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Book Review

Sergey Davydov (Ed.)
Internet in Russia: A Study of the Runet and Its Impact on Social Life
Cham: Springer, 2020, 298 pp.

Internet studies seem to be an essential part of the current research agenda in social studies. The specific nature of Internet components (online-media, online-communities, etc.) are studied unceasingly and closely. This book focuses precisely on the national Internet segment of Russia (Runet) as a separate phenomenon and, hence, as an integral research object. Such a complex study has not been presented before in academic literature.

This book stands among 11 others in the series "Societies and Political Orders in Transition" (Springer Publishing), which provides plenty of studies in political science, social sciences, and economics, with the focus on political orders and societies in transition, primarily those in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The series was initiated by the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia), one of the leading universities in Russia, which has a sustainable interest in social science.

The volume contains four parts that thoroughly cover the history of Runet, peculiarities of its economic sphere and state regulation, prevailing digital culture, practices of participation and representation in social media, and some other vital discussion points. The current review is not aimed at covering and summarizing all articles included in the book, but it presents some basic and core research points that may be interesting to potential readers.

In a way, the current book may be considered to be a representation of the whole research field of Internet studies, due to the variety of disciplinarily frameworks presented – it summarizes almost all Runet studies of the last three decades. The authors were brought together by the editor of the volume, Dr. Sergey Davydov, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Communications, Media and Design at the Higher School of Economics, who

has a great deal of research experience in the field of Internet studies. Thus, the book presents complex and comprehensive studies by 25 authors from 10 countries – reading closely, one can notice how research focuses differ and authors sometimes contradict each other. Without a shadow of a doubt, it should be noted how essential a mix of outside and inside (foreign and native) research perspectives is to a complex study.

Here one can find the history of the Runet's development, which has become a continual topic of everyday informational discourse in recent years in Russia. Now an academic field has its own widely accessible media product that provides key features of the first Runet decade. The authors place the features of the Russian media system, which are the focus of the book, into a broader international scientific context that makes the book understandable and valuable for researchers from different countries.

So, Natalia Kondratova started Runet's history with the launch of the first artificial Earth satellite in the 1950s, continues through the software development period of the Soviet era, and goes on to the specific communities for Russian-speaking users (USENET), that formed the Runet in 1990s. Finally, the article explores pivotal projects of the beginning of the 20th century, which predetermined the development of the Internet in Russia for decades. Besides the well-known facts, this chronicle presents some details unique to the Russian context. The article may be considered the first attempt to analyze the first decades of the 20th century as a historical period.

Marina Shilina's paper, dedicated to the concept of Big Data in the Russian national context and "datafication" in general, presents methodological observations and goes even further. The author presents the genesis of the Big Data concept, and further on, through the example of Russian data art projects, she shows the variety of data-driven practices, analyzing their co-existing opportunities and methodological problems. Besides obvious research interest in the new paradigms that big data is determined, authors notice the interest in it from the political elites, who made big data part of the state's strategy for construction of the image of "Digital Russia."

Elena Vartanova, one of the most respected and well-known Russian scholars in media studies, proposes a structural approach, and considers the Runet to be part of the Russian media system, allowing the examination of specific features and their influence on other media segments – radio, print, TV, and notice trends, which drive modern communication

practices. Likewise, one should notice the special attention paid to the alternative research agenda that highlights peculiarities of various forms of the Internet in Russia's regions, suggested by the authors Polina Kolozaridi and Olga Dovbysh. The majority of papers on media and Internet studies tend to explore the agenda and structure of media majors (platforms), which allows for interpreting results on the macro level. This type of subject conceptualization and dominant global research focus may be rooted in the strong vertical political system in Russia and the need to explore the "top" in order to understand the "bottom." One can notice that such a paradigm misses and underestimates the role and impact of the Internet's local parts. Thus, the authors suggest an alternative (inductive, "bottom-up") approach, and consider the Internet not as a homogeneous object or a common space, but explicit in its inner non-obvious treats (different stakeholders' configurations as an example) based on empirical data from six Russian regions. Moreover, this approach of exploring a variety of "Internets" goes against the concept of the book, which aims to describe Runet as a solid research object. So, the authors proved that the configuration of the early Internet was influenced by the economic, demographic, and (in most cases) cultural contexts of the regions. They also contradicted the idea that the Internet is a global technology, and emphasized the local function of it.

The country-specific adaptation of the concept of "digital literacy" seems like a fruitful contribution to the research field of media literacy studies, which was forming and flourishing after Paul Gilster's book Digital Literacy (Davydov et al.) became widely spread. Despite the constant growth of publications on Digital Literacy, the subject area does not seem to be depleted. The book presents an overview of exciting approaches to digital literacy studies, as well as further conclusions from the ZIRCON Research Group studies on media literacy. A set of indicators was created, based on the types of digital competencies, and measured during the annual mass surveys of the Russian residents (2009–2016). To date, it remains one of the major longitudinal research projects on digital and media literacy in Russia.

Another significant project is presented by Svetlana Bodrunova and Kamilla Nigmatullina, who continued adding to the list of international studies on professional journalistic culture (roles) studies. Based on the mixed-method study (survey and interviews), they claim that the gap between post-Soviet and Western-oriented journalistic

cultures is caused mainly by a values-based split rather than by financial, regional, online/ offline, or generational ones. The heterogeneity of professional culture does not only present different normative models, but also influences career paths and group identities.

The particulars parts of digital literacy lie in the sphere of Ellen Mickiewicz's interest – in her paper, she examines interpersonal trust through deep-seated attitudes in online-communication practices of elite students of top Russian universities. Among the main results, the author highlights the idea that the ability to critically receive information from various Internet sources is not a special digital skill – it is taught in primary and secondary school and belongs to the general education sphere. Her respondents also demonstrated a limited trust for new interactions, and keep a distance from random online friends, which lets them easily reject sources when they feel an attempt to persuade them. Thus, strategies for making decisions about potential acquaintances and information sources are similar. Considering the elite students as trendsetters, the author notes lack of trust as a social problem.

Almost all of the authors mention problematic methodological points in Internet research; however, Gregory Asmolov explores the mediator function of the Internet during problematic social events. He considers the meaning of online platforms in crises (terror attacks, natural disasters, wildfires, and political protests) in historical and sociopolitical contexts. To the author, user-generated data has an opportunity to contribute to the transparency of events and to make authorities accountable for their actions in emergency decision-making processes. It has become apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic how extremely important the communication function of the Internet is. It is hoped that the highlighted treats will be used in further investigations on the topic.

As has been presented, this book draws together parts of distinct research disciplines – a broad research perspective has been assembled by an array of interdisciplinarity methods. While paying attention to their theoretical approaches, we can see that the articles are valuable for empirical materials presented according to academic standards. In addition, the book is free of political prejudgments.

The main findings may be considered as a mirror for both global trends and local peculiarities. Thus, the book may be strongly recommended for two groups: the first is foreign scholars, students, as well as general readers, who are interested in Internet

studies and want to be aware of the Russian case; the other group would be specialists in Russian studies, who could extract information about the digitalization process in Russian society – which is lacking in the international scientific literature.

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