

## Editorial Comment

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### ISSUE 3. BETWEEN BIG BROTHER AND THE DIGITAL UTOPIA: E-GOVERNANCE IN POST-TOTALITARIAN SPACE

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The third issue of *Digital Icons* explores the practice of e-participation and e-governance in post-Soviet, post-communist countries, focusing on three main geographical areas, Central Europe (Slovakia), Russia, and Central Asia. e-Governance is understood in broad terms as a multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses (un-)regulated socio-political and cultural practices that foster public debate, facilitate community building and ensure transparency and accountability of official and alternative actors of power.

The use of information and communications technology to overcome traditional difficulties associated with the interaction of the state and its citizens represents a double-edged sword in post-totalitarian spaces. For many, the coming of digitized governance heralds an end to needless bureaucracy, countless hours wasted in queues, and access to hitherto unavailable government services. For others, however, the expansion of the state into the virtual realm is a harbinger of a dystopian future where the panopticon is always watching, and even the most private thoughts of citizens are monitored and recorded by the state. This issue of *Digital Icons* aims to examine the inherent tension between these two extremes.

The issue consists of three distinct sections. The first section includes three research papers as well as three elaborate statements coming from Internet practitioners and theoreticians. Annasoltan, a Turkmen journalist whose true identity cannot be revealed, reports on Turkmenistan's government policies regulating access to the Internet and analyses everyday practices of digital communities in the country. Her paper (3.1) combines elements of political analysis and anthropological observations, elucidating on the cultural implications of the digital transformation in Turkmenistan.

Ivan Ninenko, Deputy Director of Transparency International—Russia (TI-R) and project director of AskJournal.ru, discusses the objectives and concerns of Russian government programmes enabling electronic public services in the Federation (3.6). His views exemplify the aspirations of the Russian 'digital intelligentsia', who continue to make Runet a space for

technological, social and cultural innovation and now establish links between the state actor and everyday users of the Internet.

Stephen Coleman's contribution theorizes many issues raised by Annasoltan, Ivan Ninenko and other contributors through the lens of e-deliberation and democracy theory (3.4). He examines e-deliberation as an emerging body of research, technological tools, social practice and policy-making related to encouraging and facilitating democratizing processes on the Internet and other post-broadcasting media. He analyses e-deliberation environments and discusses the philosophical underpinnings of web interfaces and software enabling social online interactions between citizens and public officers.

Two research papers, one by Erica Johnson and Beth E. Kolko (3.2), and the other by Anton Shynkaruk (3.3), analyze e-governance sites in Central Asian republics and Slovakia, respectively. These two papers present contrasting results of the digital revolution in the regions and explore the prevalent social and cultural constraints in further digital developments in societies in question. The authors employ complex quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the situation with e-governance in the regions. Their papers also develop the democracy theory in relation to the use of digital technologies and Internet enhanced tools.

While Erica Johnson and Beth E. Kolko and Anton Shynkaruk analyze government sites, Sudha Rajagopalan investigates more complex and less pronounced forms of e-governance and e-participation (3.5). She provides an analysis of the online environment of a Russian television show and specifically interrogates how the viewers participate in the articulation of cultural ideals, specifically those of femininity and individuality, and work on making the show's prescriptions correspond to reality as they understand it. Her paper is a valuable piece of research also because it documents the process of media convergence in the Russian Federation, a phenomenon developing at an accelerated speed that no one could anticipate five years ago when the Internet became a medium of mass communication in Russia. Ultimately, Rajagopalan's paper contrasts the speed of technological and socio-cultural developments in a post-totalitarian state where individuals now effectively exercise various types of cultural citizenship.

The second section of the issue includes a set of reports and commentaries that provide an overview of developments in the field of new media studies (3.7.4-3.7.6), digital art practices (3.7.1) and associated fan cultures (3.7.2), and digital industries in Russia as exemplified by recent film releases (3.7.3). From the contributions to the second section, it transpires that a) following the e-revolution in the former eastern bloc countries, a full-fledged review of the media landscape in post-totalitarian states is imminent; b) the field of area studies will grow further to include new modes of communication and cultural production, including digital and web-facilitated projects and practices; and c) new forms of cultural production as well as political communication and articulation of social practices require a new vocabulary of terms and concepts that will address these issues in the context of post-totalitarian states.

The book review section provides reviews of two books, namely, *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook (3.8.1), and *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace* edited by Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski and Jonathan Zittrain (3.8.2). The choice of these publications for review was determined by the following considerations: a) they explore the theme of e-governance, surveillance and display of digital objects in two different realms, the political and the cul-

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tural, b) they compare and contrast two types of actors and public institutions, the politician and the government, on the one hand, and the curator and the museum, on the other, and c) they speak to Section 2 of the issue, which provides analyses of current research into Internet use in Eurasia and informs the reader of recent digital art exhibitions.

Thus, the issue provides a systematic exploration of e-governance and e-participation in the region, looking at both political and cultural manifestations of the phenomena. The contributors engage in the discussion of regulation and self-regulation as well as analyze alternative platforms and modes of grass-roots cooperation and deliberation.

~ VLAD STRUKOV