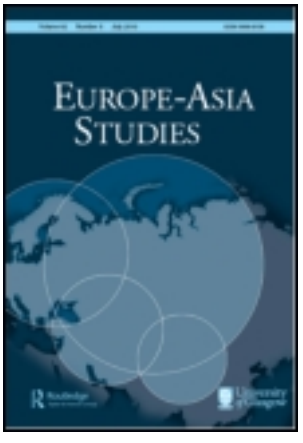

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Learning How to Shoot Fish on the Internet: New Media in the Russian Margins as Facilitating Immediate and Parochial Social Needs

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Learning How to Shoot Fish on the Internet: New Media in the Russian Margins as Facilitating Immediate and Parochial Social Needs

JEREMY MORRIS

Abstract

This essay examines regimes of internet use, and the significance of the internet for everyday lives, in the Russian margins. The field site, a small provincial town in European Russia, was visited in 2009 and 2010. Informants were mainly families dependent on a single non-professional wage. Research materials—semi-structured interviews and participant observation—comprising an ethnography of internet use, are supplemented by survey data. Qualitative social research on new media use has critically examined technologically determinist assumptions about social effects of the internet, including the so-called 'digital divide'. The present research also seeks a contextualised understanding of new media use by considering how it is embedded in established everyday social settings and practices. The ethnographic materials and survey data collected indicate that Woolgar's rules of virtuality hold true in the Russian margins: use of new media depends on the local social context and supplements, rather than replaces real activities. Most users in the group surveyed are highly instrumentalist and have little interest in the communicative and non-grounded aspects of the media. At the same time the impetus for initial access to the internet is closely related to issues of esteem and peer recognition within a social network rather than actual need.

THE BACKGROUND NOISE IN SASHA'S HOUSEHOLD means it is almost impossible to conduct a coherent conversation. His two children are present in the living (and sleeping) room, sitting on their bunk beds and continually interrupting. The television, ignored by all, blares away on a wall-mounted steel arm, directly above the computer monitor. Two large fish tanks, brightly lit, with filters humming, sit next to the computer console. A mini hi-fi, printer, CD rack and multiple remote controls mounted vertically on the desk in charging cradles complete the techno-tableau. In the kitchen, Sasha's wife watches a different television programme on the smaller set similarly mounted on the wall above the fridge, the volume set high enough to follow the gist of the programme from the other room. Sasha sits on the only chair in the living room, pivoting towards

Supplementary data for this essay can be found in the online version at: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceas20 (Figures S1, S2 and Appendix).

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me with his back to the computer. The monitor 'wallpaper' is the popular search engine and portal Yandex. For the first hour and a half of this visit, the computer and internet, like the TV, remains ignored. Only when it is time to leave, as the children start their bedtime routine, does Tanya emerge from the kitchen to play for half an hour: a recently downloaded point and click game, the object of which is to nurture a potted plant sufficiently to produce a lasting bloom. In this setting, the internet and personal computer have been neatly integrated into daily life alongside other objects signifying that this family is 'up-to-date' without much changing it or its habits.

Writing before the advent of the World Wide Web, Neuman listed 15 sometimes contradictory propositions that had been put forward about the effects of new media on society. These propositions included, *inter alia*, the creation of an information underclass and the diminution of media conglomerates' power to shape and control the news individuals receive (Neuman 1991, pp. 5–7). To avoid an overly deterministic understanding of social change and technology,[1] he proposed an interaction model 'focusing on the issue of technology-in-use' (Neuman 1991, p. 18). For him, new media's obvious place in filling communicative gaps between one-to-one and mass communication on the one hand, and the phenomenon of instantaneous communication (conversation in the presence of others) compared to delayed communication (traditional mail) on the other, meant that in the information age there would be 'no prospect of resurrecting the technologies, life-styles, and values of the small town and rural society' (Neuman 1991, p. 9). It is not so much the 'resurrection' proposition that this essay seeks to examine with reference to the post-socialist context of the Russian small town; rather the thrust of this research is that, specifically, the internet has not subverted, replaced or fundamentally altered the existing social, communicative and cultural rhythms that predate new media use. However, it is precisely 'small towns'—the focus of this essay—that saw the fastest growth in the first decade of the century (Galitskii 2009a, p. 15). From 2002 to 2008, internet use there grew by a factor of five; by contrast in metropolitan areas it grew by a factor of three and is approaching levels similar to other European countries (Galitskii & Sidorova 2009, p. 12) at around two-thirds connectivity. Clearly, smaller urban settlements are now experiencing growth similar to that in cities about 10 years ago. There are obvious, though untested, hypotheses about the lag in diffusion to provincial areas. One is that the telephone infrastructure outside large cities is patchy and unable to support reliable broadband and the existence of local service-provider monopolies means the cost is prohibitively high (Cooper 2008).[2] Another is that Russians, as a nation living mainly in small cities and having already wholeheartedly embraced the mobile phone, have their social networking needs more than catered for by existing technologies of communication (Cooper 2008)—including the most reliable and traditional of all—dropping in on each other. This is compounded by the demography of many regions, where older people are less likely to seek access to digital networks. Finally, there is as yet little economic logic behind broadband diffusion in the regions. With an undeveloped system of electronic financial payments, e-commerce cannot be seen as a driver of

[1]For an overview of this tendency see Croteau and Hoynes (2003, pp. 305–7).

[2]For an extended discussion on uneven technological diffusion and the new geography of marginalisation in Russia, see Castells and Kiselyova (1998).

diffusion: the 4% of users defined as 'shoppers' (Galitskii 2009b, p. 81), new media users, still rely primarily on alternative forms of payment (such as mobile phone credit and cash-on-delivery) for their online purchases.[3]

New media ethnography: qualitative research on actually existing internet use

Like other ethnographies of new media use, this research does not seek to test such hypotheses directly; however, in seeking to understand the actually lived experience of internet users in 'ordinary' areas—small towns in the regions—it can provide a micro check on these macro presuppositions. For example, for the vast majority, the computer-based internet as a one-to-one communication device does not compete with voice-based mobile phone use. This supports the hypothesis that existing social networks are not directly enhanced by online life—if the latter is narrowly understood as the potential for virtual communication such as through social networking sites. This is not to say, however, that internet use does not enhance or supplement network practice in other ways, the main contention of this essay. Despite being networked by relatively high-speed and reliable broadband, the working people of the small Russian town hardly ever email each other, or anyone else for that matter. Why should they when mobile or land-line communications suffice?[4] Even when contacting relatives and friends in other regions and countries, other methods of communication were preferred to email. Of course, socio-economic, cultural, as well as geographic factors explain this—most informants for this study were in manual and semi-skilled employment and therefore had never used email for professional purposes. For example, work was frequently sought online, but CVs and interviews were provided and elicited respectively in traditional non-electronic forms. Socio-economic factors are not adequate alone to explain this. Looking at a comparator grouping of well-educated businesspeople in the same town, similar dynamics of use were found. For business, email was a twice-daily-only ritual, reserved for communication with prospective partners outside the region; the internet itself was used for financial transactions with state structures such as the tax authorities.

A second imperative for ethnographies of internet use in Russia arises out of the largely qualitative sociological nature of existing materials. The ethnographic approach can supplement, enhance or challenge qualitative data when the latter adopt a functionalist approach to access and use of the internet, or where analysis adopts an implicit determinist approach (Schmidt & Teubener 2006, p. 19). The dominance of quantitative and survey-based qualitative approaches in social research on new media use in the post-socialist sphere is evident from the meagre list of area-specific literature utilising ethnographic methods. Examples include Pearce's study of social networking in Armenia (2009), Bakardjieva's study on becoming an internet user in Bulgaria (2005a), and survey and interview data on use from Kyrgystan (Driesbach *et al.* 2009).

[3]The situation concerning electronic financial payments was nonetheless rapidly changing over the course of two fieldwork visits as various e-cards and other systems for making payments online were becoming available to ordinary Russians, if not electronic payments linked to credit and debit cards.

[4]Consideration of the use of mobile phones is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay, but see Lonkila and Gladarev (2008).

In Russia, survey data collected mainly by the Public Opinion Fund focus on national and regional snapshots of access and use (Galitskii & Sidorova 2009) which inevitably brush over socio-economic nuances and a more contextual relevance of place.[5] Such sociological research on the internet in Russia, while providing interesting data on, for example, the differences between types of non-users, still takes as its main heuristic tool a modernisation narrative predicated on a simple dichotomy of access or non-access. When it asks questions about actual use, these are typically formulated in generalisations such as—'to what extent has access changed your life?' (Galitskii & Sidorova 2009, p. 35). Unsurprisingly, while inhabitants of the urban centres report the internet as an integral part of their lives (41%), few rural inhabitants and those with an income of less than R4,000 a month see access as qualitatively affecting their life—only 17% and 13%, respectively. Over and above the expected uses of the medium as another leisure and entertainment source—for watching films and playing games—the opaque typology: 'reference and necessary information', at 53% of use (Lebedev & Galitskii 2009, p. 42), reveals the limitations of qualitative survey data at getting to the reality of actual use regimes of such a versatile and inherently social medium. If social research is not to avoid the trap of couching its research questions in such a way that the agency of users is assumed to take limited or prescribed forms, it must go beyond the typologies of user as the narrow 'shopper', 'financial user', and on the other hand, the unhelpfully broad category of 'socialiser' (Galitskii 2009b). Work done on new technologies' actual regimes of use is important, because in time it is ordinary users themselves who can shape the evolution and unforeseen affordances of new technology (Kline & Pincher 1996; Wyatt *et al*. 2002, p. 36).

Finally, the Birmingham and University College London workshops which generated the materials of this collection show that much research is understandably focused on the civic and political potential of new media in the post-socialist space—in particular the essays by Bakardjieva, and Gladarev and Lonkila. Invariably this entails a preoccupation with the technological elite of sophisticated consumers and producers of online material. In line with existing ethnographies of the internet I ask more mundane but equally fundamental questions about the internet in Russia such as 'how members of a specific culture attempt to make themselves a(t) home in a transforming communicative environment, how they can find themselves in this environment and at the same time try to mould it in their own image' (Miller & Slater 2000, p. 1).

Qualitative research methods are increasingly being used to question assumptions about the technologically determining social effects of new media. Scholars are building theoretical models of the interplay between technology and society to question new media's potential to replace or change existing social and cultural behaviours. This includes critically examining 'epithetised phenomena' such as activities prefixed by the word 'virtual', and the meaning of 'community' as it is variously adjectivised (Woolgar 2002a, pp. 2–3). Simultaneously, case studies using a

[5]An exception to an overly narrow typologisation is early research (mid-1990s) carried out by Russian behavioural psychologists which identified key motives for use as: professional, knowledge seeking, socially affiliative, corporative and collaborative, self-actualisation, recreational, communicative (Arestova *et al*. 2000).

variety of social research methods from surveys to ethnography have found that actual use of media is significantly gendered (Howard *et al.* 2001; Hargittai & Shafer 2006), differentiated on the basis of age (Söderström 2009), culture and ethnicity (Bakardjieva 2005a; Pearce 2009; Leonardi 2003; Miller & Slater 2000) and class (Crump & McIlroy 2003; Leonardi 2003; Hargittai 2010). This development of a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between social and cultural life and new media has in turn led to a reappraisal of the meaning of the 'digital divide'. Instead of thinking in terms of access only, difference in proficiencies and usage can be mapped on to existing socio-economic structures in society (Norris 2001; Hargittai 2007). Access itself continues to be strongly correlated to social background: an Australian study found the degree-educated to be six times more likely to use the internet than others (Willis & Tranter 2006, p. 53). Despite the technological *milieu* of 'pervasive communication' (Fischer *et al.* 2008, p. 529) within which social life now takes place, the internet, especially as a social capital resource and potential driver of social mobility, must be understood as a qualitatively different medium depending on the identity of the user. One response to this problem is the domestication of research and material cultures. This approach aims to move beyond adoption and use towards the meaning of services and technologies to people and how they are experienced in everyday life, especially in the home (Haddon 2006). The question of how the internet is mediated through actual use, spatial relationships, placeness, sociability and social class, is key to the research presented in this essay.

The field site, informants and methods

The research presented in this essay derives from materials collected during two periods of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in November 2009 and July–December 2010. The fieldwork site was an urban settlement of 15,000 inhabitants in the Kaluga region of Russia with which the researcher had a longstanding connection as a source of ethnographic research material for other projects. I call this settlement 'Izluchino'.[6] The main group of informants for previous and parallel projects had been blue-collar workers; for the purposes of collecting information on internet use it was decided to focus on this same group: not only was a ready-made pool of informants available to the researcher thanks to previous research in this field site, but anecdotal evidence pointed to this group as newly connecting to the internet from around 2005 onwards.

From an existing informant base of nine families, all of whom relied on manual and semi-skilled wages for their primary household income, snowball sampling was undertaken in Izluchino during November 2009 to identify members of those household's immediate and extended social and kinship networks that had recently (in the previous three or four years) started to use the internet at home. As was to be expected in a physically and socially compact sample and field space, a limited number of genealogies of use of the internet were identified. Early-adopters (by the social and geographical standards of the field) were some of the primary informants of this research. To put this into perspective, the earliest use of the internet at home among

[6]For ethical reasons, mainly relating to other research carried out at this site, I adopt a pseudonym for the town, as well as anonymising material relating to individual informants.

informants was 2006. By contrast, professionals in the same field space had been observed by the researcher using dial-up as early as 1999. Some of the present informants had clearly 'skipped' the dial-up phase for reasons of cost or accessibility.[7] During fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with key informants were undertaken; however, the vast majority of materials presented in this chapter derive from participant observation and rich open-ended conversational research focusing on five domestic settings. A variation on this methodology was considered: installing software on the computer with permission from informants to track actual internet use;[8] however, for ethical reasons this was rejected. In a few cases informants gave permission to view their web browser's 'history' which was very useful.

In addition to ethnographic methods, two paper surveys (sample sizes: $n = 54$ in 2009 and $n = 88$ in 2010) on access were carried out. By way of comparison, this allowed the evaluation of the ethnographic informants in terms of the typical trajectories of access and habits of use from the survey data. The survey tried in part to replicate those administered by the sociologists Galitskii and Sidorova (2009); in addition it asked about routes into access, histories and hierarchies of use, specific information about websites visited, local websites accessed, the domestic setting of use and interests relating to the internet beyond the virtual sphere. This survey was administered by a research assistant in households selected by a random walk method using different temporal sampling intervals (Bernard 2000, p. 150) after a period of pre-testing in a local public library. As is standard practice in ethnography, survey data are not presented separately; the data are used to indicate the generalisability or otherwise of informants' use regimes.[9]

Another group of informants—local business owners—served as a further comparator. A small number of formal and semi-structured interviews were conducted with this group. Like the survey data, such materials are mentioned here only when they inform the focus on 'ordinary' use by non-technical, non-professional people. Such users have little or no vested economic interest in the technology.[10]

Before entering the field I had constructed a linear model of increasing penetration of an individual or family's use but this remained little more than an ideal. The model would have begun with arranging an informal interview, usually in the home of the informant, in which I would replicate the main points of the separately administered survey discussed above. This combination of interview and interaction would be conducted one-to-one and take about half an hour. After this, depending on the willingness of the informant, I would ask them to give me a 'tour' of their online habitat, sitting with them at the computer or from a suitable vantage point. We would visit the sites the informant most often visited, and I would prompt them about the

[7]It should be noted that many younger people (in their 20s) tended to rely on 3G connection technology when asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) broadband was not an option, when living in rented or parental accommodation. Quite often connectivity through 3G was comparable to dial-up in terms of speed.

[8]This alternative was also suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

[9]Supplementary data for this essay can be found in the online version at http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceas20 (Appendix).

[10]As for example, in Latour's 'simple customer' model, quoted in Bakardjieva (2005b, p. 3).

existence of sites catering to local interests such as forums about the *oblast'*, about Izluchino and special-interest hobbies of which I had learned in the interview.

From the first interviews it was clear that the above format would be unlikely to succeed. Firstly, the majority of informants lived in 'one-room' flats[11] and in most cases it was in this single living and sleeping space that the computer was located. In some cases too, interaction with informants took place in the evening when the whole family was present. It was difficult enough to replicate the main points of the survey in this environment, let alone discuss in private the use-regimes of individuals. However, what this research setting did allow was the observation of the internet in use by families in a 'natural' setting (Schrøder 1999; Bakardjieva 2005b, p. 79). Also, researcher-effects need to be accounted for;[12] in a few cases it was clear that informants were uncomfortable about an observer watching their every click over their shoulder. Most of the time, however, the process of gaining access through informants' acquaintances via the snowballing technique meant that informants, after discussing the main reasons for the research, were put more or less at ease. In some settings, careful physical positioning of the researcher at a distance away from the computer often resulted in the informant, increasingly immersed in their own online experience, losing situational awareness, and therefore providing the researcher with periods of arguably 'candid' use.[13]

In addition, most hands-on sessions were conducted, not on initial contact, but during a second follow-up meeting sometimes lasting more than two hours, with an interval of a day or more after the semi-structured interview or initial contact had taken place. Often in the interim, or even immediately prior to the second session, less purposive interaction was sought with informants, taking part in the domestic social gatherings typical of the spatially constrained leisure activities of the small town.

A final point needs to be made about the personal computer and internet themselves as props for the ethnographer to gain trust from informants. More than once I was encouraged to connect a pen drive I had loaded with photos of my own domestic setting and life to show interested informants; often I found myself opening browser windows to show informants some of the kinds of sites I used—though this in itself could be viewed as problematic in terms of encouraging informants to read the researcher as a technologically 'learned' person (Bakardjieva 2005b, pp. 80–81). On the other hand, by limiting such researcher-led use of technology to its more banal and everyday characteristics—news sites, information and hobby-related forums, rather than revealing professional activities—this mode may be described as contributing to a

[11]Flats typically comprised a single living space of about 12–15 m^2, a small bathroom and kitchen, and in some cases a covered balcony. Thus a family of four persons might have only 25 m^2 of 'living space' available to them.

[12]These are discussed at length in this research context by Bakardjieva (2005b).

[13]'Situational awareness' relates to an individual's awareness of their physical environment and sense of time. Research into online learning has shown that the high level of cognitive load imposed by many internet experiences can be disorientating (Eveland & Dunwoody 2001, p. 56). In the present research, goal-directed concentration on a screen leading to loss of informant's awareness of the researcher was frequently exacerbated by the typical domestic setting encountered—a single family multi-use room. The effects of background 'noise'—movement of people, other conversations, other technological media resulted in a very high level of cognitive load indeed for informants.

dialogic approach to new media ethnography,[14] and redresses at least some of the power imbalance implicit in the researcher–informant relationship in front of the screen.

In the following thematic sections I present the main research materials gathered from the two fieldwork periods in Izluchino. Three dominant themes on use and reasons for access—educational, informational and leisure—combine material from personal observation, survey data and interviews. For informants, pseudonyms, age and occupation are given.

From access and narratives of virtual arrival, to everyday pragmatic regimes of use

The most common answer to the question of 'Why did you first get connected (at home, with a monthly broadband contract) to the internet?' was usually a slightly uncomfortable pause followed by variations on: 'I don't really know'. Informants found it very difficult to articulate a concrete need to justify their decision to invest in what was always a quite costly service.[15] At first a narrative of general usefulness was pursued: the 'information' strand discussed below. 'You really need it to keep up to date [*byt' v kurse*]—the internet means we're not living in the stone-age'.[16] When pressed on this point, Sasha found it very difficult to pinpoint any of his actual internet use in terms of generic information gathering. Like all informants and most respondents he never visited news sites. A common arrival-narrative developed which hinged on three 'reasons' for connection, often linked to the purchase of the personal computer through which access was gained. In many cases informants had not initially bought a PC to gain access to the internet. Each of these are really *post-hoc* 'reasons' and can be shown to lack explanatory power for initial access. I conclude the section with a description of the main, usually indirectly articulated, reason for connection that emerges from the user narratives—a reason which stems from a general anxiety about not having access to the latest technological gadget and the peer-recognition that comes from getting connected before others. I define this phenomenon as 'internet inertia'.

'Without the internet at home, the children will be educationally disadvantaged'[17]

The internet as an educational aid was proposed as a reason for access by more than half of informants, but schoolwork was rarely, if ever, carried out with the aid of either computer or the internet. In fact, in at least two families who gave education as a

[14]The ethical considerations of giving informants some kind of ownership over the research materials has long been an ideal in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, p. 279)—the 'technique' of bringing personal items and scraps of the researcher's own home life to the field in order to establish trust and credibility is well known in ethnography. A similar consideration is the extent the researcher should or can take on the role of contributor to the lives of informants (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, pp. 274–75)—an example of this relates to the online guidance given by the researcher to the informant Valerii, see the section on informational affordances.

[15]Up to 5% of take-home breadwinner pay.

[16]Author's interview with Sasha, 39, manual worker, November 2009.

[17]Author's interview with Tanya, 37, primary-school teacher, November 2009.

reason for connection, a password was installed on the PC to prevent child access altogether. Parents embarrassedly mentioned the tendency of otherwise innocuous Russian sites to carry links to adult sites: 'We were looking for some pictures of dinosaurs or something for little Lena's school project, but when we clicked on some link from a site all these pictures of naked women appeared in the margin of the screen. After that we stopped using it with her for school work'. Tanya's use was itself exceptional in that she frequently used online teaching resources; she also browsed with her eight-year-old daughter for pictures to print out and illustrate school projects. However, when Tanya was pressed on the subject she revealed that the majority of her pupils did not have access (as shown by survey data and predicted by the national statistics on access[18]) and therefore there was never any expectation or even mention of the internet as a resource for school projects. Tanya's own use with her daughter appeared to have been an experiment at the beginning of their honeymoon period of access, which was quickly superseded by a ban on underage use in their household—even by their 14-year-old son. At least for this family, initial connection appears to have been prompted by the professional needs of Tanya, and is therefore unrepresentative of the sample as a whole.[19]

An overview of the current use of the internet shows the educational impetus to be a *post-hoc* rationalisation for some, and for others a genuine if unrealistic ideal prior to access, that was quickly dispelled by actual use, or abandoned in favour of other uses. Similarly, some expressed disappointment with the communicative and socially-situated potential of the internet. This is why I use the term 'honeymoon' period: initial delight and fascination of informants at the entertainment and leisure aspects of use, such as viewing and downloading films and music, rather quickly gave way to an acute sense of the paucity of reliable information and content relating to local concerns and communication. (I discuss these concerns in more detail in the following section.) I do not wish to argue that for families the internet will not in time become a useful educational resource, merely that there are two obvious barriers to this at present: the *Runet*'s overwhelmingly 'adult' focus (though this is changing rapidly), and the continuing lack of access in schools and homes.

'The internet? Well, it's information, isn't it?'[20]

The most common reason for initial access given (by most interview informants and over 70% of survey respondents) was that as an informational resource the internet occupies an unassailable position in contemporary lives: that without access, informants would somehow be 'out of the loop'. At first glance there is little to dispute here; and in reviewing the ethnographic material plenty of examples were observed of the utility of internet access in fulfilling informants' immediate and parochial informational needs. However, the term 'information' needs to be carefully qualified. Often, when technological change is discussed in terms of networking characteristics allowing unbounded communication and informational flows (Castells

[18]On this point see Galitskii and Sidorova (2009).
[19]Author's interview with Tanya, 37, primary-school teacher, November 2009.
[20]Author's interview with Dima, 35, arc-welder, November 2009.

1996, 2001), what is at least implied is the potential widening of the socio-cultural informational frame of the individual user.[21] In its lay iteration, informational affordances can be viewed as analogous to the 'informational utopics' described by Hetherington (1998), whereby reification of such utopian technological visions via networking of individuals takes place. The uses of virtual literacy in the utopian readings of new media relate to the same narratives of self-improvement and self-education to be found accompanying the rise of other communicative technologies and affordances,[22] for example public libraries.

In the Russian small town, the affordance of 'information' turned out to be epistemologically framed by informants not as utopian, nor even as particularly pragmatic, but as strongly or exclusively instrumentalist. However, the very nature of narrow instrumentalism often served to undermine the 'informational' affordance as an initial justification for access. The title of this essay refers to the best example encountered of this paradox—one informant's interest in underwater harpoon fishing. This hobby is not included in the section below on leisure use for two reasons. Firstly, Dima, the informant who liked to visit an online forum on harpoon fishing in Russia, was at pains to compartmentalise his online experience relating to fishing as 'informative'—an almost technical and intellectual affordance separate from the actual practice of fishing:

> For me it is just like reading a book on it. You're looking for the specific answer to a specific problem—like how to hold your breath under water for longer. There aren't any books so I started searching on the internet and I found this forum. I just find the information I need but I don't want to discuss it with these 'participants' [*uchastniki*]. I don't class myself as a 'participant'—I mean, some people just sit there posting all the time—when do they actually get a chance to do any fishing!

Dima articulated a distinction between an informational affordance relating to a personal interest and more communicative aspects which remained unexplored. A similar narrative emerged from discussions with others about interests as diverse as knitting patterns for clothes and the maintenance of diesel engines (also a 'hobby').[23]

The second reason relates to the first in a negative sense. If 'informational' use was posited as active, goal-orientated gathering of knowledge, then leisure use was usually placed on an opposite pole by informants—passively to 'kill time' together with family or friends, most typically in viewing so-called 'fun' (*prikol'nye*) sites comprising user-

[21]Lay interpretations of the socio-culturally widened communicative opportunities of the internet often include references to intercultural communication—either directly between individuals located in different countries, or indirectly in terms of the informational resources the internet provides for people to discover 'thick' descriptions of cultural knowledge pertaining to their own or other countries and cultures.

[22]After Gibson (1979), as discussed in Bakardjieva (2005b, p. 19), I use the term 'affordance' to describe what a technology offers a potential user in the context of that person's social and cultural life. See Bradner *et al*. (1999) on the unpredictable and user-predicated 'social affordances' of technological change.

[23]Author's interview with Dima, 35, arc-welder, November 2009.

posted jokes and images designed to amuse and/or shock, playing online computer games, and downloading films, games and music. The extreme instrumentalism observed served to undermine the 'informational' narrative of initial access in the following ways. Firstly, some interests that emerged as central to informants did not pre-date access. Therefore informants could not coherently rationalise the impetus for initial access by means of furthering their interests or hobbies by online means. Secondly, when online interests coincided with pre-existing ones, it emerged that internet use to support a hobby had developed only recently—such as in the case of Sveta, who had been knitting for years, but only in her fourth year of internet use had started downloading clothing patterns.[24]

But what of the less narrowly defined 'informational' affordances of the internet? As has already been mentioned, no one used the internet to supplement their diet of TV news, whether local, national or international. The paucity of the more generic informational online life can be partially explained by examining informants' reports of their initial use. This indicates a pre-access idealisation of the informational potential of the internet that was frustrated by initial experience, perhaps leading to a rejection of many aspects of the 'infosumptional' rationalistic ideals of use (Bakardjieva 2005b, p. 169). Sasha[25] reported that at first (in 2006) he and his wife had looked for local news information—a site with user-generated local content had appeared with commentary on issues of community interest, but quickly this had 'got broken' (*slomalsya*) and the websites on local themes (*lokalka*) were now not interesting.[26] The chat forums relating to Izluchino were used only by a narrow segment of young internet users. Sergei expressed frustration at this situation—'they're going to use the disused clay pits as a rubbish tip for Moscow but you can't find anything out about it'. He was concerned about the employment and health implications of this issue, but had given up on the *lokalka* as a source of information.[27] Finally, a telling 'informational' example that underscored the importance of approaching and understanding internet use in terms of competencies was observed as a result of interaction between researcher and informant. Valerii had heard a rumour that taxes on car owners were to rise sharply in the following year. He owned a foreign-made car with a powerful engine and was afraid that this would hit his pocket hard—but where could he find out the particular tax-rate for the Kaluga region? We tried looking on the site maintained by the regional authorities but were unable to find the information there. 'I told you it wouldn't be there—there's never anything useful there', he rebuked me, despite previously admitting he had never visited the site.[28] After a number of searches we found the information on a region-specific forum for motorists—but this slightly inconvenient operation merely confirmed for Valerii the internet's lack of utility for obtaining locally specific information—whether relating to news, official information or even the weather. In addition, like all informants, there

[24]Author's interview with Sveta, 43, shop-assistant, July 2010.

[25]Author's interview with Sasha, 39, manual worker, July 2010.

[26]The primary meaning of '*lokalka*' is 'local-area network', but informants used the word to describe online content serving the town in which they lived, which at the time of the research fieldtrip was extremely limited.

[27]Author's interview with Sergei, electrician, 28, December 2009.

[28]Author's interview with Valerii, delivery driver, 45, December 2009.

was no mention from Valerii of contributing his own user-generated content to enhance the local online space. Finally, in contrast to these findings, a review of locally generated content relating to some larger settlements (the *oblast'* capital and other towns with a population over 50,000) revealed some significant use of forums for local people to discuss local community issues—such as illegal gambling—and in some cases to apply pressure on local authorities to take action.

'Entertainment? Well, yes, but there are more important things to do on the internet'[29]

In contrast to the purportedly informational or educational utilities of access given, there was often an understandable initial reluctance or discomfort in admitting the potential of the internet as a leisure resource. However, the entertainment resources that the internet provided were often revealed—usually only after the informant had prioritised the utilitarian reasons given above. Partly this could be explained by the abstracted description of the use of the term 'entertainment' (*razvlechenie*). When given concrete examples of activities observed—downloading electronic games, cartoons for the children or the latest cinema release—then informants readily agreed that these activities were a significant impetus for initial connection.[30] Informants did not make the indexical leap from the umbrella term to specific practices. Nonetheless the physical (offline) exchange and sharing of downloaded material significantly contributed to social intercourse and the maintenance of personal networks. This practice supported local communication and socialisation. Such socialisation is also linked to the physical citing of internet access in the domestic space—the discussion of which follows this section.

There were, of course, a number of incidences of solitary online gaming observed. Typically these sessions involved school-aged children and young adults living at home with parents. However, this activity was not the norm. The 'entertainment/leisure' use was rooted in sociality. A new game would be downloaded by an informant prompting a visit from extended family or friends to make a CD-ROM copy or play together. Alternatively, a film or game was downloaded, a copy made of it on recordable media, and a short journey undertaken by the downloader himself to visit friends. In a number of cases, the online or downloaded game provided the focus for the only permissible use of the internet by children under direct observation by parents, or as a whole-family activity. However, in terms of the share of time spent online by families and individuals alike, gaming and leisure featured as a relatively minor activity. Characteristically it performed a function of delineating a temporal threshold between evening and bedtime. Children and adults alike would 'play for half an hour' before it was time for the former to go to bed. Gaming was also important for some workers in killing time between and after shifts when no one else was 'around' online, such as the middle of the day. Perhaps one of the most striking findings that emerged from discussions of leisure use was that informants reported few examples of interest in computer gaming prior to their connection to the internet—indicating another difficulty in comparing current use to the

[29]Author's interview with Vadim, 28, electrician, July 2010.

[30]Informants were generally quite sophisticated users of online sources of pirated material and the software enabling such use. However, on the other hand the researcher observed an alarming number of cases of users falling victim to online scams and computer failures due to viruses and Trojans.

purported reasons for initial access. This may be due to the fact that computer access for many did not significantly pre-date internet access.

Narrow and locally determined instrumentalism

Three main affordances of internet access as understood by informants have been conceptualised and examples of them within concrete regimes of use described. What emerges from comparing narratives of the initial use-justifications for access with everyday experience is that no affordances provide adequate explanatory power for such access. In the first 'educational' justification it emerged as largely *post-hoc*. Indeed, in a number of families the internet was largely off-limits to children. Even taken as a 'naïve' ideal by pre-access individuals, an 'educational' justification can only carry a small amount of weight as a justification for a connection costing up to 5% of monthly wages for a family. The second and most dominant narrative, 'informational use', is also problematic. If we examine current use, it is dominated by practical self-educational and self-provisioning purposes; the latter includes finding the right knitting pattern for a daughter's autumn dress, or the correct order in which to dismantle parts of a diesel engine. Key informant Dima's narrowly instrumentalist use of the internet is not untypical of the case studies in this research. His use consists of reading up on the techniques of underwater harpoon fishing. He almost never checks his email, does not contribute to forums about his hobby, does not read the news online, and registers for social networking sites then never returns to them.[31] Current use for him revolves around a narrow, instrumentalist need—he is learning to shoot fish on the internet. However, this is actually an offline activity, rooted in a locally and socially specific life-world. (The field site borders a national park with excellent river fishing opportunities; fishing in company is an important male blue-collar leisure activity.) In contrast to actually encountered narrow regimes of informational use, the strong narrative of general informational utility of access reported by informants—'you can keep up to date with what's going on'—is difficult to accept at face value. A more compelling interpretation is provided if we focus on the first part of this statement—'keeping up to date'.

Access, as one might expect, occurred in a chain, moving through an extended social network. A pioneer family or individual gained access and others followed, often, seemingly with little or no rationale. Being up-to-date related more to relationships within networks than to the utility or otherwise of the new technology. Looking for the primary affordance-in-use is to ignore a palpable prompt in plain view of the researcher—the domestic setting of the computer at the centre of the living space of the family and therefore on display to all visitors. Internet access inertia then requires little or no rationalistic or use-related explanation. The third theme of use also

[31]This came to light when the researcher tried, unsuccessfully, to make use of social networking websites in order to contact informants before, during and after the first period of fieldwork. The researcher, at the prompting of Dima, registered for the well-known sites: odnoklassniki.ru, Vkontakte.ru and finally mirtesen.ru. However, Dima, after inputting the minimum of personal information to the profile pages that these sites are predicated on, gave up on them. Very little contact online was achieved with any informants with the exception of Sasha who liked to use the Voice-over-Internet Protocol service Skype. Revealingly though, the researcher remains to date Sasha's only Skype contact. He never turns Skype on because it slows his computer down.

supports this thesis—gaming and leisure use are strongly correlated with existing sociality and the maintenance of social networks. Interest in gaming, or even in the latest movie releases, did not pre-date access in any significant way. With access achieved, leisure uses were embedded in existing temporal and spatial regimes—family evenings, domestic visits, etc. The visit with a new game or to watch a new film becomes an event connected to peer-recognition and status. To download the latest version of the game 'Russian Fishing' is to show that one is 'up to date', not with current affairs as an outsider might impute, but with one's significant peers.[32]

The domestic setting: the internet on display as technological wallpaper

The physical citing of access and the computer's hierarchical positioning as first among other equally visible technical and leisure furnishings within the domestic space underline the importance of 'recognition'. The 'internet', taken here to mean the totality of physical access points including electronic connection devices, is permanently on show in the single living spaces of families, but like other technological wallpaper and status items such as the permanently locked-away Czech crystalware in the dresser, it is a signifying presence more often than it is a utility—whether informational, educational or even in terms of entertainment. The opening ethnographic moment of this essay illustrates this well.

Connectivity in Sasha's family is about showing the frequent kin and other visitors that despite a very meagre income, the household is sufficiently well-run so that disposable income can be spent on a particular type of luxury, even if it remains without a washing machine and the furniture is largely self-built. Technological gadgets—mobile phones, the PC and internet access—are an expense that is not spared; their meaning as an 'affordance' is problematic as they do not significantly widen the social and cultural lifeworld of the users. The adoption and use of the internet can therefore be seen, not as infosumption—and therefore specific to the new media phenomenon—but as a more mundane and well-established technological commodity fetishism and conspicuous consumption in a physically marginal setting, where other such forms of consumption are limited: there are few locally available spaces for public display of wealth and more traditional markers of disposable income are on sale only in the *oblast'* capital.

Discussion and conclusion

One of the ethnographic presuppositions about new media is that the internet must necessarily be socially and culturally embedded in existing structures and spaces and that it would therefore be a mistake to study it as a world apart, dislocated from the rest of people's social lives (Miller & Slater 2000, p. 4). While the transformative civic and political possibilities of the internet and other media are clear, this ethnography has brought agency literally 'back home' in looking at the affordances of virtuality in

[32]Among male personal networks, 'show and exchange' of downloaded material as a network affirming practice extended to pornography.

FIGURE 1. DOMESTIC SPACES OF INTERNET ACCESS: THIS ACCESS POINT IS USED BY FIVE DIFFERENT USERS, THREE OF WHOM ALSO USE THIS SPACE AS A BEDROOM.
Note: image taken by the author in the field between November 2009 and December 2010.

the everyday Russian context. The setting of technology-in-use—from its position in the domestic space to the structuring of offline communities (both practical and socio-economic)—has a structuring-formative effect on use. In its diffusion to 'ordinary' people and areas it is crucial to understand the meaning and use of 'virtuality' as a 'social accomplishment' (Miller & Slater 2000, p. 6), instead of a 'world apart' from offline sociality. If social research cannot account for the fact that ordinary internet users do not need electronic mail, or even politically variegated online news coverage for that matter, then how can it begin to impute transformative civic potential to a medium? In examining the ordinary Russian internet in ordinary Russian places we find evidence of the assimilation of 'yet another medium into various practices' (Miller & Slater 2000, p. 6) that constitutes the existing, and therefore socially and culturally important everyday. Many of these practices revolve around the domestic sphere—self-provisioning, the maintenance and improvement of living space, hobbies and the sustaining of existing and place-bounded social networks. Such 'ordinary' use and socially related practices link internet use to that of the mobile phone (Lonkila & Gladarev 2008, p. 284); and it is the domestic sphere which is only now in Russia becoming the primary physical connection point to the virtual world, the workplace previously being most favoured. In 2009 the home as the primary space for internet connection passed the threshold of 75%. In contrast, in 2002 less than a third of users connected from home (Galitskii & Sidorova 2009, p. 18). Home use indicates the

advent of socio-economically 'ordinary' users (Willis & Tranter 2006, p. 47). As the internet finally comes home in Russia this statistic indicates that the time for a domestic ethnography of the internet has come.

In conclusion, the adoption and use of the internet in the Russian internal margins is explained by separate models of consumption and production, closely related to existing meanings of the domestic space; but these respective modes do not look much like those analysed in the Western context by Bakardjieva. For her, the internet problematised the meaning of the home—it could herald the intrusion of work into the private domestic space with teleworking being an instance of production. The internet could equally enter the home as a 'specific instance of consumption' normally associated with economic relations in the public sphere—shopping, participation in e-commerce, etc. (Bakardjieva 2005b, pp. 24–26). In a Lefebvrian interpretation, new media use would appear to confirm the worst predictions of a technologically determinist position—everyday life is deprived of some of the shelter the domestic sphere is supposed to afford from marketised relations. At the very least, 'previously unchanged characteristics [of everyday life] had to be given up in exchange for the gadgets of technological progress' (Bakardjieva 2005b, p. 51). In the Russian context 'productive' modes of internet use are no less economically determined, but *contra* Neuman, reflect unchanging imperatives of small town life—self-provisioning, the maintenance of the home and updating of skills and knowledge relating to economic priorities. Thus, knitting patterns, diesel engine schemas, allotment advice and DIY furniture plans dominate use. The 'instance of consumption' that the internet brings to the home is inscribed, not in use, but in the acquisition of the new media technology itself. Ironically, the internet, at present, contributes little to market economy-related consumption in the given Russian context, despite the very visible demand for pirated material online, and yet its presence in the home is itself an instance of the marking by informants of their position and potential as consumers. By connecting they 'have arrived', without actually travelling in the sense of enhancing social mobility. Internet inertia means that as one family unit connects, an imperative, without particular recourse to utility, is created in a socially networked unit. If the 'Ivanovs' have it, then so must their social peers, the 'Stepanovs'.

In this case study of a small provincial Russian town with its focus on 'ordinary' users in a 'marginal' setting, Woolgar's first rule of virtuality is fulfilled: 'uptake and use of the new technologies depend crucially on local social context' (Woolgar 2002a, p. 14). Social and geographical imperatives of self-provisioning and difficult economic realities significantly shape use. The internet is integrated into the 'local' by a form of connectivity not predicated on the virtual, but on the physical presence of, and access by others to, the domestic computer-point as an indicator of status. Rules Three and Four—that the 'virtual supplements, rather than substitutes for real activities' and 'the more virtual, the more real'—are also therefore supported by the material presented here (Woolgar 2002a, pp. 16–17).[33] Similarly to an analysis of the impact of the

[33]Rule Two states that the 'fears and risks associated with new technology are unevenly socially distributed' (Woolgar 2002a, pp. 15–16). The present research cannot adequately address this hypothesis, but clear indicators of the 'fears' associated with the internet regarding inappropriate underage use were prominent among informants. Rule Five states that the more global a technology, the more local the nuances of its implementation. Again, local relevancies and the absence of interest by informants in communication outside their locale, would support this hypothesis.

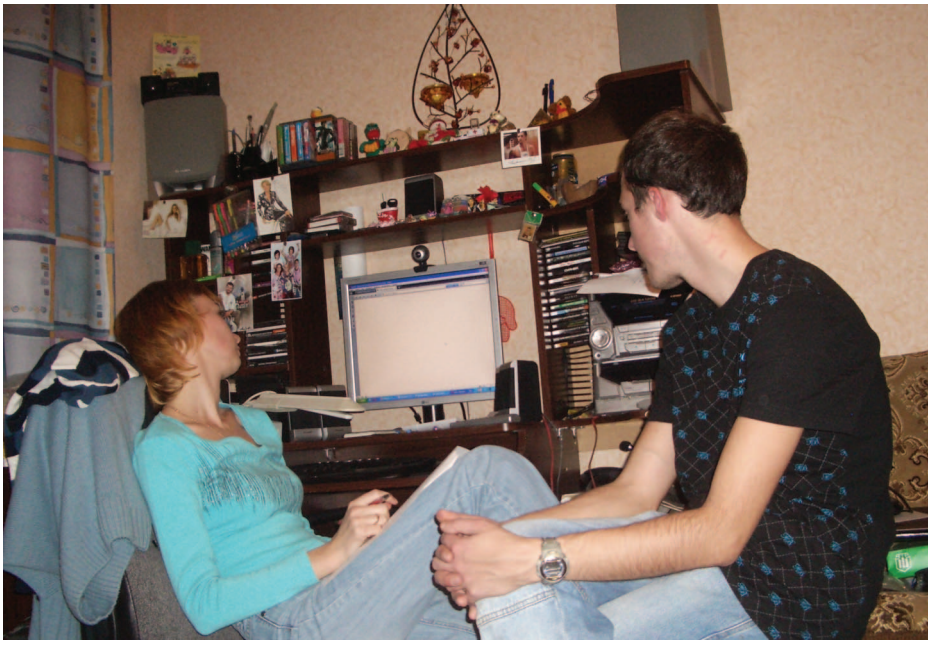

FIGURE 2. Access, Even Through an ADSL Line, Can be Slow in Izluchino—Giving More Time for Non-virtual Interaction.
Note: image taken by the author in the field between November 2009 and December 2010.

telephone in 1940s America or the use of the mobile phone in Jamaica in the 2000s, the internet in provincial Russia can be shown not to 'dramatically affect the localism in small-town life' (Horst & Miller 2006, p. 8). Instead, like Russian mobile phone use, the internet helps maintain close personal networks (persons living in a single city) (Lonkila & Gladarev 2008, pp. 284–85) and, ironically, communication between persons physically in the presence of each other. The internet increases the volume of 'talk', but not virtually. Practices that are by and large socially predicated are enhanced: family and friend leisure pastimes in the domestic sphere, and self-provisioning activities that are often social—gendered hobbies often carried out in the physical company of others: fishing, knitting, tinkering with cars. The internet in Izluchino can be seen to largely reproduce the 'narrowness' of the existing social architecture—placeness, both of the physical citing of access and the user's social milieu, turns out to be a key determiner of the 'virtual'.

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