the floor, deal with unsolicited help, address a person who had left unannounced, answer a question that was addressed to someone else, or knock over someone else's things that were in the way. Although in all these moments she would understand that there was nothing to be ashamed of, she would *still feel* it. She exposed herself even further when she decided to identify the source of her shame:

And these reactions came from those closest to us—from our parents. It's hard for me to write this text. I try to choose my words so that they do not sound like an accusation. But many [sighted] parents [of blind children] read us, and they still have time to change something (Nurullina 2020a).

Aliia Nurullina not only opened up about herself; she used her story and her own vulnerability to address a serious problem of internalised ableism as well as ableism among blind children's parents. She encouraged the latter to avoid reproducing harmful stereotypes and their concomitant effects. As she inhabited this risky position in her writing—together with other authors who have done the same—she reproduced the tonality of other posted materials and of this digital sociality in general: confided, trusted, shared. Through carefully constructing this affective disposition, she invited the sighted to dialogue and reflect. In her interview, she said:

When the post came out, I had, if we talk about emotions, just a feeling of gratitude to God, because there were so many responses from people who also experience something like this—they saw that they are not alone. This is one of our goals. That is, a person sits and thinks, 'Here I am alone, a loser'. But they see others who share their similar experiences and they realise 'Oh, I'm not alone'. People lose their minds alone [*s uma skhodiati poodinochke*], as they say. It means a lot to me that many people wrote in DMs [direct messages] saying they recognised themselves in this, something about themselves. (Nurullina 2020b)

As well as direct private messages in response to her post, Aliia Nurullina also received wide public support in the form of elaborate comments, more than half of which either grew into conversation threads or received a thoughtful response. The majority of the comments expressed gratitude for the author's sincere⁶ and daring social critique. Two comments challenged the post's thesis by respectfully bringing their own experience of growing up in a family where they were treated as equals. Responses and references to this article appear in other authors' publications, signalling its resonance. Aliia Nurullina's ability to present her-

⁶ Webb Keane's (2002) work on sincerity demonstrates that it is a linguistic ideology that presupposes the voluntary and intentional convergence between expression and thoughts in a given context, for a specific audience. The moral assessment of Aliia's written speech contributed to the formation of a sociality whereby her identity as an author and a blind person, as well as the identities of the readers and her virtual interlocutors, were negotiated.

self as vulnerable and tackle a difficult topic of ableism was predicated on this virtual platform's configuration as a safe space for people with different experiences of blindness and living with blind people to express themselves and be heard.

With multiple people's voiced recognition of Aliia's experience and the conversations this narrative provoked, this article, as well as others, contributed to the formation of a protected and trusting sociality with room for social critique, albeit in a tamed and contained form. Consider Sof'ia Didina's and Roman Pavlovskii's search for an appropriate online community of support, discussed earlier in the essay. They found and stayed with TTB as a result of their intentional search for a community of like-minded people living with blindness: they appreciated not only the content but also the manner of mutual engagement practiced on the platform, the manner of being for each other, even when discussing experiences of vulnerability and abuse. The experience of another author (and editor), Gabriella Modylgan, resonates with Sof'ia's:

Growing up, I lived in a vacuum [isolated from other blind people]. If there had been an opportunity to be closer to the rehabilitation centre for the blind, or a chance just to know some blind people or at least to read stories similar to TTB, then much would have been easier. I had to learn many things intuitively. Plus at TTB we have many topics that you will not find anything else about on the internet, by and large. This motivates me, because I understand that to many teenagers, as I once was, it can be very helpful. (Modylgan 2020)

Gabriella Modylgan told me about how she grew up 'in some sort of a vacuum', far from any rehabilitation centre, other blind people or anything that resembled a community of people who face similar barriers. This lack of connection to the support and knowledge of others left Gabriella Modylgan with a wish to have such a community. By now, she knows many blind people who live in post-Soviet countries as they are connected through social media and other online platforms, one of which is TTB. Gabriella Modylgan's experiences reverberate in Pavel's words: '*The Typical Blind* ... creates an environment where we [blind people] can be inspired, take an interest in each other and together go through life only forward' (Kliachenko 2019). In this sense, connecting to others digitally enables round-the-clock access to a community where users learn from their peers, expand their social network and provide content and support.

At the same time, besides blind people, there are sighted readers (and as of Fall 2020, writers) on the platform—family members or friends of blind people, as several of my interviewees mentioned. The mixed profile of readership is by design. The editors implement various measures to ensure inclusivity: they ask for all specialised jargon to be explained and for all materials to be visually appealing (through inclusion of at least one image). The authors I interviewed understood the mixed profile of readership as a strength, as an opportunity for long-needed communication between blind authors and their sighted audience, which rarely happened offline in a sustained manner. The digital format also allowed every reader to engage with raised topics at their own pace—visiting and revisiting the texts, reacting to them, expressing their opinion and reading other people's comments over a prolonged period of time, bypassing the pressures of fast reactions and content disappearance typical of in-person conversations and events.

On TTB, blind authors could present themselves and their experiences, many of which had been negatively conditioned by ableist actions and beliefs held by sighted people, directly to the project's sighted audience. Aliia Nurullina shared:

It is especially important for parents to communicate with blind adults living independently. And they can do it on TTB. Personally, I had in-person meetings when people came here to St. Petersburg for treatment or they moved here. I met with them and it was a very important experience for the parents. Another young woman told me that she also met with parents in her city... Other blind people should also communicate with blind adults, especially those who become blind, those who have lost their sight at a mature age. They are often in such a transitional state, they are no longer sighted but they also do not know how to live as blind. They need a role model. We have authors who have lost their sight. It would also be great if the readers would not just read this text, but start communicating, share some life hacks with each other, advice, experience. (Nurullina 2020b)

Aliia Nurullina listed the sighted parents of blind children, blind people who have not yet had a chance to develop sufficient adaptations and people who are currently in the process of losing their eyesight as beneficiaries of the project. Indeed, as I read through the comments section, I came across sighted parents and other family members, friends and people with recently acquired blindness. Many of them fall through the cracks of the public infrastructures of disability support and have to find their own resources for developing strategies and tactics for living in the world with blindness. In a comment, a self-identified parent of a blind child captured the affective state of a parent who has just heard the doctor pronounce their child blind:

We often visit the hospital, so I recommend to everyone there to subscribe [to TTB]. After the announcement of blindness, all parents ask questions: 'How to continue to live? How to educate? How will my child live? How will they study? How will they work? How will they create a family?', etc., etc. [They think] there are no prospects, that the world has collapsed... Fear... It's scary to see the eyes of these parents... Your public page helps to get out of this hell. You open up new horizons, set the vector for your future life (Semenova 2019).

To deescalate these emotions and to address the state of experienced crisis, this parent suggests turning to stories and reflections written by blind persons who have adapted to living with vision loss. Blindness, which is culturally constructed as a state of emergency and inability, often evokes immobilising affective reactions in sighted people. This parent adds: 'when I recommend reading your public page, many nod and say: 'somehow', 'someday' ... And then heavy artillery goes into battle—[I say that] all the authors of the posts are blind themselves. After that, they [the parents] usually ask for the name of the group or ask for a link' (Semenova 2019). Due to scarce availability of narratives authored by blind people and platforms for dialogue, the content and subjects present on TTB acquire added value—they offer a supported and caring environment, created by blind people, whereby blind and sighted people discuss lived experiences of ableism and ways to avoid reproducing them. In

this sense, sighted readers and blind writers and readers create new forms of relatedness, a form of ‘mediated kinship’ (Ginsburg 2012).

Despite the best efforts of community participants who read the comments and address emergent critique respectfully, this public presence is not entirely risk-proof. There are risks associated with being out in public, whether as a blind person or another person with a socially devalued identity (see also Vivienne 2016). A digital public presence exposes one to the risks of facing disapproval, or worse, becoming a victim of trolling or bullying—remember here Roman Pavlovskii’s negative experience. Regina shared in her interview:

I remember there was a text that prompted strong reactions, where a lot of negative things were written in the comments and of course it was difficult. But this taught me, in a sense, to defend my opinion, to stand my ground, to convey to people that this is my experience. If you disagree, if you don’t like something, it only concerns you. My experience is what it is. (Filatova 2020b)

Although in this particular case Regina managed to process critique in a helpful way, not everyone has the resources or abilities to not take personally negative reactions that come in the moment of authors’ vulnerability. As one of the interviewees mentioned, ‘there is no way around this risk’, one just has to live with it.

Besides vulnerability associated with the content of the post and the personhood of the author, another risk factor that blind authors face is the cultural imperative for the narratives to be stylistically and grammatically polished. Publicly accessible digital stories written by blind authors may be read as evidence of their competency as social actors. Those readers who come to the platform holding prior prejudices and misconceptions about blind people may use textual mismatches with the norms of standard Russian to discredit the validity of the author’s public presence altogether. In the parlance of the editors, such commentators are called ‘grammar nazis’, people who publicly police the authors’ language use with the purpose of discrediting their narrative. As the editors shared with me, some of their authors—especially those who do not write routinely—use dictation technology which transcribes spoken speech into writing. For a range of technical reasons, the resulting transcripts often require copyediting. To ensure that the posts and authors are not vulnerable to attacks on the authority of the author, the editorial team assists the authors with stylistic and grammatical copyediting. Although such a risk does not only threaten blind authors, its potential harmful impact on blind authors is increased given the prevalence of negative social attitudes towards blindness and the lack of control over their stories’ trajectories and circulation online and offline—which is an endemic feature of social media platforms that post publicly available content.

Storytelling is a familiar tool of reclaiming one’s experience and dignity in the face of normative devaluation and criticism (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Verbilovich 2020; Krause and Gubrium 2019; Nosenko-Stein 2018b). It is also a technique of community making (Falconi 2013; Hurtig 2005). But *whose* stories make it to *what kind* of audiences matters—often some voices are allowed to count as representative while others are marked as insignificant and inappropriate and rendered invisible (Cvetkovich 2003). The editing collective at TTB works hard to make room for stories that are owned and authored by people with a lived experience of blindness and encourage the development of a safe and supportive sociality

around them. In this sense, TTB is an example of a networked public—‘publics that both rely on networked technologies and also network people into meaningful imagined communities in new ways’ (boyd 2014: 201).

The case of TTB shows that sharing individual stories does not necessarily impede the formation of a community, as David Mitchell (2000: 312) suggests is the case with autobiographical writing: ‘the documentation of disability as a communal identity is largely unavailable in the “self-reliant”, first-person literature of disability’. On TTB, individual stories and the conversational space they open up *facilitate* linkages and *cultivate* the sense of belonging: to the community of blind people who assert their experience, distinct in its details and yet resonant in recurrent encounters with ableism, and to the social world which blind and sighted people share, albeit on unequal terms. As blind authors make presence in this shared world, as blind and sighted readers come to reflect and relate to these authors’ narratives, as the repertoire of *possible* life stories grows, blindness emerges as significant part of the social world that has had its past, has its present and will have its future.

6. By way of conclusion

An interviewee who chose to remain anonymous commented to me: ‘I like thinking that my story is out there, together with the stories of other blind people. That you read it. That others read it. It somehow expands our presence [*prisutstvie*]’. When I asked to clarify whose presence comes to be expanded, they answered: ‘Mine, hers, his, theirs, ours, of all blind people. There seems to be no end to these stories, there are always more coming [*na podkhode*]’. In this sense, blind people’s digital storytelling becomes a tool of the social, spatial and temporal expansion of blind people’s presence—or rather, what I called here, following Saskia Sassen, their making presence in a shared (ableist) world.

Importantly, this form of public presence is managed with the goal of preserving the authority of those who present and are being presented—blind authors themselves. Authors not only appear in public, opening their narrated experiences and reflections to the public, they claim their past, present and future experiences, they support other blind people in asserting such claims and encourage critique of ableism, albeit in a controlled and careful fashion. In this sense, their public presence is also about being continually present for others, as a fellow person with an ongoing life history, a reader, a user, an interlocutor, a peer, a potential friend or a writer. Stories are told to help the readers in whichever way this life story shows up: as evidence of a life, as a narrative to learn from, as an opening for establishing a connection, as a challenge to one’s assumptions, values, and habits or as a way of feeling not alone. However, more research is needed to explore the effects of these stories on the sighted readers.

In this article, I argued that blind people’s digital storytelling accomplishes a triple effect: it promulgates the idea that there are multiple ways of living with blindness; it helps the authors establish their own voices; and it brings about a sociality open to difficult conversations about exclusion and ableism. Importantly, this triple effect transcends the imaginary boundaries between the materiality of everyday ‘real life’ and digitally-mediated communication. As some blind readers picked up white canes after reading stories on TTB, as blind writers carried over their authorial confidence to other domains of their life, as writers and readers formed connections that unfolded both online and offline, as TTB’s writers and readers en-

gaged in articulating their relation to documented experiences of disability exclusion, to the researchers of digital they posed the necessity to theorise digital selves as embodied *and* mediated (Hartblay and Klepikova, this issue).

To the students of Russian digital cultures, this study shows how Russian social media platforms become a tool for a sustained and differently-paced renegotiating of the terms of disability inclusion and exclusion, which is rare, more costly and difficult to organise offline. In so doing, Russian social media platforms become an integral part of the complex disability inclusion apparatus that binds together disability policies, private and public disability inclusion programming, disability activism, private capital, and public infrastructures of accessibility and inclusion. Finally, the case of TTB emphasises the inextricable nature of the digital and the embodied, the narrated and the experienced in the lives of blind people in contemporary Russia. By telling life experiences that do not fit into stereotypical moulds, blind authors engage in everyday activism, which Sonja Vivienne defines as ‘the sharing of personal stories in public spaces with the aim of challenging the status quo’ (Vivienne 2016: 1). This everyday activism brings about “erosive social change”: changes in attitude that take place slowly over extended time frames, profoundly reshaping social norms as they diffuse among networked publics’ (Vivienne 2016: 1). It is a form of digitally mediated civic engagement (Vivienne 2016: 2; see also Bonilla and Rosa 2015), as it broadly constitutes the conditions that facilitate the formation of new subjects—blind subjects who belong to a society they help create. In the words of the US-based disability activist Alice Wong (2020: 22), ‘[s]tory-telling can become a movement for social change’.

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SVETLANA BORODINA is a Postdoctoral Research Scholar at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from Rice University in 2020. She also holds graduate certificates in Critical and Cultural Theory and in the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her recent publication 'Unfixing Blindness: Retinal Implants and Negotiations of Abilities in Postsocialist Russia' appeared in *Remaking the Human: Cosmetic Technologies of Body Repair, Reshape and Replacement*, a volume edited by Chiara Pusetti and Alvaro Jarrín (2021). [sb4468@columbia.edu]