



Folk-art-net: novye gorizonty tvorchestva. Ot traditsii — k virtualnosti: sb. statei [Folk-Art-Net: New Horizons of Creativity. From Tradition to Virtuality: Articles]. M.: Gosudarstvennyi respublikanskii tsentr russkogo folklor, 2007. 200 pp.



Internet i folklor: sb. statei [The Internet and Folklore: Articles]. M.: Gosudarstvennyi respublikanskii tsentr russkogo folklor, 2009. 320 pp.

In 2004 the journalist Sergei Kuznetsov [Kuznetsov 2004: 10] compared studying the internet to the oriental fable of the blind sages feeling an elephant and trying to form a common impression of what it was. This seems a very happy comparison. The Internet does indeed appear to society in general, and to the contemporary research community in particular, as something elusive, diverse and hard to evaluate in a straightforward manner. Everyone has his or her own assessment of the World Wide Web, which is the product both of his or her personality and of the particular sector of the Internet that he or she knows best. The formation of an overall picture is made even harder by the fact that the object of study is in a state of constant change, so that judgments about it go out of date very quickly.

The first attempts to study computer folklore were made even before the Internet existed, in 1983 [Fox 1983], but in spite of the abundance of publications on the subject, the situation

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remains the same: the studies are fragmentary, lead to no general conclusions and remind one of the elephant being examined by touch. We could mention the research by M. D. Alekseevsky, who concluded, after examining over a hundred publications on internet folklore in four languages, that the majority of them amount to no more than an assertion that 'internet folklore exists' [Alekseevsky 2010: 153].

The difficulty faced by researchers when confronted with such new and unusual phenomena as the Internet and its folklore is that they have neither a research methodology nor any developed theoretical concept. As a consequence they approach the task 'ad hoc', and decide independently *what* they should study, *how* they should study it, and by what means they should interpret their material. The result is an accumulation of empirical material: each blind sage feels his own part of the elephant and forms his own opinion about it.

In this situation it makes sense to analyse different researchers' different approaches to the study of internet folklore and the aspects of this extremely wide field on which they focus their attention. To this end we shall examine two publications by the State Republican Centre for Russian Folklore (SRCRF).

The miscellany *Folk-art-net: novye gorizonty tvorchestva* (hereinafter FAN), which came out in 2007, was the first book in Russian devoted to internet folklore. The miscellany *Internet i folklor* (hereinafter IF) came out two years later. Both of them are composed of materials from conferences on this theme at the SRCRF.

There is a noticeable difference in the extent to which the concept is developed in the two books. In FAN the overall concept has not received much thought, and the book is more of a 'declaration of intent' (though a thoroughly worthy one), than a finished product. This can presumably be explained by the fact that the collection was prepared for a specialised conference and simply included those articles on the subject which happened to be available at the time. IF is an improvement in terms of the development of the concept: evidently the project organisers had become more at home with the material. It is divided into four sections: 'The Worlds of Folklore, Real and Virtual', 'Genres of Internet Folklore', 'The Folklore of Subcultures and Web Communities' and 'Internet Folklore and Postmodernism'. Such a division gives the book a much more concrete structure (although the compiler does of course have to explain his use of the word 'postmodernism').

It must be recognised that the overall quality of both books is high, although the really good work is accompanied by a certain number of 'items in transit'. It must, however, be admitted that this diversity and inconsistency is an unavoidable evil in collections of materials

which have been sent in individually rather than having been written to a set theme by selected authors. Returning to the notion of ‘feeling the elephant’, spontaneous collection of materials is actually a good thing, since it produces a random selection which allows one to identify the set of different approaches to internet folklore adopted by the different authors (and there are over fifty of them). But for all the diversity of the materials presented in these two collections, they may be reduced to the following heads.

1. Studies on the subject of virtual creativity

The process of communication on the Internet unites actual people sitting in front of their screens. They are the subjects of the communication and the reason for the existence of internet folklore. One important task is the sociological examination of the milieu of internet users in general and visitors to specific sites in particular [FAN: V. V. Metalnikova]. But for the study of internet folklore the examination of the specific forms of the construction of subjectivity peculiar to that sphere is more interesting.

Unlike ‘real’ communication, in which each participant as a rule takes part under his own name and not concealed behind a mask of one form or another, internet communication presupposes that the subject is variable. In other words, the participant may supply reasonably full information about himself, create an imaginary image, or keep any information about himself to a minimum. At present there are both internet spaces that require reasonably full self-identification (social networks such as VKontakte and odnoklassniki.ru) and those which assume anonymity or a play of images (the LiveJournal network and forums). This exotic property of the Internet attracts the attention of those who are trying to analyse what is happening here. The possibility of putting on any mask is a particular instance of anonymous communication. ‘Web space offers people [...] the chance of anonymous communication, forming that unity in which a person begins to feel that he is expressing not his own personal ideas, but those of the anonymous collective’ [FAN: A. S. Kargin, A. V. Kostina].

In the process of web communication, virtual personalities are formed, both in ‘ordinary web communication’ [IF: V. A. Pozdeev, E. V. Kozlov] and specific forms of it such as on-line role-play [FAN: T. N. Sukhanova]. The construction of virtual personalities is a form of ludic behaviour. Besides the aesthetic and competitive pleasures derived from play, experimentation with the image encourages personality changes, in particular through its psychotherapeutic effect.

One of the most interesting examples of the construction of subjectivity is the creation of the image of the poet Alex Antei by the

literary scholar Irina Sidorenko [IF: T. B. Dianova]. The image of the poet was developed, the illusion of his presence on the Web was created, and a large number of poems written under his name, which, moreover, as Sidorenko herself admits, were of notably higher quality than those which she wrote under her own name. Thus playing with the image was the stimulus for the creation of a really unusual literary phenomenon.

2. The language of communication

The internet produces its own languages of communication. Thus the methods of conveying information by means of the creation of special symbols (e.g. emoticons) has been studied more than once. The slang used on the net has also been studied [IF: A. A. Petrova]. Even more interesting is the subject of the development by different zones of the internet of their own linguistic systems for internal communication. Thus the languages of 'Kashchenites', 'Upyachka' and 'Lurkoyaz' have appeared on different sites at different times. The majority of these languages have remained a game for the initiated, though there is an example of such a game acquiring wide participation, namely the expansion in 2005 and 2006 of the 'Padonkaff'¹ or 'Albanian' language. This language is studied in articles in the first of the collections reviewed [FAN: N. G. Myrayyova, I. E. Mukhaeva, Yu. V. Taratukhina].

3. Studies of the movement of information and the transformation of text on the Internet

Just as a folkloric text is dynamic and variable, so do internet folklore texts move about in cyberspace and acquire a large number of variants. The ways along which information moves and the changes undergone by texts and images on the Internet are a research topic which requires serious technical abilities for work on the Web. At present a number of viewpoints may be identified as established in this area of research.

Once a text is on the Internet, it may become variable. As it is passed along the chain of users, each of them may make changes and additions, particularly if its structure permits it: there are such things as 'open' texts, which may be conveniently expanded (lists, for example), and 'closed' ones, which are not supposed to be added to

¹ 'Padonkaff' is a phonetic rendering of *podonkov*, genitive plural of *podonok*, 'lowlife'. For discussions in English of this satirical internet language, see Michael Gorham, 'Language Culture and Identity in post-Soviet Russia: the Economies of Mat' in Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (eds.), *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Albert Baiburin, 'Yazyk padonkaff', National Identity in Russia from 1961 : Traditions and Deterritorialisation — Newsletter No. 1 (June 2008) — Albert Baiburin, Iazyk padonkaff. [Editor].

[IF: D. A. Radcheko]. It is, moreover, not only verbal texts that are subject to variation: there is a flourishing genre of ‘photoshop tennis’ in which users expand or add to images.

Texts on the Internet may be ‘archival’ (once it has been uploaded, a text will remain on the net until it is removed, sometimes as the result of the site’s being taken down) or ‘topical’ (as in oral circulation, the text enjoys a period of more or less active distribution and modification on the net, and then becomes generally known and is taken out of general circulation and archived [FAN: D. A. Radcheko]).

Texts recorded on the Internet may circulate both in virtual space, as electronic text, and orally, having escaped from internet space [IF: M. D. Alekseevsky].

The examination of the movement of information implies the study of the local spaces into which the Internet is divided. Each of these spaces has its own tokens and parameters which distinguish it from other spaces and determine its choice by users. At the moment the type of space that is most thoroughly ‘run-in’ and convenient to study is the personal electronic diary – the blog incorporated into a social network such as LiveJournal [FAN: V. V. Metalnikova]. The creation of these networks provides additional opportunities for the circulation of information and various forms of creative writing (and also for following the flow of such information).

A phenomenon similar to the Internet but strictly limited in space is the intranet, in particular closed corporate systems intended for a limited number of users. These networks typically have their own methods of circulating information, including folklore [FAN: I. A. Pereyagina].

4. Examination of thematic communicative nodes

One notable property of the Internet and communication over it is the possibility of forming communities with a common interest. Someone with even the most exotic sphere of interests is sure to find like-minded people on the Web, even though they live at different ends of the earth. The self-presentations made in such communities could be an interesting research topic.

Within the books under review there are studies of communities devoted to zoomorphic images [FAN: A. A. Chubur], weapons [IF: A. B. Roslyakov] and computer games [IF: N. I. Vasilyeva, P. I. Efimov, T. A. Zolotova]. A common type of virtual community consists of people involved in amateur creative writing. This is particularly the way in which fan fiction – writing by the admirers of a particular work – is organised. A good example would be the

fandom devoted to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels [FAN: M. V. Kamankina].

Communication according to interests has resulted in the creation of original forms possible only on the internet, such as the virtual cemetery [IF: E. L. Sverlova].¹

5. Attempts to find analogies with traditional folklore

Folklorists who come to the study of the Internet from the study of traditional forms of folklore find it natural to try to see how traditional forms adapt themselves to the new conditions. When specific texts are recorded, they look for parallels to them in oral genres. Admittedly, the 'residue' remaining after such comparisons is often an account of differences rather than similarities. Thus a comparison of traditional (street) advertising and virtual advertising of commercial products [IF: V. A. Kovpik, A. V. Kulagina] makes one think that they are totally different in all respects.

At the same time one can identify cases where a comparison of forms would be appropriate, but does not take place. Thus memes [IF: I.V. Ksenofontova] are reminiscent of all kinds of folkloric phenomena, from sayings and proverbs to the sort of quotations that have typically circulated orally over the last few decades.

The attempts to find parallels not with traditional 'country' folklore but with those forms that exist in modern cities appear more natural. Various genres of student folklore [IF: M. M. Krasikov], jokes [FAN and IF: O. E. Frolova; IF: V. E. Dobrovolskaya, A. A. Petrova], *chastushki*² [IF: A. A. Petrova], forms to fill in [IF: E. N. Gorshkova], verse congratulations [IF: G. I. Vlasova] and chain letters [IF: Yu. S. Lanskaya] easily make themselves at home in cyberspace.

6. Literary analysis of texts on the Internet

Texts uploaded to the internet may be regarded as works of literature and thus subjected to criticism, the subject of which may by their literary structure, imagery, style, mythic or poetic subtext or intertextuality. Thus one of the articles examines texts on the Internet in order to discover quotations, quasi-quotations and allusions in them [IF: I. A. Sedakova].

¹ The virtual cemetery is a site that allows users to commemorate their relations with selections of photographs, etc.; some also provide services such as the *panikhida* [requiem] in absentia, and so on. See e.g. <<http://virt-cemetery.com/>>, <<http://www.rip.su/>>, etc. Individual users also create sites of their own. [Editor].

² Songs, typically in the form of a short four-line verse, and often of humorous, scabrous or political content. [Trans.].

Any selection of texts which are united by their genre or by some other principle may equally be the object of literary analysis. For example, besides the aforementioned jokes, *chastushki*, congratulatory verses etc., there are also internet parodies of fairy-tales [IF: A. A. Chikalova].

Researchers are also interested in concepts exclusive to internet texts, such as memes [IF: I. V. Ksenofontova], or repostings of old jokes [IF: V. V. Metalnikova].

7. Examination of realia from outside the Internet reflected on it

For all its individuality, the Internet is part of the real world and reflects it in cyberspace. It is not surprising that many researchers examine Internet texts together with the socio-cultural phenomena in which they originate. For example, the formation of the local texts of various towns is studied through internet publications [IF: A. V. Zakharov].

Folklore (like any textual component) is an organic part of the existence of various communities. The study of folkloric texts is impossible without an examination of the realia that exist within those communities. The books being reviewed included articles on folklore in the subcultures of Goths [FAN: E. L. Sverlova] and of Tokienists and anime fans [IF: V. E. Dobrovolskaya], in role-playing games [IF: D. B. Pisarskaya], in school [IF: E. A. Samodelova] and in student life [IF: M. M. Krasikov]. The activity of these communities mostly takes place in the real world; what we see on the internet is only a reflection of it. It is a common mistake in studying internet self-presentations of ‘really existing’ communities blindly to identify them with the realities of life. How members of these communities imagine themselves on the Web (and even more how other people imagine them) does not always correspond to reality, and some articles in these two collections notably fail to understand this.

Internet folklore may also be examined in the context of current events, since it displays a lively reaction to events that take place in the life of the community [FAN: D. A. Radchenko].

Discovering in what way certain phenomena are specific to virtual reality is an interesting research task. It is, for example, still an open question whether works of literature published on line should be regarded as a separate movement, or whether the only difference is they are electronic rather than ‘on paper’ [FAN: F. S. Kapitsa, T. M. Kolyadich].

Articles containing applied research

There is a separate group of articles of a purely applied nature, for example on the representation of folk art materials on the Web [FAN: T. V. Kuzmina], museum sites [IF: M. A. Zenina], the computer iconography of folk musical instruments [IF: E. A. Zaytsev] and the cataloguing of sites devoted to folklore [FAN: N. A. Dzhaliilova].

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Overall the topics of research examined (except for the applied research, § 8) can be arranged as a tripartite system of ‘subject — process — object’.

The subject is internet users in their virtual self-presentation (§ 1).

The process is language (§ 2), channels of communication (§ 3), and the rules governing the formation of local internet communities (§ 4).

The object is the folkloric texts themselves (verbal, visual, etc., §§ 5–6) and the degree to which texts on the Web are part of real life (§§ 4, 7).

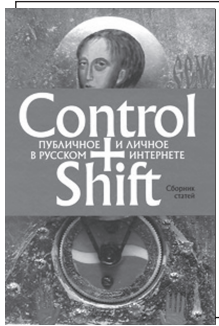
An analysis of these two volumes (and also of similar research) shows that the study of internet folklore involves not only folkloristic research, but also many other human and social sciences. The methods of literary criticism are by themselves clearly inadequate in this sphere. The study of internet folklore (and the wider study of the flow of information on the Internet) is a direction requiring an interdisciplinary social-anthropological approach.

Of course, the two books reviewed here cannot give a complete picture of internet folklore and the rules governing its existence, but the general outline of this phenomenon is becoming every more clearly drawn, so that future researchers will be able to draw on more material and make more assured general conclusions.

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Translated by Ralph Cleminson



Control + Shift: Publichnoe i lichnoe v russkom internete: sb. statei [Public and Private in the Russian Internet: Articles] / ed. by N. Konradova, H. Schmidt and K. Teubener. M.: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2009. 336 pp.

Hyperlinks and Power Points: Public and Private in the Russian Internet

The question of how to write about the Internet has been discussed with varying degrees of success over the last twenty years. This period has seen the publication of dozens of works on the sociology, anthropology and culturology of the Internet, most of them descriptive. Since the late 1990s and early years of this century, internet studies have been actively evolving as a discipline and a number of monographs and collections of articles have appeared,¹ but they all maintain the traditional structure of academic narrative. The collection *Control + Shift: Publichnoe i lichnoe v russkom internete: sb. statei* [Public and Private in the Russian Internet], edited by N. Konradova, H. Schmidt and K. Teubener is the first work of scholarship to have been deliberately planned so as to match its object of study to the greatest possible extent both formally and ideologically. It is the result of the work of the Russian-cyberspace.org project, which, according to information on its official site, was established in 2004 by Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, and Nils Zurawski. The project aims to study such phenomena as

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¹ See, for example, [Computer-Mediated Communication 1996; Communities in Cyberspace 1999; Gumanitarnye issledovaniya 2000; Internet i rossiysskoye obshchestvo 2002; Folk-art-net 2007; Internet i folklor 2009] etc.

‘web culture and literature, politics and social development on the Web, identity in the media age and cultural hybridity’.¹ Besides its official site, the project is presented in the form of a collective blog² monitoring current tendencies within Runet and studies in this field. The project’s working group includes western authors and migrants (in Germany and Britain) and native literary scholars, anthropologists, sociologists and specialists in culturology.

This collection, which results from studies carried out within the framework of the project thus has an interdisciplinary character. The direction of the research was determined a great deal by who the authors are: to a large extent it is a look at Runet from outside, from a certain cultural perspective. The fact that the researchers were working at a certain remove from their subject allowed them, on the one hand, to see it more in the round and form a more sober assessment of certain processes taking place in Runet, but on the other hand meant that in some cases they involved themselves in a basic description of their material to the detriment of a more profound theoretical analysis.

It should be noted that the collection is published on the ‘open source’ principle under a Creative Commons License:³ material from it may be freely copied, distributed and used for non-commercial purposes provided that information about its authors is included and a similar condition imposed on any subsequent users (a full-text version of the collection is available on the project website: <<http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/library/texts/ru/control-shift.htm>>). The authors have thus declared their position on the optimal organisation of informational space, and, in particular, the Internet: free access to data, free interaction in the use of data, no censorship or *parti pris*, with preservation of authorship and no anonymity. This position to a large extent informs the contents and ideology of the collection.

It consists of an introduction, a ‘user guide’, an introductory article and three sections: ‘The Historical, Political and Social Context’ (which gives a description of the Internet as an informational milieu), ‘The Building of Communities and Construction of Identity’ (which discusses the specifics of the ‘Russian Internet’, gender, national and cultural identity in Runet and the mutual influence of identity and grouping in that sector of the Net), and ‘Web Art, Literature and the Aesthetics of the Internet’ (focusing on verbal and visual creativity in the Russian-language Internet).

¹ <<http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/project/ru/opisanie.htm>>, retrieved on 1 February 2011.

² <<http://russ-cyberspace.livejournal.com/>>, retrieved on 1 February 2011.

³ <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/1.0/>>, retrieved on 1 February 2011.

This structure is complicated by many additions to the basic texts, imitating the hypertextual structure of the pages of the Internet: pop-up windows, hyperlinks, illustrations. On the pages of the book the authors engage in discussions and cite analogous examples (these fragments are presented against a dark background). This means that the text is perceived not as a finished, fixed product, but more as a space for the exchange of opinions, a virtual conference in which the reader becomes an equal though passive participant.

The next, no less successful innovation is the inclusion of additions to each article written some years after initial research. These additions, written four or five years after the completion of work on the text, indicate the dynamics of change in its subject. The book becomes a sort of palimpsest, a dialogue not only between the authors, but between the past and the present. As a result those conclusions which would have become obsolete given a different approach to publication acquire the value of a historical viewpoint. Moreover, this structure gives the reader a feel of ongoing research and constant renewal. In this respect the book is more than the sum of its parts, which is an extremely important quality for collections, though not one that is often encountered.

Besides the rejection of the traditional structure, the book is like its subject in another respect: it has a visual component which is not merely illustrative, but has its own content and is in a complex relationship with its context. For example, the caricature on p. 202 shows a 'graphomaniac' writing on lavatory paper. This caricature does not so much illustrate the text about the amateur prose on the 'Zagranitsa' server but rather expresses an attitude to this prose and its authors. Illustrations which are not always directly connected with the text recall keyword searches on the Internet, where a search for 'Russian literature' will produce both portraits of classical authors and sites containing model essays. (At this point it is hard to resist a dig at the editors, whose commitment to the observation of copyright law evidently does not extend to the illustrations: see pp. 30, 43, 82 etc.) Beside the photographs and drawings, screenshots of web pages and banners are organically incorporated into the text, reminding of pop-up windows on the Internet.

Another important feature is the replacement of the traditional index of terms with visually distinct 'hyperlinks'. This sort of layout not only imitates the connections between webpages and points out the collection's key concepts, but also facilitates a dialogue between the texts which is almost impossible when the index is placed at the end of the book. This device must also be considered successful from a formal point of view, and it is moreover interesting to turn our attention to the actual content of this original form of index. It is worth seeing which terms, names and concepts are regarded as

fundamental by the authors, especially since there is not such a great number of them. So, in alphabetical order:

amateurism, Andreev, blat, borders, class, control, counterculture, cultural identity, cyberspace, 'dangerous Internet', Delitsyn, de-virtualisation, élite, e-Russia, essentialism, fake, Gelman, gender stereotype, intelligentsia, Kononenko, language, Lebedev, Leybov, literature, logotyping, Luzhkov, Masyanya, memory, Moshkow, negative semantics, Nosik, padonki,¹ Pavlovsky, platform, political art, political technology, polit.ru, pornography, positive, postmodernism, public sphere, Putin, resistance, Runet, Slavophiles, social schizophrenia, stability, terminology, Verbitsky, Vladimir Vladimirovich™, web design, web geography, www, Zhitinsky.

This is essentially an attempt to identify the 'power points' of virtual space and to describe the personalities, technical devices and ideological forces behind them. If we were to try to draw a portrait of the collection using nothing but this index (which would in fact be a perfectly rational thing to do), we could say that it was an attempt not so much to describe the Internet itself as the vectors of the socio-political evolution of Russia in the first decade of this century, to determine what lies at each end of the axes 'power — resistance' and 'censorship/control — freedom/anonymity'. It is no accident that an eighth of the words in the index are connected with political activities and their reflection on the Web.

It is noticeable that the collection is actually focused on 'WEB 1.0': the problems of the creative 'élite' are regarded as fundamental, and the 'audience' is regarded as a passive consumer of the 'content'. Certain articles, however, refer to the next generation of internet users, who are vigorously interacting with the flow of information, but these directions of research are not reflected in the index.

But let us return to the texts. It is possible to identify four key themes that are visible one way or another in the authors' work.

The first of these is certainly the specifics of the Russian-language Internet as compared with other national or transnational sectors of the Web, the problem of 'Russian' cultural identity and its projection into the virtual milieu. This is, in fact, the question which the collection seeks to answer: to determine 'to what extent historical experience and cultural identity affect the use of communications technology' (Editorial, p. 8).² Meanwhile, the question of what to call the subject of the research — Runet, the Russian-language Internet, the Russian Internet or the Internet in Russia — remains

¹ See above, n. 1.

² Here and below, in conformity with Darya Radchenko's wishes, citations are taken from the English-language edition (Control+Shift, 2006). [Editor].

open. Ekaterina Kratasyuk's article even expresses doubts as to whether this is a real subject, and whether 'Runet' really exists as a separate space, or whether this is a myth created and propagated by users and researchers.

The boundaries of the 'Russian-language Internet', to use this cumbersome term, are fluid, and strong internal differentiation is developing within it. It does nevertheless have certain specific features, and these are consistently identified by the authors of the collection. From the user's point of view, it is distinguished by a high degree of connectedness, 'communality', a tendency towards the formation of groups and communities (Editorial, p. 14), and at the same time it tends to be introverted and 'cocooned' by the language factor (Schmidt, Teubener, p. 23).

The problem of 'borders', real or imagined, and how to cross them takes up a considerable amount of space in the articles in the collection, inasmuch as it is connected with defining the very subject of the research. 'The Russian-language Internet' includes users from Russia and the former USSR and representatives of the world-wide Russian-speaking diaspora, and is a space 'for resistance to the imposition of global (American) cultural values' (Bowles, p. 32). Despite the 'trans-frontier' nature of this idyllic picture, no language-based unity of informational space is achieved: 'Runet' is made up of closed groups with their own identities.

The researchers also note the high level of historical and political reflection in the Russian-language sector. At first sight this is hard not to agree with, though the lack of comparative analysis in most of the articles gives rise to certain doubts. Although the identification of the specific features of 'Runet' is one of the authors' basic tasks, it is almost always examined in isolation from the overall development of the Internet.

Another direction which the analysis of the specific features of 'Runet' has taken — the juxtaposition of its contents and its formal aspects — has also proved very productive. Thus the compilers note in the introduction to the collection that 'the Russian Internet is much more orientated towards content than towards form, and much more interested in communication than technology' (Introduction, p. 17). This position is supported by Eugene Gorny's observations, although the concepts of 'Russian culture' and 'Russian people' are used somewhat superficially: 'MUDs, IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, chat rooms and forums are typical of a predominance of the spoken word, albeit in written form. Usenet, homepages and blogs, on the other hand, are oriented towards the rhetoric of the written word [...] Therefore, the Usenets, homepages and blogs, in accordance with the literature-centric nature of Russian

culture, had a higher axiological status for Russian users (Gorny, p. 158).

At the same time, Andrej Gornykh and Almira Usmanova insist of the structural specifics of the Russian-language Internet, suggesting that it should be sought ‘in the system of repetitions of basic Internet schemes that produces the effect of “exposing the device” (Victor Shklovsky),¹ exposing the logic of post-modernist visual consumption’ (Gornykh, Usmanova, p. 214). However, while they describe this phenomenon on the basis of what they have observed, the authors refrain from any kind of comparative research, so that their conclusions are felt to be somewhat unreliable. Thus they state that it is the intensity of the RuNet’s visual images and its systematic use of gif- and flash animation, often several at a time on the screen, which creates the impression of visual aggressiveness’ (Gornykh, Usmanova, p. 210), while in fact there is a much greater concentration of such elements in cyberspace outside the Russian sector.

Another important theme of the collection is the relationship between the Internet and the authorities. The articles of the collection examine the Internet as a space for counter-cultural activities and resistance in the wider sense of the word (Schmidt, Teubener, p. 22; Bowles, p. 32; Goryunova, p. 249; etc), and as a source of uncensored information which is regarded as trustworthy for this reason but is by no means always so in fact (Kratasyuk, p. 49). The analysis by Henrike Schmidt and Katy Teubener (p. 78 ff.) of the authorities’ cautious attempts to ‘tame’ the oppositional mood of Runet, by supporting it or by developing a negative semantic of the Internet, insisting that lack of supervision, even of web resources, is synonymous with unreliability and insecurity, is particularly interesting. The relationship between the web and the authorities as conceived by the latter turns out to be the opposition between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, in which ‘culture’ means ‘control’. Indeed, we have now reached a situation in which cyberspace is one of the main milieux for the evolution of resistance, a space which has room for any number of alternative ideas and tendencies, and at the same time remains a mechanism for the affirmation of stable ‘mainstream’ paradigms.

The combination of an absence of external supervision with the opportunities for manipulation within cyberspace is reflected in another phenomenon on which the authors have concentrated their attention, namely that of the ‘virtual personality’, studied both as a construct and as an agent of influence. The ‘Russian’ virtual

¹ The more usual English translation would be, ‘laying bare the device’. The term refers to a technique of making clear a convention by emphasising this — as when a TV cameraman is shown on camera. [Editor].

personality is described first and foremost as a literary genre — a recognisable genre of web writing, ‘legitimised with a corresponding category in a major Russian online literature competition’ (Gorny, p. 175).

It should be noted here that the articles in the collection are on the whole characterised by that same focus on literature that is regarded as a pillar of national identity. The authors’ persistent attempts to inscribe activity on the web within the context of the literary tradition may not always be justified, but always have some nuance of justification: ‘literariness’ in their interpretation is a sort of affirmation of the value of the phenomena of web culture and their significance for research. However the authors also note that the ‘Russian’ virtual personality is more extensive than the ‘Western’ understanding of virtual personality. It ‘is specifically the representation of the self, it is its psychological and existential extension and not an alienated and self-sufficient mechanism’ (Gorny, p. 158). Playing with identity and the mosaic of ‘ego-constructions’ nevertheless results not in psychological compensation, but in a flight from identity as such (Kratasyuk, p. 45).

It would seem that the Russian-language Internet has been carried away by these games and even encourages them, but its anxiety to verify the information that it receives (as a result of the aforementioned perception of web resources as unsupervised, and therefore containing reliable information) pushes it in the direction of de-virtualisation, the transformation of a virtual community into a real one (Gorny, p. 108).

Finally, the authors address the topic of the Internet as an information space and its specifics. It is viewed as de-structured, lacking in system, order or hierarchy, but at the same time a field firmly bound together by means of hyperlinks and the ties of social networks, as a flickering, slippery, complex mosaic object that closes in on itself at the same time as it opens up borders, which leads nowhere, confusing the user with an endless loop of hyperlinks (a statement which in the light of present-day experience is an exaggeration, but which is justifiable for a certain period of the Web’s history): ‘RuNet provides the users with the seductive opportunity to learn as much as they can possibly absorb at the expense of loss of ability to ‘map’, classify and to know the world itself’ (Gornykh, Usmanova, p. 212). From the authors’ point of view, ‘news websites and information agency news logs, Russian- and English-language resources create the impression of boundlessness, impossibility of control and plurality of information streams’ (Kratasyuk, p. 43). However, ‘It is the potential promise of the Internet to provide unity where a lack of entity is experienced — often in a painful way’ (Schmidt, Teubener, Zurawski, p. 130).

The authors stress the decomposition of narrative on the Internet, the rise of a visual 'dispersed' perception, the logotyping of events and phenomena, the reduction of information to the various signs between which 'generation 2000' wanders. From this perspective the Internet is a reflection of a fragmented, disconnected world, and at the same time an attempt to compensate for this disconnection by forming new groups and new identities. This collection is in turn a portrait both of the birth of the Russian-language Internet and of a particular stage in the evolution of Russian culture as a whole, although its value is certainly not confined to its historical significance.

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