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Can you hear me now?

Mobile technology in rural Russia

With Siberia and the Urals close on the heels of Moscow in mobile phone ownership, Russia's expanses are rapidly seeming less vast. The latest broadcasting and telecommunications technology, above all mobcasting, is "leapfrogging" conventional handheld usage and challenging the monopoly of state-owned media. What's more, international copyright law, a requirement for Russia's membership in the WTO, is increasingly difficult to keep track of in the farthest reaches of the Russian media landscape.

Why show the poverty, all of that poverty? Why
show the imperfection of our life by exposing those
people from the middle of nowhere, from the
far-flung corners of our empire?
Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls* (1842)

One of the most enduring moral benchmarks for Russian storytelling has been its attitude towards the countryside, to the romanticism of boundlessness. Today, however, the grim reality of provincial life makes romance impossible. Rural poverty, substance abuse, disease, abortions, and other appalling problems have conspired to reduce Russia's populace by an annual average of 700 000 people since the end of the USSR. Modern storytelling on state-sponsored television and radio tries to correct this with tales of better or kinder interaction. Problems of myriad nobodies in the "middle of nowhere", however, do not lend themselves to effable solutions or pragmatic policy. What results are the banalities of inexpressible empathy — at the point where rhetoric does indeed fail.

In Moscow's neo- or proto-socialist narratives of socialization (of "growing up properly"), Putin complains, for example, about children's television and its lack of suitable role models in song, dance, and drama. Paradoxically, it is the grand, open expanse of an affectively-driven worldview (that of the children) that politics needs in order to sound charitably mature; it is the boundlessly inclusive viewpoint that "elected" officials must aspire to, yet something they can neither name nor equal.¹ Today's President speaks — as did his socialist predecessors — of an unmanageable integration; his narratives require a heritage of nationwide promise that cannot be enacted (nor, indeed, was it ever). Thoughts of ineffable inclusion, inspired by a boundless realm, have lessening relevance for those who inhabit that Gogolian "nothingness". This social division is, somewhat surprisingly, already being felt in Russian television drama; stories of a life without nature are rapidly increasing, founded upon a deep distrust for moneyed, urban "reality".

There are, nonetheless, suggestions that modern, mobile technology might improve communicative potentials for outlying areas, so narrative networks could develop without reference to Moscow. In the capital, not surprisingly, 72 per cent of the populace use a mobile phone, but Siberia is close behind at 66 per cent, as are the Urals at 51 per cent. The noise of new communication is moving away from the centre; this article looks at how mobile media are being used in those snowy backwoods. Since *Dead Souls* can now be downloaded onto your mobile phone, though, maybe Siberian residents have little faith in happy endings...

Building an alternative to situated media: Mobile phones

What kinds of technology might make a flight from centralized media possible and thus reduce the centripetal relationship of the provinces to the capital? Only in Moscow do more than 50 per cent of web users have sufficiently fast connections to gobble up mp3s, so larger visual files (such as television shows) would never reach rural desktop computers.² Mobile phones might reduce the disparity between centre and poor periphery. Mobile usage in Russia has now jumped to 120 million users, or 84 subscribers per 100 adults.³ Only four other nations worldwide match this density. Related, ever-snowballing figures might soon correct a current asymmetry in statistical analyses of "popular" media. At present they favour elderly television viewers who — while answering opinion polls regarding what they have seen — actually buy nothing, and thus quantify notions of popularity from the dusty comfort of their penniless living rooms. Since they see nothing else apart from Moscow's televised media, it's all they ever vote for (and therefore perpetuate).

Technical participation in any new, less rigidly situated media will, of course, be neither instantaneous nor absolute. Only 20 per cent of our opinionated senior citizens own a mobile phone (a lowly figure nonetheless five times higher than their computer access).⁴ Hoping not to lose this age group, Samsung has launched a pensioner-friendly phone in Russia; this is important, since the catchment area of networks nationwide is now close to 95 per cent — while landline services have hiked, rather than cut, their rates in the face of increased competition.⁵ Some septuagenarians may indeed be won over by easier connectivity, while their more parsimonious friends may be swayed by the Duma's insistence on 1 July 2006 that all incoming mobile phone calls henceforth be free.⁶

The most striking change of recent months was an announcement from *Tsifrovoe teleradioveshchanie* (TsTV) that phone-based television would soon be unveiled in the wake of a similar Italian debut during the World Cup.⁷ Initial plans were for six channels, both state-run and commercial, to be increased to sixteen at a cost of \$5–15 per month; the ultimate target is now half a million subscribers by 2010. By the end of this year, at least, compatible phones will be on the Russian market from Samsung, Nokia, and LG.

If the people get mobile media, how will they use it?

Russian telecommunications hope to nurture the behaviour of 50–60 per cent of western European mobile owners, who perceive their phones "as an extension of their television sets".⁸ It would seem, however, that Russia's path might follow the slightly different route of the Third World, where the rapid advancement of phone-based technology has, oddly, allowed users to bypass several "earlier" and less portable stages of (desktop) evolution. And yet we still face the conundrum of why adult Russians might want to actively,

commercially encounter "something other" than state-proffered media via their telephones in particular. The thing is that Russian phones are already "something else", estranged from their presumed, primary function in other countries. Mobile phones are used chiefly as watches, mp3 players, phone *books*, texting tools, and so forth. Actually using them as phones is only the sixth most popular option in Russia.⁹

In a country where regular web usage has now reached approximately 22 per cent of the populace, these subsidiary media are developing quickly alongside. No district has developed faster than Siberia, which until recently constituted 26 per cent of all web surfers nationwide;¹⁰ active mobile ownership has outstripped computers in the region.¹¹ We appear to be moving swiftly in the general direction of mobcasting, or audio-video podcasting conducted over a mobile phone, for it was MTS in Siberia and the Urals who debuted such practices in Russia.¹² Empty places begged the most noise first of all and are now being the most innovative as they garner new communicative freedoms.

Precisely along these lines, Eyeline Communications and Mobil-2 announced in 2006 that they would then be launching Russia's first ever mobile podcasting service to 80 million users nationwide through the so-called "Big 3" networks (MTS, Megafon, and Bee-line).¹³ This might, conceivably, mark the start of tendencies to outstrip even the United States, where approximately 7 per cent of web users download at least one podcast per month, its average length being 44 minutes.¹⁴ The speed of modem connections (and processors) has, however, again tended the Russian situation away from any desktop or architecturally "fixed" developments. When we consider that even in 2005, 68 per cent of Americans were unsure what the term "podcasting" means,¹⁵ Third World, handheld technological leapfrogging from the boondocks of Slavdom again looks likely.

The distressing importance of cash for "independent media"

In terms of media richness and audience expectations, though, the qualitative distance between puerile videocasts and primetime television remains enormous. For all the revolutionary idealism of provincial mobcasters, therefore, it will not evolve without financing — without (heaven forbid) advertising, a market that currently generates \$80 million worth of investment in the US alone. The biggest, most likely intrusion will be in the area of viral marketing, designed primarily to advance brand (or broadcast) awareness by initially piggybacking on blogs or web-based matter in ways that appear to be attractively amateur in origin. Virals have already let US video- and podcasts outpace other, less-funded forms of downloadable socializing.¹⁶ By the summer of 2006, the positioning of ads within US video- and podcasts was prompting some serious venture capital: Dixie funded a series of casts for \$100 000, a sum almost matched by similar interest from Sony, Shell, Earthlink, Warner Brothers, and Hewlett Packard.¹⁷

Bee-line, one of the three companies involved in the Russian mobcasting plans, is busy gun-jumping here, too; it already runs podcasts announcing its own development and new offers. Russian audiobook company Sidikom is doing the same, putting its own fiscal narratives prior to any other stories it has to offer.¹⁸ The PR department of Moscow's Delta Bank, for example, has discovered that interest in (i.e. download of) its audio PR releases, announced by sending links to the capital's journalists, is as high as 40 per cent. Recent, flourishing interest in thus-enhanced audio has already led to a conference at Moscow's PR Club, dedicated to the benefits of partially funded podcasting.¹⁹

Strict corporate parallels with the US are not yet possible, though. One Russian expert neatly defined the tough development of marketing strategies in post-Soviet contexts. His corporate mumbo-jumbo formulates well — its banality aside — the idealism of shifting from strict, inflexible hierarchies to modes of small-scale interaction: "[First] nobody does PR, [then] everybody does it, [then] some colleague or other does in addition to his normal job, [then] they hire a marketing manager and, finally, set up a management group."²⁰ When we consider the Russian Internet's competition with television, the use of equally small-scale corporate involvement would be of no direct detriment to local ideals of minorized interfacing, even among a more cynical, youthful (and overtly anti-corporate) audience. It's worth remembering here that according to recent nationwide surveys, as many Russians listen to and act upon radio ads as ignore or change channels altogether during television ads.²¹

Acting locally, thinking globally: A possible long-tail scenario

The more romantically inclined of provincial observers declare that, sooner or later, "the era of [Moscow's] mass media is coming to an end".²² Their kindred spirits likewise insist that Putinesque infrastructures now constitute a neo-socialist habitus in which bona fide "communicative possibilities are limited to mail and rumours".²³ They worry, nonetheless, that the fussy plenitude of kinetic visual messages is detrimental to the clarity of informational encoding, an assertion underwritten by contemporary Western pedagogy.²⁴ Sound should be wary of vision; amateurism should be wary of more expensive formats. The answer, perhaps, lies in between these extremes, between two-dime mp3s and the razzle-dazzle of Moscow's television stations, in the so-called "long tail" of state-run or heavily, if not inelegantly, funded media. This is the graphic "trailing off" of statistical distribution as high density or popularity diminishes: the smaller, provincial television/radio stations, Internet service providers, amateur hosts, or podcasters. Considered en masse, the tail's constituent elements outnumber those of any intense, centralized peak; this pattern duplicates Russian population distribution, too.

Low-demand entities, like amateur songs and regional video clips (with their free storage and inventory), can establish market shares or sufficient interest to outpace blockbusters or stately media, if they are distributed widely enough. This is not revolutionary isolationism, but the necessary interface of big and small, so that songwriting sites, for example, might offer licensing agreements and/or mobcast media content worthy of state channels, as underwritten (i.e. qualitatively boosted) by ad revenue.²⁵ There is good reason to hope that, according to a long-tail hypothesis, niche marketing could help to reduce or erase the synonymy of mere market presence and popularity, as now.

As these processes are debated in the American blogosphere, some telling observations have even been made about the fate of Hollywood blockbusters that may soon be applicable to Russian state television. "The mass market", allegedly, "is yielding to a million minimarkets."²⁶ If so, then received binarisms of Russian business versus alleged, amateur "piracy" will soon be false; they'll fall into one another and do so productively. Likewise, if assumptions here prove correct about the subversive role of mobile media, then Russia might soon be enjoying a Third World technical prelude to a First World finale.

That's the optimistic viewpoint, but how about the pessimistic one? Siberia stuck its first flag in the map. On 21 September 2006, the Novosibirsk provider *Novotelekom* opened up its equivalent of YouTube, branded as *Telèk*, a

televisual project known in full as *Elektronnyi gorod* ("Electric town"). The head of its editorial committee declared the site's intention to filter out material of wholly commercial intent. He also held that video- and mobcasting are not subject to the same copyright restrictions as television, in other words the Duma's ruling of the same month, designed to stop the redistribution of copyrighted materials.²⁷ Needless to say, things are not that simple. Vasilii Strel'nikov, Russia's self-appointed "godfather" of podcasting, praised the introduction of the legislation; his own site closed its podsafe video and music rubric for well over six months in order to establish legal guidelines, but immediately after this purge, russianpodcasting.ru was deluged with close to 600 new broadcasts, almost all of which flagrantly break the law. The webmaster at another podsafe host, freemusic.org.ru, Valerii Mifodovskii, considers this new and dangerously abstract legislation to be more of "a police truncheon" than anything related to jurisprudence. He even believes it will foster illegal output.²⁸

A very Russian problem: Worryingly grand ideas from a very big country

Last summer in Saint Petersburg, with the need for the G8 to see jurisprudence in action, many audiovisual stores were raided by the police, allegedly in search of fake — in other words illegal — products. Clerks later told of policemen robbing the stores themselves and, in one case, hammering a shop-girl in the face when she refused to submit her employer's phone number.²⁹ One might argue that this post-Soviet violence, the laudable audacity of beaten shop staff and the virtual output of "excessive" podcasters are all forms of disproportionate energy, the "reaction to [a shared] awareness of missed opportunities", of another virtual reality or universalizing potential in the (or any) Marxist project.³⁰ Something boundlessly wonderful was supposed to happen, but never did. What emerges in its place are other, sometimes self-destructive urges on the same questionable scale.

In this light, consider the excessive, most popular Siberian video clips at *Telèk*: "Young boys assault a rubber doll in a park"; "An unsuccessful suicide attempt in the metro", and "How to jump from a great height without breaking anything".³¹ Many observers suggest that the virtual and the real, harnessed in the tales of Russia's unbreakable boys or America's non-existent LonleyGirl15, all give common voice to a fractured, illusionary "age of testimony", full of private, "particularized situations" torn from actual history.³² Our bruising, fractious Slavic excess, however, is tied to the past.

These degrees of desperation have grand consequences. Russia, after all, was told it could not join the WTO until it "dealt with" the site allofmp3.com, which its swashbuckling owners maintain as a "good business model", in other words a visible constituent of proper practice.³³ One could draw a parallel here with the equally tiny visual narratives of Soviet animation, since this inverse flip (the biggest, best idea of all as virtually undoable) was evident in the most *fantastically* socialist cartoons — with their inconceivable extension of political praxis (of bruised, "squashed and stretched" animals) to a point that would be "either dismissed or censored as ridiculous" were it to star real people.³⁴ Bearing in mind the recent murder of Anna Politkovskaia as more tragic proof of this endless battle between managed actuality and storytelling from an outlying or fantastically, excessively "provincial" remainder, heaven only knows what we'll find at the far end of modern media's long tail. Maybe that's why LonleyGirl15 has a picture of Aleister Crowley in her bedroom.

- 1 "Putin trebuet ubrat' ubogikh personazhei s televideniia", *Gazeta.ru*, 3 May (2005).
- 2 "Dial-Up Is Giving Up", *ROMIR*, 1 March (2006).
- 3 "World's Cellular Phone Users Grow by Billions", *World Peace Herald*, 10 July (2006).
- 4 "60% of Russians Are Mobile Phone Users", *ROMIR*, 8 February (2006).
- 5 "Teper' pensionery mobil'ny", *MIG News*, 9 April (2006); "Uroven' rasprostraneniia", *MOBI*, 14 June (2006) and "Rossiianam pridetsia smenit' gorodskie telefony", *UralPolit*, 28 June (2006).
- 6 "Mobil'noi sviaz'iu pol'zuiuetsia 62% rossiian", *ROMIR*, 13 June (2006); another *ROMIR* study in the following month (20 July) noted the "leveling out" of age differences in web usage at "Monitoring Interneta: II kvartal 2006 goda".
- 7 "V Rossii protestirovali mobil'noe televidenie", *Ostankino.ru*, 28 April (2006).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 "Naibolee chasto ispol'zuemye funktsii mobil'niki telefonov", *Russian Research*, June (2005).
- 10 "Auditoriiia interneta sostavliaet uzhe 22% naseleniia Rossii", *Vebplaneta*, 20 April (2006).
- 11 Figures for the slight drop in computer-based web usage are at: "Monitoring Interneta: II kvartal 2006 goda".
- 12 "Novosti", *Sibinco*, 25 January (2006), "Neat New Tricks for Your Cell Phone", *CBS News*, 20 July (2006) and "Mobil'nyi podkasting", *Komp'iuterra Online*, 24 July (2006).
- 13 "Podcasting in Russia Goes Mobile with Eyeline Communications", *Eyeline News*, 25 January (2006).
- 14 "Podcasting zavoevyvaet populiarnost'", *Techlabs (Novosti)*, 24 July (2006) and "Podkasty stali populiarnее blogov", *Vebplaneta*, 14 July (2006).
- 15 "V Rossii zapushchen podkasting dlia mobil'nikov", *C.News*, 1 March (2006).
- 16 "Nikakoi romantiki: podkasty populiarnее online-znakomstv", *IT Novosti*, 14 July (2006).
- 17 "Podkastery v Amerike zarabatyvaiut milliony dollarov", *Bybanner*, 29 July (2006).
- 18 "Piter FM — èto ne radio. Bilain — èto radio", *Sotovik*, 13 April (2006). On the subject of podcasts dedicated to *undesirable* Russian content delivered to one's phone or iPod, see: "Sophos zaniialas' podkastingom", *Cyber Security*, 26 July (2006).
- 19 The PR conference, together with collected images, is hosted at <http://prclub.rpod.ru>. The ongoing importance of this site as Russia's primary podcast host is well outlined in "Podkasting: otvety na voprosy", *Komp'iuterra Online*, 16 March (2006).
- 20 "Chisto russkii marketing. Interv'iu s Igorem Mannom", *Adme.ru*, 13 June (2006).
- 21 "Bolee poloviny rossiian nakhodiatsia v pole deistviia telereklamy vo vremia ee transliatsii" *ROMIR*, 19 July (2006); "Dve treti slushatelei loial'no otnosiatsia k reklame na radio", both at *ROMIR*, 26 July (2006).
- 22 "Media — v massy!" *Komp'iuterra Online*, 30 March (2006).
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 "Podcast Theory Gap", *BeyondUtopia.net*, 9 August (2005).
- 25 Clay Shirky's ideas on this score were popularized by Chris Anderson in "The Long Tail", *Wired*, October (2004).
- 26 "The Rise and Fall of the Hit", *Wired*, July (2006).
- 27 "V Novosibirske zapushchena pervaia za Uralom transliatsiia videopodkasta", *Regnum*, 22 September (2006).
- 28 "Krasnyi svet dlia podkasterov?" *Telnews.ru*, 26 September (2006).
- 29 Forum entry by "annutka84" at *Fontanka.ru*, 5 September (2006), 15:45.
- 30 Zizek, S. "Lenin Shot at Finland Station", *London Review of Books*, 18 August (2005).
- 31 "V novosibirske poiavilos' internet-televidenie, siuzhety dlia kotorogo snimaiut pol'zovateli seti", *Amic.ru (AMITEL)*, 22 September (2006).
- 32 Felman, S. and Laub, D. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge (1992), 5 and Felluga, D.F. "Addressed to the Nines: The Victorian Archive and the Disappearance of the Book", *Victorian Studies*, Winter (2006), 308.
- 33 "Music Web-Site Blocking WTO Bid", *Moscow Times*, 6 October (2006).
- 34 For a little more on the relationship between animation and the fictional construct(s) of verity, see Zizek's *The Parallax View*, Massachusetts: MIT Press (2006), 350.

