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National Identity in New Media

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Abstract

The Internet is often regarded as a global and supranational network. Criticizing this view, the author examines the mechanisms for maintaining national identity and proves that the ritual use of mass media is steadily decreasing, while national discourse replaces it. National discourse also covers new media which start to resemble traditional mass media more and more, including their function of nation building.

1. Introduction

Rapid changes in communication technologies during recent decades have sharpened the question of mass media's role in shaping and maintaining national identity. This question is particularly urgent for Russia, because we use such terms as federal channel and all-Russian newspaper (instead of national channel and national newspaper, respectively). The role of print periodicals and other types of traditional mass media as integrators of nation has been shaken by the expansion of Internet communications, and particularly social networks. From its beginning, the Internet has been a cross-national community with features of exterritoriality; it has been opposed to the cultural identity of traditional press. The problems of national sovereignty are being withdrawn from the political foreground as a result of the growth of European Union and other transboundary institutions. It was exactly the Internet communications that put on the agenda such idioms as "the death of distance," "the end of geography," and a "broadcasting without borders". A lot of scholars already regard nation state as an analytical construction or even an

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abstraction for studying social dynamics but a potentially unviable institution. Nevertheless, the dichotomy between traditional national media and new cosmopolitical media requires detailed critical examination.

2. Research Design

"Us" and "them" on the Internet

Digital era is changing the modus of media consumption which becomes more and more individual. There is essentially a great variety of news sources on the Internet and there cannot be just one national web resource. It comes from the nature of the Internet as metamedia with parallel interfaces. Computer, as opposed to television set, does not serve all household, but it is an individual means of communication. Since network users are spread all over the world, the Internet consumption acquires not so much national as local and at the same time global nature. A friend who has been living in Australia for a long time can join a discussion of Russian regional problems on Facebook any time if he has maintained a lively interest in the problems of our community. Internet forums are being created exactly for maintaining social contacts. In this regard Facebook community is rather similar to that imaginary community that national newspapers created in their day. At the same time we should admit that the possibility of anonymous participation in social networks and role participation in network discussions (e.g. trolling) substantially limits social effects of such discussions. Comparative analysis of traditional channels and Internet communications content convinces us that instead of contrasting new and old we need a three-component scheme which elements can dialectically eliminate contradictions of the previous period. Thus, direct contradictions in the way of communication which existed between newspapers and television disappear in network publications comprising both advantages of long-read texts and visualization of screen art. In other words, the Internet community co-opted members of other media platforms. Along with the involvement of new audience groups new media acquired such features which were not taken into consideration by the creators of Internet communications.

The Internet is often regarded as the means of globalization and obliteration of boundaries. If a free flow of information above domestic boundaries exists and everyone can join it any time regardless of their geographical location, then banal nationalism should wane, since its foundation is shaken by the discourse of new media. However, it does not happen and this fact can be observed at three levels: 1) Organization of the Internet 2) Localization of web-content 3) User preferences.

We can see at all these levels that the global network is divided into national segments. And it is naturally connected with mentality, language and cultural attitudes of users. In other words, national identity is so strong that it transforms global network (which was planned as a communication for cosmopolitans and technocrats) in something like a national newspaper or a public television channel. The institutional matrix as a stable thought form dominates the very architecture of the global telecommunication network (Internet). Domestic boundaries have direct influence on the topography over the Internet. By a random sample of webpages you can receive evidence that all or almost all links lead to local, regional or national web resources. Russian websites refer to foreign resources very seldom. Partly it is the result of poor language knowledge; partly the reason lies in reluctance to study foreign languages.

One more national aspect of the Internet structure concerns domain names of countries. Such names have become signs of national identity on the Internet. The system of domain names (DNS) was originally devised without regard to national identity of a web resource, and top-level domains such as .gov, .org, .com, .edu indicated a certain function (state authority, organization, corporation, education) and not national identification. However, with the course of time, the top-level domains gave way to national thinking and turned into something like national flags. Although a national domain does not guarantee that a website server is physically located within boundaries of a certain country, this is a nominal indication of its belonging to a certain country. A user can speak (write in) Russian, but if he/she has a domain name .kz, it becomes clear that this person is not from Russia but from the sovereign republic of Kazakhstan.

The majority of the Internet users lived in English-speaking world and spoke English during the formative years of the Internet. Nevertheless, the Internet is becoming more and more multilingual. Today most of its users live in third-world countries where people do not speak English. The Russian language took the second place in the

popularity rating on the Internet leaving the German language slightly behind. This fact is confirmed by the language research of web content of the global network [W3Techs]. The English language takes the first place well ahead of others on the list of top Internet languages – 54.7% of all web pages and documents are written in English. Russian and German languages have 5.9 percentages, but the Russian-speaking segment of the web is slightly bigger.

The English language is not becoming the dominant language of international communication in online communications. The Internet Committee for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) made a decision to allow the registration of domain names in local languages. Now along with early .su and .ru one can meet a top-level domain name .рф. This process resembles the denial of first printers from using Roman script in books circulation. .ru domain became the most popular among national domains back in 2011, being behind only .com and .net domains. Besides constant increase of websites in .ru domain zone, .su domain zone is also growing as before. The Russian language remains the most popular in domain zones of former Soviet countries – Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and others.

Now a domain name plays an important symbolic role from the point of view of national identity, contributing to the understanding of "us" and "them". Furthermore, the growing popularity of search engines serves the strengthening of the national organization as an organizational search principle. The fact that Google has devised "national" search engines serves as proof that perception of the Internet as supranational space is not working anymore. It is clear that if location and language of search (and therefore geography and politics) did not influence results, then there would not be need in differentiated country-specific search engines.

The local platforms have a nominal meaning, as they also usually act as a national "gateway" on the Internet. "Google UK" and "Google Russia" have various national connotations. In fact, these connotations are so influential that there is no need to emphasize an actual country name, as users know that they will be automatically redirected to the website that is correct.

We should admit that localization of web content according to national identity has a pragmatic and an economic nature. If it was profitable to promote a website in English, then all web developers would speak English. But they often make two versions of a website – one in the international language of communication (which is mostly English) and another in a native language. At the same time an international version usually is incomplete and serves mostly for advertising purposes.

During national crises and wars the character of web content changes towards stronger patriotism. In such cases national passions run high, as, for instance, it was demonstrated during the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Internal differences in a country become less important, they are replaced by unambiguous declarations "who are we" and "who are they" in the spirit of banal nationalism. Military blogs, pictures of soldiers and tweets from a front line are brought to the forefront of public interest. The very Internet becomes a battlefield when hackers aim their attacks at the official websites of a country. Information warfare spreads over news portals which can post manipulative texts and pictures. National diasporas seek to use the Internet for their own purposes just as they once occupied post and telegraph offices in the first place.

Research conducted in Central Asia (Wei, C. Y., & Kolko, B. E.) show that though users are displeased with the dominance of English and Russian-speaking resources in the web, they mostly use those which language they understand. For the Uzbeks it is still the Russian language that allows them to create an account in "Odnoklassniki" or "VK". Therefore the Russian world spreads outwards Russia until then former Soviet republics use Russian during media consumption of TV and Internet content.

3. Conclusion

The globalization processes which existence is impossible to deny compete with the processes of regionalization that are not so visible and often disguised as banal nationalism. State authorities eventually began to control the Internet which originally appeared as uncontrollable and self-expanding network. Now the Internet reproduces the features of traditional media more and more, and joins national media system. The contribution of new media to banal nationalism does not depend on the ritual consumption of content, and it should be taken into account while

examining media discourse. It is essential to examine the difference in discourses of countries with high and low penetration rates of the Internet.

References

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