

Culture @nd Technology in the New Europe

Civic Discourse in Transformation
in Post-Communist Nations

edited by

Laura Lengel



Civic Discourse for the Third Millennium

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Civic Discourse in Transformation in
Post-Communist Nations

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chapter 10

Online Orality: The Internet, Folklore, and Culture in Russia*

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The Internet is a strange phenomenon in the history of technology: unlike its immediate technological predecessors, namely the press, telephony, and mass media, the Internet does not actually exist. That is to say, it does not have any boundaries, any definable physical existence or shape, nor does it have an owner, a designer, or even a representative. It is not necessarily a commercial enterprise, nor is it necessarily noncommercial. Despite its history, it does not belong to a single nation, political group, or ethnolinguistic group. Its motions and development are certainly not controlled by any identifiable individual. Its future is not being centrally planned, nor is it clear that anyone is capable of specifying the social roles the Internet will some day play. It even transcends our usual notions of a network, because in fact it is a virtual network of networks.

It is this aspect of “virtuality” that makes the Internet enigmatic, something that by its very nature forces us to realize that we are dealing with a different sort of animal than we have had in the past. The Internet is still mysterious, to the extent that it appears to be self-creating, while at the same time it forms something of a community. Or, analo-

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gous to its quality as a network of networks, it can be thought of as a community of communities.

The communal aspect of the Internet is today more difficult to discern than it once was, thanks to all the personalized home pages, advertisements, texts, and so on, that have deluged the World Wide Web in recent years. But once upon a time, in the early to mid-1980s, when the Internet was just expanding beyond the borders of the United States, the Internet was indeed a small community.

Begun as a mechanism for exchanging text-based technical information between major research universities and technologically oriented private enterprises with links to the United States government, the original ARPANet served only a handful of scientists and engineers working on a limited number of projects. It is safe to say that most of the people on the Net in its earliest years knew each other, either personally or by reputation. But gradually, the network, whose abilities to connect computers across vast spaces became more important as the personal computer began to be developed, expanded to include other faculty and students at those same universities, as well as nonclassified employees of the commercial firms that held nodes on the Net.

Thus, the Internet was once a very specific tool for a very specific purpose, and as such, was not of much interest to anyone who had no need to use its capacities (which at the time did not go far beyond e-mail). But as the Internet extended its reach to individuals who had nothing more in common with each other than their affiliation with a particular set of institutions, its purposes became more undefined, and the network began to take on the aspects of a larger, more diverse community—approximating a “real” community, like a city or even a country, with all the diversity such analogies imply. As people came onto the network with their home computers or from publicly accessible networked computers at universities, they encountered other “citizens” on the Net (“netizens,” in Internet-speak), about whom they knew very little. At the same time, new text-based technologies began to be developed that would enable people to have more dynamic, interactive conversations with each other: the UNIX-server command “talk,” or, more recently, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and ICQ (“I seek you”), for example, enabled people to have real-time conversations with each other by using their keyboards (Reid, 1991).

This brief early history of the Internet is provided here merely to point to a time when the Internet began to exhibit characteristics that moved it beyond the domain of earlier communications technologies. The model for the development of the Internet in subsequent years has been somewhat analogous to the telephone, which is noncentralized and multiplexed (information flows in more than one direction, in multiple

“layers”) (Poster, 1995a). This is because existing phone lines were adapted to the transfer of digital information. However, the Internet is often perceived as a medium more akin to broadcast media, partly because of its “televisual” appearance (requiring a display screen) and because, in recent times, it has become capable of transmitting multimedia objects (including video, music, and computer programs), but primarily because it also possesses broadband characteristics: one person can send the same message to a large number of people without much additional effort. Unlike broadcast media, to date the content on the Internet has not been closely controlled or regulated by nation states or by conglomerates and public utilities. The uniqueness of the Internet is precisely this: that its development has so far been decentralized and “democratic,” yet its power to influence and distribute information makes it seem more like a medium of mass information, and thus a desirable object to be owned and controlled, or at least “regulated.”

PROBLEMS FOR THE INTERNET COMMUNITY

Unlike either the telephone or mass media, then, the Internet started out as, and continues to be, a kind of community—despite its rapid growth. As Mark Poster writes, distinguishing the technology of the Internet from other technological developments with which we are familiar, “the Internet is more like a social space than a thing so that its effects are more like those of Germany than those of hammers. The effect of Germany upon the people within it is to make them Germans; the effect of hammers is not to make people hammers...” (1995a, p. 3). The emergence of the Internet community was accompanied by problems similar to those encountered by physical communities, especially those where urban planning is absent: traffic jams, pollution, and the formation of social hierarchies and rivalries. As the number of people on the Net increased, so did (it would seem) the need to establish behavioral protocols. The Internet, by attracting people with different backgrounds, levels of education, and levels of expertise with a computer, not to mention different attitudes toward the nature and function of the network itself, began to get less controllable. The actions of any particular individual using the Internet became less predictable, although we must remember that these actions were primarily verbal, since aside from viruses, it is currently difficult to cause physical action or bodily harm directly across a telecommunications channel.¹ The incursion of obscenity, insults, anger, and other emotionally charged contributions to the previously peaceful community of the Net was viewed as antithetical to the goals of the group constituting the Internet.

What is odd about all this, historically, is that a community was being formed among people who had never seen each other, and in fact more often than not had absolutely no idea with whom they were conversing (Poster, 1995b). The "blindness" resulting from being limited to typing in text at a keyboard had the unusual side effect of permitting network citizens, conversing perhaps across thousands of miles, to represent themselves in any way imaginable. Short people could describe themselves as tall; engineers could become movie producers; men could become women or even children (Poster, 1995b). There was, and currently is, simply no way to tell the truth. Put another way, the very notion of social identity (with such trappings as gender and race) ceased to have the sort of stability we have become used to.

For some reason, the natural processes of community formation took place without any regard for the curious, *virtual* nature of the Internet. That is to say, the boundary between the actual and the virtual began to become blurred. As more people signed on to the Internet, primarily to find out "what all the fuss was about," those who had been on the Net for a longer amount of time began to express the need for rules governing behavior as a way of legitimating their heritage as old-guard users. A new class system was clearly in evidence: those with more experience with the network fancied themselves to have a certain authority over newcomers, and those whose user IDs (e-mail addresses) were associated with the ".edu" domain tended to consider their prerogatives greater than those accessing the Internet through a commercial node (.com"). (Even Internet server domain names are not free of cultural associations: domains registered in the U.S., for example, are the only ones free of a country designator: UK, IT, RU, and so on. Thus, the American genetics of the Internet are always implicit.)

The broader community of the Internet now of course has grown to global proportions. As with the spread of electricity and telephone service earlier in this century, the Internet, too, is reaching into remote (from urban centers) and sparsely populated areas around the world. There are fewer and fewer places without some form of access to the Internet, even if restricted by cost or some other means. Meanwhile, many of the pragmatic and political problems of coordinating a multiplicity of interacting cultures have analogues in the Internet universe. Aside from the obvious practical difficulties posed by language, currency transactions, security, and so forth, a relatively unstudied problem is that of cross-cultural fit, that is, how the cultural predispositions of the Internet (information retrieval, interface, resources, costs, and so on) are interpreted and dealt with in a new cultural context. Certainly, both electricity and telephony carry with them certain presumptions about methods and extent of distribution: relative affluence, population den-

sity, need, and similar factors are involved in the distribution of these technologies, as is also true of the distribution of computers, televisions, and so on. But unlike these more neutral technologies, the Internet is by nature associated with additional presumptions: the *lingua franca* used on the Internet is English, a de facto decision that never involved consultation with prospective users, yet whose consequences are still unassessed; the ability to duplicate and transmit "objects" such as photographs both presumes a value to such distribution and challenges traditional notions of production and intellectual property; the ability to communicate or interact across political boundaries almost seamlessly is a feature of the Internet's architecture that could only have been developed in circumstances where openness was considered a social benefit. In other words, the presumptions about the possible uses/abuses and social consequences of the Internet within a poorly defined and rapidly changing community continue to go unexamined, even by those who purport to deconstruct the Internet as a social phenomenon.²

THE PROBLEM OF PUBLIC SPACE IN RUSSIA

It is certainly not our purpose here to elucidate all the cultural assumptions that are embedded in the current set of Internet technologies. It is important, however, to understand that the Internet makes possible a "public space," which seems to be an abstraction, a "virtual recreation" of actual public spheres: "the *agora*, the New England town hall, the village church, the coffee house, the tavern, the public square, a convenient barn, a union hall, a park, a factory lunchroom, and even a street corner" (Poster, 1995a, p. 1). It is equally important to recognize that these spaces listed by Poster to suggest the public sphere are not nearly so commonplace in cultures with a shorter history of democratic institutions than the Anglo-American sphere.

Neither the village church, nor the coffeehouse, nor even the tavern was the sort of public space that was easily accessible to the average Russian before the fall of the Soviet Union. Therefore, as we can imagine, the Internet (since it virtually embodies all those metaphors for community) might have a different value for people in post-socialist nations (the concept of nation itself being challenged by the transactional complexities induced by the Internet). The uses to which the Internet is put, especially when it first enters a culture, are in large part dependent upon the availability and suitability of existing analogous services (for example, postal system versus electronic mail) and upon which functions have not been previously available or accessible. Indeed, the potentially democratizing effects of the Internet's incursion represent a possible

wedge between those who would immediately apply the Internet's capabilities to decentralize power and the distribution of knowledge and information, and those who, seeing the Internet as conceptually homologous to instruments of mass media, would seek to restrain it.³

THE INTERNET AS A FOLKLORE SPACE

Folklore is communicative behavior whose primary characteristics, by one definition, are that (a) it doesn't "belong" to an individual or group (as a corollary, there is no way one can intentionally create folklore), and in the modern context therefore transcends issues of intellectual property; and (b) it is transmitted spontaneously, from one individual (or group of individuals) to another under certain conditions, frequently without regard for remuneration or return benefit. As it is transmitted, it often undergoes modification, according to the inclination of the retransmitter. Folklore, it must be pointed out here, is merely a label applied to certain types of cultural productions according to a given definition, which may vary from culture to culture. Indeed, there is absolutely no reason that a particular culture should have such a concept at all, even if there are many productions in that culture that we might want to term "folklore." What constitutes folklore in one circumstance might be considered "art" in another, or religious activity in yet another. The purposes of folklore itself, moreover, may be interpreted differently: from the Marxist-Leninist perspective, for example, folklore is "a reflection and a weapon of class conflict" (Sokolov, 1971, p. 15).

The English word *folklore* and the Russian word *fol'klor* tend to designate conceptual categories that do not completely overlap. The American usage demands that it must be primarily oral or performative; that is, subject to change with retelling or a new performance, as opposed to relying upon an invariable text or script. Second, folklore tends to not be ascribable to an individual creator or author. Finally, folklore and literary art are clearly distinguished. Thus, Gogol's story, *Vii*, for example, a short story about an errant priest, a vampiric witch, and a demon from Ukrainian folklore, would be construed as literature. Oral *skazki* (tales) about the *vii*, on the other hand, are folkloric. From the Russian perspective, the study of folklore is less a subdomain of anthropology, and may be closely linked with the study of theatre, dance, literature, and music (Sokolov, 1971).

Now, by my own definition, I would not technically be able to include jokes that are passed on the Internet in the category of folklore, because they are, for the time being at any rate (and we must remember that we are still at a very rudimentary stage of Internet technology), printed and

reproduced by e-mail. At the same time, because of the Internet's ability to disseminate information broadly and quickly, current events may immediately produce a spate of Internet-based jokes, and this collective response we would want to include under the rubric "folklore." Such responses certainly are neither art nor literature, nor even news. The origin of the jokes is unimportant, and indeed the most common types of jokes that are sent over the Internet are lists and compilations, which suggests multiple authorship. For example, the number of jokes pertaining to Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky that were passed around the globe in a single year is perhaps uncountable. As jokes get translated and cross cultural boundaries, however, often the point gets lost. The mechanisms of transmission of this type of folklore via the Internet are as yet little understood. That is, no one has yet studied extensively how such materials as jokes get sent from one person to the next: what, for example, are the parameters for familiarity, how closely do you have to know someone in order to feel free to send jokes, which may be offensive, to someone else on the Net? How are the cultural boundaries for a given instance (for example, a joke) determined, and how does the Internet influence those boundaries?

The use of the Internet to transfer within a given community instances of jokes, gossip, legends, and even out-and-out lies depends upon the technical and personal ease with which such objects can be transmitted. In Russia and most of the former Soviet republics, for example, the cost of access to bandwidth sufficient to permit unhindered use of the World Wide Web is still somewhat high. Not only that, but in these environments, information technologies possessing the degree of openness that characterizes the Internet have not, historically, been widely available. Consequently, the use of the Internet for purposes that are not pragmatic or goal-oriented (research and information seeking; publishing; commercial activity) is understandably rarer.

FABULATES AND URBAN MYTHS

Folklore frequently crosses the boundary between the private and public domain. Tales that are passed from one individual to another in a private space, such as a face-to-face or telephone conversation, are usually told with a particular motive, whether to impress, frighten, amuse, prove, and so on. The motive of the original teller, however, can eventually become supplanted as the tale is retold, either in private or in public. Along the way, such a narrative can change to accommodate the new intentions of the teller. In the case of a certain subgenre of folklore, the so-called *fabulate*, a tale is usually told with some sort of confirmation of

its veracity. "A neighbor of mine swears she saw this..." a story might begin, and frequently the teller may also believe that the story is true.

Because the Internet is still frequently perceived to be a space where what is printed is true (that is to say, the distinction between unverified or unedited information on the Internet and edited information such as that in newspapers and journals is not rigorously maintained), it is a likely medium for the transmission of folklore of the fabulate type. This is especially the case where the substance of the folkloric message involves the need for broadcasting to a large audience. Two recent examples come to mind.

The first occurred in the aftermath of the TWA flight 800 disaster in 1996, in which a jet exploded shortly after takeoff from JFK airport in New York. Some weeks following the incident, while there was still no well-understood reason for the explosion, the once well-known political writer and adviser, Pierre Salinger, claimed to have evidence of an attack upon the plane by a U.S. Navy rocket, and that the investigation, which was getting nowhere, was in fact a coverup of the truth. This information was eventually published and republished on the Internet, causing the investigators to have to publicly deny any such coverup. In our modern age, where technological and informational complexity itself has become a type of demon, conspiracy theories constitute a very common form of folklore. As Derrida observes (1995), "Contrary to what is normally thought, technological modernity doesn't neutralise anything; it causes a certain form of the demonic to re-emerge" (p. 35). The Internet, with its ability to obscure the usual tests for truth-value by eliminating or leveling the mechanisms for assigning value (such as editorial discretion or cost), is a superb medium for promoting and expressing social anxiety, hysteria, and so forth.

A similar but more widespread type of Internet folklore in the U.S. takes the form of so-called "urban legends." Urban legends, a term coined by the folklorist Jan Brunvand, constitute a genre of lore in which a story about a plausible but unlikely event, usually reflecting uncertainties about the modern age, is passed from person to person as if its truth were beyond question.

For example, the now-famous story of the Neimann-Marcus cookie recipe has recently been passed to possibly millions of people on the Internet. Neimann-Marcus is a large store in the U.S. that is known for its expensive, high-quality items it sells. A message passed around the Internet in recent years contains a recipe for chocolate chip cookies, and an accompanying story about how Neiman-Marcus charged the credit card account of a customer \$250.00. The charge was supposedly the hidden price of the cookie recipe, which the hapless customer believed cost only \$2.50. The ostensible intention behind publishing the recipe on the

Internet was to deflate the value of the recipe so that Neimann-Marcus could not continue to overcharge customers in the future. The tale, which is of course untrue, is nevertheless believable at first glance. We can infer that the social motive for this type of Internet folklore is to express disapproval of the ways in which large, wealthy corporations infringe upon the limited rights of the individual: the free distribution of the ostensibly valuable recipe of course would make the recipe worthless, and thereby eliminate Neimann-Marcus' ability to dupe unsuspecting customers with exorbitant credit card charges.⁴

These types of easily reproducible narratives, such as jokes and urban legends, are the simplest forms of folkloric materials that can be moved from the domain of the actual community to the virtual community without much loss. The Internet adds nothing in these cases other than rapid and inexpensive reproduction to a form of social dissemination. However, as new technologies develop—in particular, those facilitating so-called virtual reality—not only will new forms of interaction develop, but the boundaries between online productions such as art, literature, theater, and folklore will blur. At the moment, outside of certain technically advanced areas, the ability of the Internet to transmit video and sound images in 'real time' is still quite limited. However, it is important to understand that folklore will assume whatever forms it wants if the means for doing so becomes available.

Games, which are distinguished by the presence of fairly explicit rules, are another form of behavior that fits some of the parameters of folklore. The emergence of virtual reality, first as a text-based environment controlled by a complex of programs residing on a central computer, later as a more distributed and visually representational phenomenon, enables interaction in imaginary or virtual spaces among people who have no face-to-face knowledge of each other.

Most of these games generally presume a certain fantastic background setting, such as a mythical, medieval Europe or some futuristic world. One such category of games is known as MUSH, an acronym for Multi-User Shared Hallucination. Each player must be on the Internet, of course, and creates the general outlines of a persona or character that will be injected into the ongoing, unending narrative of the MUSH-space to interact with other characters. The "game" is going on all the time, and often involves people from various parts of the world (although the games originating in the U.S. are usually conducted in English only). Aside from the fantastic setting, some of the characters can also eventually acquire fantastic or supernatural attributes, becoming magicians, vampires, or werewolves or other creatures. However, most of these games prohibit the newcomer from acquiring advanced attributes such as magical powers, shapeshifting, and so on, until the

character has been in the game for a while and has successfully interacted with other characters—who, in fact, have the power to virtually “kill” him. These “powers,” in reality, represent access to certain functions of the computer program controlling the game, and can best be described as an increase in the ability to control “virtual objects,” including other characters. Thus the rules of the game mimic those of real society, in which social powers are conferred by the group on the basis of familiarity and appreciation of certain acceptable qualities.

One very popular set of RPGs has the title “Vampire: the Masquerade,” because it is based upon a book of the same name. In fact, Internet RPGs are based upon the same types of games that are played in nonvirtual spaces. In these games, there are two basic classes of beings, ordinary “mortals” and “vampires” or “immortals.” Curiously, those who aspire to become vampires are not regarded as monstrous aberrations or murderers, but are in fact esteemed because of their “powers” and their quality of being immortal.

The elaboration of this game, its rules, and what I take to be its meaning I will have to leave for another time. And, indeed, the question arises as to whether such games constitute a form of folklore or instead a new form of theater, since they require players to play roles with general scripts (any virtual behavior that is completely unsynchronized with the fantasy behind the game is considered to be outside the accepted script and is therefore chastized by other players). But because it is construed as a game, because it has a social purpose, because there is no definite, repeatable performance, and because it occurs in a public space into which anyone is admitted, it also can be included under the heading of folklore. What is especially intriguing about these games is that there is the potential for a certain psychological danger that results from the elimination of a distinction between the actual and the virtual Self. There are reports—and some of these reports themselves may also be folklore—of players who have become depressed or even suicidal because their roleplaying personae were outcast or abused. A recent case in the U.S. involved a group of teenagers who imagined themselves to be vampires. Several of the members of the group had been involved in playing vampire-based RPGs. This group was held responsible for the murders of the parents of a girl in the group. Although the Vampire RPG was not considered to have played a significant role in the murder, the loss of distinction between real and imaginary domains, exaggerated by the increase in our ability to quickly generate manifestations of collective fantasies, was responsible for a horrendous act (Linedecker, 1998).

THE INTERNET AS A SPACE FOR “FOLKLORIC PROTEST”

In the foregoing descriptions of some of the folkloric activities that can be adapted to or generated on the Internet, we have not mentioned a number of significant questions concerning how these new or modified forms of folklore might operate cross-culturally. In Russia, as we have noted, questions arise not only around technical parameters such as computational power and bandwidth, but around the purpose of a powerful technology like the Internet. Many of the folkloric (and other creative) activities that take place on the Internet in Western countries assume that the Internet is not by any means a scarce resource. Neither is the time it takes to “surf the Web” considered particularly valuable, since on average, the relative costs of usage with respect to personal income are minimal, and the potential for freedom and openness that Internet technologies imply does not appear threatening. The use of the Internet for creative, nongoal-directed, even frivolous and excessive pursuits in fact is taken for granted by Western corporations wishing to secure profits from the users of the Internet.

The adaptation of such incautious, apolitical, and excessive activities in the former Soviet Union is likely to be complicated. Russia has, by and large, taken the promise of the Internet very seriously: its use as a publishing vehicle, for example, is valued quite highly, to judge from the rapid growth of Web hosts supplying literature, art, bibliography, news, and so on. Unlike the U.S., where access to the Internet has been largely subsidized (a fact that is not promoted abroad), in countries with less stable economies, the Internet appears to be more of a commodity, that is, something that obeys rules of supply and demand, and therefore is less likely to be used without premeditation or purpose—at least among the older generation. Furthermore, the idea of an unwatched, open community is still regarded with skepticism and ambivalence by many Russians, and thus the casual use of the Internet may take longer to develop than in the West. At the same time, as it becomes realized that the Internet cannot be subjected to the same sorts of controls that the state security organizations have enforced in the past, folk uses of the Net should become more apparent. But this, of course, implies having a critical mass of the “folk” online.

CONTROLLING THE PAST?/CHARTING THE FUTURE

We see, then, that the Internet currently has the ability to do something that the mass media cannot do: because everyone potentially creates or

modifies its content, it provides a mechanism for “folkloric protest,” since the Net does not represent a coherent vested interest. Whereas television and radio stations are usually owned by an individual organization or a government, which makes it hard for unedited or uncensored information to be broadcast, the Internet provides a means for individuals to post information that may or may not be reliable, accurate, or even politically correct. The cost, however, of this leveling is that the economic or use-value of information currently available on the Net is difficult to determine. As the old adage has it, “You get what you pay for.”

While we have certainly not described all the potential and actual forms of folklore on the Internet, we can confidently state that the Internet, regardless of its past and future directions, currently constitutes enough of a human community to accommodate all kinds of human verbal and nonverbal activity, including folklore. It is unlikely that this quality of the Internet as a self-creating technology owned by no one and controlled by no one will not be eliminated, despite its promise, especially for societies where freedom of expression is not taken for granted. Humans have a tendency to want always to possess for themselves what is seen to be an advantage to everyone, and the Internet represents just such a target. In the meantime, we have an opportunity to try to understand this new phenomenon by looking at the processes by which areas of human ritual and communication become adapted as the technology develops.

The eventual obliteration of the absoluteness of truth—an unexpected consequence of the technological drift toward total digitization, and therefore total reproducibility—will mean that one can no longer be sure that a given piece of information, be it a photograph or a legend, represents historical or perceptual fact. And as we gradually learn that photographs and newspaper stories have no greater claim on reality or truth than an urban legend, we might eventually free ourselves from the need to control the past.

NOTES

1. Regarding analogies to our traditional notions of ‘harm’ occurring over the Internet, however, see Dibbell, 1993.
2. Mark Poster (1995a) acknowledges the preponderance of “white maleness” in the development of the features that are developed for the Internet, yet does not question his own assumptions regarding the relative importance attributed to the Internet in different cultural settings.

3. In this regard, the governments of both the United States and Russia are equally misguided, even hypocritical. The U.S., for example, on the one hand has spent millions of dollars trying to make the Internet accessible to Russians who have returned to Russia after studying or working in the U.S., while at the same time it maintains a continuing attempt to legislate tariffs and to restrict access to portions of the Internet for some U.S. citizens.
4. For more details on the history of this Internet legend, see Goldin, 1994.

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