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Web Publishing Revisited – A Case Study of Literary Websites in Russia

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Abstract

The concept of web publishing has been widely discussed in IS research literature since the WWW emerged. The discussion in various publications often revolves around the issues of business success and profitability, web design, and effective content presentation. This paper is a study of one of the “unknown” segments of the Internet - a family of websites publishing literary works in the Russian language. We demonstrate that the innovative model adopted by site owners in building the relationships with the site customers, and the information technology selected for the sites can play a crucial role in the success of a web-based venture. Our analysis is based on the concepts of virtual community and socio-technical interaction. We discuss the contribution of this case not only to the innovative use of the Web-based business models, but also to the new forms of literary life and national culture. Some of the concepts, principles and practices, adopted on those sites may be of interest to the Internet developers and communities worldwide.

Key words

Virtual community, socio-technical interaction, web publishing, interactivity, case study.

Introduction

The concept of web publishing has been widely discussed in IS research literature since the WWW emerged. The discussion often revolves around the issues of business success and profitability, web design, and effective content presentation. At the same time, the roles and relationships of the authors and the publishers seem to be constructed in the most traditional way. The authors submit their work to the publisher, and any further process is out of the author's control.

This paper is a study of one of the “unknown” segments of the Internet - websites publishing literary works in the Russian language. Firstly, we demonstrate that an innovative model adopted by site owners affects not only the publication process and content presentation, but also radically changes the relationships with the site customers. Secondly, we show how the

information technology, selected for the sites, supports the purpose of the venture and plays a crucial role in turning these sites into a significant cultural phenomenon with a unique creative atmosphere. Thirdly, we discuss the contribution of this case not only to the innovative use of the Web-based business models, but also to the new forms of literary life and national culture.

Our analysis is based on the concepts of virtual community and socio-technical interaction. For the purposes of this analysis we have utilised a number of the virtual community formation frameworks presented in IS, CMC, and social science literature, with the Rayport & Jarowsky (2001) framework as a basis.

Some of the concepts, principles and practices, adopted on those sites may be of interest to the Internet developers and communities worldwide.

Research Methodology

This is a case study based on the interpretative or phenomenological approach. In accordance with interpretative research philosophy, the aim of our study is not to measure or find causal explanations of the observed patterns, but rather emphasise the role of the individual experience, different meanings associated with this experience, to understand and explain a phenomenon as holistic and socially constructed.

Our research framework includes a brief review of the key facets of virtual communities as discussed by academics and practitioners. Then we investigate the process of community building in the considered case, business model employed by the project owners, aims of the project, and sources of value, as they are viewed by community members and the owners of the site. The analysis is completed with evaluation of the project success. This aspect of the research has been based on the review of literature on virtual communities, interviews with the community members, observations, and personal experiences, as well as on statistical analysis of available site-monitoring data.

The other aspect of our research utilises and extends the body of knowledge on the interaction of web-based technologies with human actors in the social construction processes. In the considered case, the use of specific web-base technologies plays an important role in the community building process. We show that fundamental democratic principles, which form the structural basis of this community, being successfully facilitated by particular technologies, have an immediate impact on the individuals, and also affect the societal change in the long term.

Virtual Community

Howard Rheingold (1998) defines *virtual communities* as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace”. Virtual communities are developing around affinities, shared interests, and common values. Creation of new forms of culture, building trust, knowledge, and experience sharing are at the core of successful community. The process of community building itself is important and crucial. It requires a self-organisation and takes time to maintain and sustain a valuable community life. Rayport & Jaworsky (2001) identify a number of elements important for community formation. They include cohesion, effectiveness, help, relationships, language, and self-regulation.

The early on-line communities were formed around social issues. Recently the word “community” has been introduced to business lexicon. More and more organisations make use of electronic networks and collaboration tools, and view virtual communications as means for capturing, transferring, and sharing knowledge among geographically dispersed groups of employees.

Three main directions can be clearly distinguished in academic and professional publications concerning online communities.

The first one deals with psychology and sociology of on-line behaviour and community development. Geyer (1996) notes that in the course of time, communication has become increasingly symbolic, and less “immediate” to such extent that contemporary society consists not of people, but of communications. At the same time, the enhanced community computing is viewed as compensation for eroding traditional community life (Schuler (1996)).

The second focuses on organisational forms, business and value creating aspects of virtual community. Cothrel & Williams (1999) present findings and lessons learned from their studies of a number of corporate online communities. One of the important questions is the value of virtual community. No doubt, community building aspect is becoming an important factor of business performance. Bressler & Grantham (2000) believe that a public corporation, in order to sustain itself, needs to change from being a piece of property owned by shareholders to being a community of citizens who come together to pursue a common purpose. At the same time, the greatest impact of community will come from the new forms of business culture, improved communications, enhanced trust, and a shift in political influences, as well as from effective learning and knowledge management, rather than from direct revenues. Reinhold (1999) suggests that it is unlikely a virtual community will become a profit-making business model in itself. On the other hand, Hagel III and Armstrong (1997) argue that in the commercial world, due to the shift of power from producers to customers, virtual communities have the potential to overturn many traditional business assumptions. Since the successful experience of the pioneers like Cisco and Amazon, the idea of generating a virtual community has become an ambition for many organisations. Nevertheless, online communities should be regarded as one of the most effective forms for not-for-profit on-line organisations.

The third one discusses the technology and tools, which facilitate interaction, communication, and community building processes. For example, Preece (2000) and Carroll et al. (2000) focus on community-oriented applications, which provide virtual counterparts to real-life activities and places. Gómez, (1998) notes that although there is much debate and speculation about the technology possibilities, there is a lack of literature describing or analysing concrete uses and meanings of CMC in virtual communities as part of civil society.

In this paper, we are considering the case of free publishing literary sites, which serve as a national resource and meeting place affecting both broader on-line and off-line cultural processes. In the following sections we discuss the community building process, organisational forms, sources of value, and the role of tools and technologies in the context of this particular community.

Overview of Online Literary Publishing Sites in Russia

Inter-cultural information flows, concerning the latest developments in different language based sub-sets of Internet, appears to be unidirectional. Normally, Internet developers and

customers of non-English speaking countries are very well aware of the current state of play in the English speaking world. They adopt cutting edge technologies introduced by leading providers and follow the most fashionable business models, directions and practices. In contrast, not very much is known, in the English-speaking world, about some of the niches of Internet being developed in languages other than English. Meanwhile, there are examples of such developments that do not particularly follow the pattern existing in the English speaking segment of the Internet. They are advanced and innovative in their own right, and their concepts, business model and practices could significantly contribute to the world-wide Internet culture if there were no linguistic barriers. One of the recent developments worthy of exploration is the Russian literary Internet.

There are currently many literary sites in the Russian language situated either on Russian servers or established by Russian migrants abroad. These sites adopt different operation models, which vary greatly in rules for filtering and accepting publications, membership and admission requirements, relationship building processes, and levels of interactivity. Table 1 has been constructed from an analysis of existing literary publishing websites and presents a summary of variations in operation rules.

Type of the site	Publication filtering rules	Membership requirements	Interactivity tools
Web book	Editorial board Moderation prior to publication	No membership required	No interactivity tools
On-line literary journals	Editorial board	No membership required	No interactivity
Virtual clubs	Peer refereeing process	Closed membership for authors, strict admission rules for new members.	No interactivity; or Limited interactivity tools
Combined publishing model	Moderation prior to publication	Open membership for authors only.	Limited interactivity tools
Literary on-line community	Moderation after publication	Open membership for authors and for readers willing to publish reviews.	Composite tools for comprehensive interactivity

Table 1. Variations in operation rules of online literary publishing websites.

We distinguish several substantially different segments of Russian web literary publishing, including: web books; virtual journals; virtual clubs; combined publishing models and interactive on-line communities.

Perhaps the most traditional approach is implemented in personal, thematic, historic and/or anthology *web books*, which are Internet-based equivalents of hard copy books. For example, “*The Poetry of Moscow University from Lomonosov to...*”¹ (www.poesis.guru.ru) is a result of a comprehensive research project on both professional and amateur poetry associated with the best and one of the oldest Russian universities. The authors-poets represented in this project belong to different generations of Moscow University graduates, academics and/or staff. Among them there are great poetry writers of the past, well known currently publishing authors, and relatively new names.

There are, however, a few considerable differences between hard copy and Internet book publications. A virtual book can be a living project, absorbing new contributions as soon as they are available, whereas in the case of hard copy such contributions have to wait for new editions or additional volumes/issues. Furthermore, well organised internet sites offer search by different keys and corresponding views. For example the above-mentioned Moscow University site allows, alphabetical, chronological and “by faculty” search of authors.

Many of the Russian literary sites are, by their nature, high quality *on-line literary journals* with editorial boards. They operate on the same principles as hard copy journals, media type being the only difference. Many well established hard copy literary journals have become present on the Internet as well. The on-line literary journals are well organised and linked to their common information resource (magazines.russ.ru), providing links to all member-journals’ contents as well as a dedicated search engine.

The third group of sites represent *virtual clubs*. The most distinguished feature of literary clubs is their closeness. They introduce principles and criteria that are the basis for admission. There are two kinds of virtual clubs: with no interactivity; and those, which support certain elements of interactivity.

One of the best known *virtual clubs with no interactivity* is “Babylon” (www.vavilon.ru). It was established by the authors of a hard copy literary almanac, which was published under the same name in mid-eighties and was one of the first attempts to utilise Gorbachev’s freedom of the press. Virtual clubs with no interactivity serve several purposes, such as facilitating visibility of the club, advertising events, and attracting new members. The web site of such a club is a virtual place for declaring mission statement, representing members’ personalities and samples of literary work as well as advertising real-life events (new book launches, literary concerts, etc).

Some recently established *virtual clubs* are also *supported by certain elements of interactivity*. One of the most recent is RUÊOMOS (rukomos.liter.ru). It was established by a dozen well known young poets (residing in Moscow). The most interesting fact about this club is that all of the founders initially had become established through their on-line publications.

In most aspects the described sites follow the tradition of physical publication process moved on-line, with introduction of limited interactivity elements. Such sites introduce principles and criteria that are the basis for admission. They require registration for publishing and/or reviewing; appoint editorial boards which filter publications and write thematic reviews.

¹ Michael Lomonosov, a scientist and a poet, was the founder and the first Rector of Moscow University from 1755.

The most serious limitations of all the models described so far are the “broadcasting” nature of a publication, no author’s control over publication process, and no opportunity for the authors to meet their readers on-line. Similar trends are typical for English-speaking literary sites on the Internet. They include web books, on-line journals, and other publishing web sites with moderation prior to publication and no comprehensive tools for interaction. The most advanced sites have Frequently Asked Questions area, and some allow personal email addresses on author’s pages for direct contact. (See, for example, www.poetry.com; www.lovepoetry.com). Interestingly, all the English speaking literary web sites have strict privacy policies, which exclude any facilitation of contacts between published authors and readers by the site owners.

At the same time, many literary sites in Russia have taken a radically new approach with a primary focus on building a *literary on-line community*, facilitating literary discourse, and social interaction. The primary aim of such sites is establishing *creative environment* rather than online publishing alone, and an interactive meeting place for authors as well as for readers.

The initiators of such internet projects believe that the 21st century literature will be created and will live on-line. (Kravchuk, 2002) The unique reason for the emergence of such innovative projects in the Russian Internet is that the appearance of the WWW and new on-line technologies has coincided with the collapse of communist regime. Radical changes in the Russian society call for changes in all societal structures, social and cultural processes.

The historic and cultural background of the literary community in the former communist countries, particularly in Russia, is a special reason for maintaining such a statement. For decades, the processes in literature, music, visual and performing arts were strictly centralised, regulated and controlled by so called “creative unions” supervised and funded by the Communist Party apparatus. After the collapse of the communist system, even though all the necessary political conditions for freedom of the press have been established, access to the publishing facilities, especially by younger authors, has not become easier. This process is known to be very competitive in the Western world as well. It has become even more difficult in Russia for a number of reasons. An already obsolete printing infrastructure has become overwhelmed with low quality commercial literature and advertising materials. Publishing resources, previously dedicated to quality literature, are still controlled, to some extent, by the old literary establishment.

At the same time there are well known advantages of Web publishing, which make on-line facilities especially attractive. There are no administrative barriers, and freedom of the press is virtually unlimited. Free-publishing literary sites serve young creative people as a substitute for the lacking access to traditional publishing facilities. WWW technologies are known as effective tools facilitating interactive environments. The Internet allows for immediate publication and immediate exchange of information. There is no waiting period before the next issue of a hard copy literary journal or before a book comes through the production process. The on-line reviewing of new pieces of literary work immediately follows publication, and feedback is received and replied to in real time.

The earliest attempt to establish a literary online community with social interaction is Samizdat.lib.ru (on-line since 1997). It is a part of “Moshkov’s library (lib.ru) that was started in late 80s for collecting digitalised literature, including ‘samizdat’ (the underground literature of the Soviet era). However, due to earlier start, this site is still based on an outdated information framework with “user unfriendly” interactivity tools. Therefore, potential users are attracted to newer sites, such as “National Literary Network” which is the case of further discussion.

The Case of Liter.Ru

The on-line venture considered in this paper includes the family of four literary sites: liter.ru; stih.ru; proza.ru; and hi-hi.ru. The sites are devoted, respectively to poetry, prose, and humor. Liter.ru is the framework and resource for all of the other three mentioned sites. All of them were established as private no-profit sites providing space for free publishing of literary work. The sites are sponsored by a commercial entity, and run predominantly by volunteers. They do not have any affiliation with the Ministry of Culture or other official structures. Nevertheless, in recognition of their importance to national culture, they call themselves The National Server of Modern Poetry (stih.ru), The National Server of Modern Prose (proza.ru), Journal of Humor (hi-hi.ru) and the National Literary Network (liter.ru). During the period of just two and a half years (in 2000-2002) the venture has grown to 559305 publications, 818049 reviews and 35589 authors (Aggregated on-line data from three sites – *www.stih.ru*, *www.proza.ru* and *www.hi-hi.ru* - accessed on 23 October 2002). These figures indicate a very high level of popularity, especially taking into account the fact that only about 5% of the 147 million population of Russia have access to the Internet. (*www.rambler.ru*, Accessed 1/09/2002)

Business Model

The National Literary Network (liter.ru) has been started in early 2000 as a non-profit organisation. In terms of revenue model, initially the project was entirely sponsored by a private person (a young prominent businessman) and later has embarked on a banner advertising as an additional source of revenue. The owners of the project do not plan to turn it into profit making enterprise. They rather revive the tradition of sponsoring creative arts by prominent businesspeople, interrupted during the communist times. Until most recently, all the hardware upgrades were also funded by the same private person. However, the latest upgrade was preceded by a public appeal, published on the front page of all the sites, for donations towards a new server.

The sites operate as follows: authors-members join the community, publish their works, participate in on-line literary competitions, in reviewing other authors' work, and reply to reviews – free of charge. The project includes a number of sub-projects in different literary genres (prose, poetry, parody and humour). Liter.ru is the meeting point of the other ones and serves as a news facility as well as the place where all the information resources can be found.

The management of the site is based mainly on self-regulation. This is possible due to a successfully implemented self-management model complemented by effective web-based tools. The project employs only one person – a Director and IT Manager who develops and maintains the IT resources. The rest of the work is conducted by volunteers and community members themselves.

The aims of the venture, as the owners declare them, include promoting creative atmosphere and facilitating creative environment, turning this family of sites into a significant cultural phenomenon, and collecting the “gold fund” of contemporary Russian literature. The site is in fact very popular among the Russian speaking Internet population for its unique creative atmosphere and variety of published works. Long-term plans include collecting a high quality contemporary digital library.

The sources of value for the community members are very diverse. Available professional resources, variety of publications, interactivity and interaction on the site attract people with different aims and interests. They include professional and amateur literary interests, access to an alternative publishing channel, informal professional help and support to amateur writers, exposure to wider audience, exchange with ideas on publications, learning, community life, and entertainment.

Rules, Ethical Norms, and Privacy Issues

Each registered user has a right to freely publish his or her literary work. The very process of publication does not take more than three minutes. As soon as a literary work is published it immediately becomes available to thousands of readers around the globe, without any economic, trade, customs and other restrictions that accompany hard copy editions.

Authors receive and reply to unsolicited reviews and are encouraged to request professional reviews by the editors of the site. Normally, the editors are the most reputable authors of the site, with the highest ratings, who may be also professional writers with a great deal of authority, recognized by the others. Such authors can be invited to become editors by the owners-managers of the site, and editors perform their duties as volunteers. Apart from reviewing literary works upon request, other editors' tasks are writing periodical reviews of the most interesting recent publications, nominating the best, in their opinion, publications of the week to be listed on the front page, and serve as judges of on-line literary competitions.

The site is opened for almost anyone who wishes to join. Nevertheless, privacy issues are observed in a basic form. All authors use registration nicknames, and their real personal details cannot be disclosed unless authors themselves publish them on their personal homepages. Direct contact with authors is maintained only via public discussion/review thread on their pages under each of the published works.

At the same time, as in any society, limited resources (ratings, nominations, and readers' attention) tempt some members to undertake unethical or "illegal" activities. They create "clones" writing favorable reviews on their own publications, and intensively emulate hits on their pages. Such activities as well as using abusive language cause adaptive development of self-regulatory measures, as severe as suspension or exclusion of misbehaving members.

Community Building Process

The analysis of the current situation on the considered web sites, using the above-mentioned concepts, gives an understanding that we are dealing with exactly the phenomenon of a virtual community. It is a large enough group of people pursuing common literary interests, as professionals or amateurs. They carry out their interest specific activities – publication, reviewing and discussions. They establish informal groups and associations within the community, by sharing a specific interest in particular genre or style, or simply appreciating each others work. Exercising the freedom of entry, authors of quite different writing skills, tastes and specific interests have joined the community. This has created inevitable stratification and relative isolation "by choice" of different groups. Crossing borders of those groups is always possible. However, people choose to read, review, and socialize with the members of their own informal group.

Most prominent authors enjoy recognition outside of the literary sites. They get published in hard copy literary journals and/or receive private sponsorship for publishing their books. Those books are sold in main stream bookshops, and the authors are invited to give prestigious public presentations. Meanwhile, for the majority of community members, there is no continuation or expansion of their literary activities beyond the virtual space. More surprising is how naturally competitive the virtual environment of literary sites has become. Members compete for ratings, reader numbers, and nominations, discuss factors affecting success and allege editors who propose unfair nominations. Those discussions clearly indicate, that, within the community there are interest groups and “parties”, including “loyalists” (supporting the site leadership) and dissidents.

Both the business model and community building process are not frozen. Rather they are being continuously developed by the management of the sites as well as by members of the community.

The most recent of such developments has been a utilization of previously introduced rating credit points as a kind of “internal currency”. Now those credit points can be spent for placing links from most visible common pages on the site to pieces of literary work, the authors may wish to broadly advertise within the community. As the number of such links available each day is limited, the authors are invited offer a particular number of credit points as bids for this service, as if they were participating in a blind auction. Surprisingly, rather stable “market prices” have been established after a few days of wild fluctuations in bidding offers at the introduction of this service. Members of the community are enabled to transfer credit points to each other. The management is also preparing a further development, where a “real” money value can be assigned to credit points, and real monetary accounts are established for members willing to pay for certain extra services.

Technology

The Information technology concept of the considered project is an important factor significantly contributing to its success. It includes well developed tools which in a way impersonate the processes carried out by different real-life players, e.g. technical managers, publication moderators, reviewers, nomination board, authors, and readers.

The literary works are stored and backed up on the electronic media in databases that are supposed to become “the gold fund of the electronic libraries of the future” (Kravchuk, 2002). Access to literary works, in these databases, is organised by different keys, such as author’s name, rating, classification of literary work (prose, story, novel, fantasy, love lyrics, philosophical lyrics, humor, parody, etc), and publication date. The system supports several kinds of ratings of authors and literary works, including: number of hits; number of returning readers; number of reviews written; number of reviews received, as well as an integrated rating based on a special formula. The front end includes tools for seamless interaction between readers and authors, search facilities, and numerous views.

The activities and processes, for which convenient tools are available, include publishing, interaction, governance and self-regulation, refereeing and nomination process, monitoring of site activities, and author related information. For example, authors can monitor information about their readers, reviews and commentaries which they receive and write, lists of new publications and authors on the site.

Fast growth of demand poses a problem: periodically access to the sites slows down, and the server becomes unreliable. On several occasions, due to the shortage of resources, large

pieces of data have been lost irreversibly. Periodical upgrade of the IT resources is required (once or twice a year).

Evaluation of Success

In this section we examine the significance of considered experience from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

From the theoretical perspective, this case can be viewed as an emergence of a network of associations (Actor Network Theory) due process.

According to the Actor Network Theory (ANT), due process is an active and critical process through which human and non-human actants (e.g. technical artefacts) are admitted (or not admitted) to existence as facts in a socio-technical collective (Latour, 1996; McMaster, 1998). The context of Actor Network Theory technology can be “any of the familiar components of information technology”, such as hardware or software, communication standards, or “can also be an idea, such as the object-oriented paradigm, and can also be a practice, such as regression testing” (McMaster et al, 1998). Technologies “are not diffused in the classical sense; instead, claims are translated and strengthened (or weakened) through the enrolment and inscriptions of additional human and non-human actants.”(McMaster et al, 1998)

The *translations* of actor network theory can therefore be viewed as *a trajectory of transformations* as the network lengthens across time and space. Each innovation along this trajectory can be seen as a *freeze frame*, which represents the inscription and capacities of a technology in single moments of time.

The case we consider in this paper is such *a freeze frame*, where innovative use of well-known technology in a specific context has redefined relationships within this context, and led to:

- formation of new meanings – network literature, publication as a dialogue, publication as a discourse, and publication as an interaction; (Ryan, 1999)
- new ways of content creation and literary forms - use of hypertext, text as a theatre, text as a masque, interactive co-authorship, e-poetry (Glazier, 2002; Johnson-Eilola, 1997);
- new communication forms - specific language which has become a cultural norm of communications on the site reflects individual understanding of personal space in virtuality, and shapes the community virtual space in order to meet needs of individual one-to-one relationships and form groups within the wider community;
- new organisational forms – community rules and governance, self-regulation mechanism, adaptation mechanism, customer incentives, and measures of individual performance.

From the practical perspective, on-line communities can be evaluated on the basis of the quality and usability of the web interface, value of the membership and content, effectiveness of community activities, interaction, and community aims achieved. A number of factors of success and corresponding metrics have been suggested for community evaluation process (Jagannathan et al 2002, Preece 2000, Cothrel, J. & Williams, R. L. 1999, Bressler & Grantham 2000). However, practical usage of those metrics is limited by the availability of data. We, consider, therefore, a few metrics that can be derived from the information

available on, and has been collected from the Russian portals providing performance monitoring services to participating sites. The most detailed publicly available data on literary sites is provided by the www.rambler.ru and www.mail.ru. In particular, these portals monitor ratings of participated sites by accumulating data on visitors, returning visitors, hits, as well on as the geographic location of visitors.

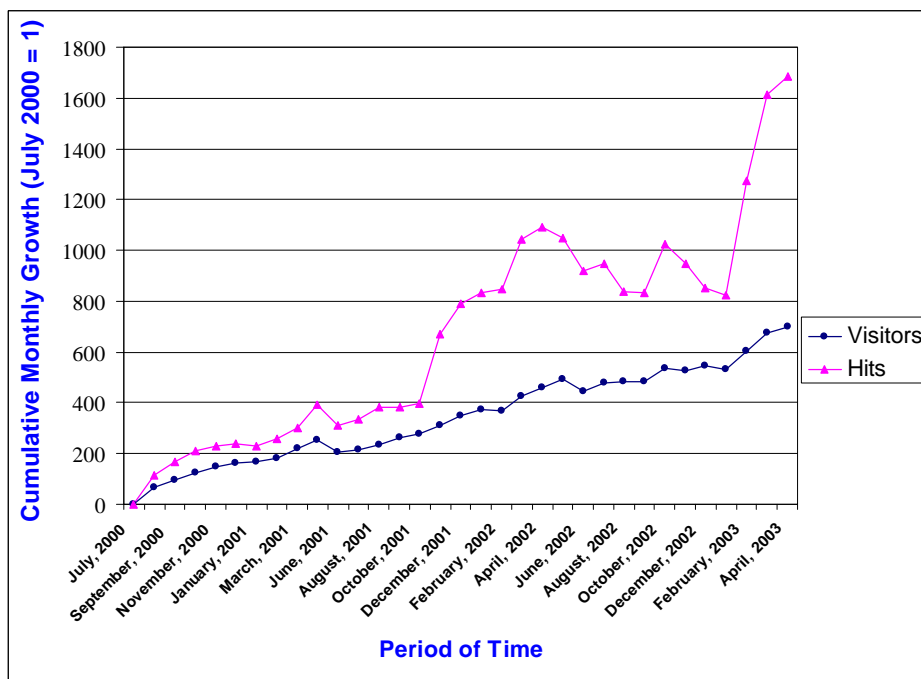


Figure 1. Growth of the Stihi.ru Site Audience - July 2000-April 2003

Let us consider a few metrics related the largest of the sites – the poetry site stihi.ru.

The monthly growth of traffic is demonstrated on Figure 1, using two metrics: number of visitors and number of hits. Since the launch of the monitoring process in July 2000, the number of visitors per months has increased about 700 times from 215 to almost 150000 in April, 2003. The growth of the number of hits has been faster – almost 1700 times and exceeded 5,000,000 in April, 2003. The outgrowing number of hits can be caused by dramatic growth of available content. Each visitor, either a member of the community, or an anonymous reader, needs more and more hits to trace the latest updates.

	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Number of visitors per day	2855	6607	9462	8310	830
Number of returning visitors per day	5782	3161	8943	4835	1077
Number of hits per day	98792	116692	215484	162186	23714
Number of hits per visitor per day	7.28	17.35	24.63	19.43	1.44
Proportion of returning visitors in total number of visitors per day (%)	55.88	44.12	100.00	58.28	12.29

Table 2 .Average Daily Visiting of stihi.ru

Table 2 demonstrates descriptive statistics based on daily observation data related to two of the most recent months (March-April, 2003). It gives an idea about, how many hits an average visitor actually needs to familiarise himself or herself with the site and to see recent updates. Another useful statistics is the average proportion of returning visitors, which is 58% in this case. It cannot be interpreted as the proportion of effective members of the community in the number of visitors. Rather it shows the quality of the content in terms of the integrated number of community members and loyal readers.

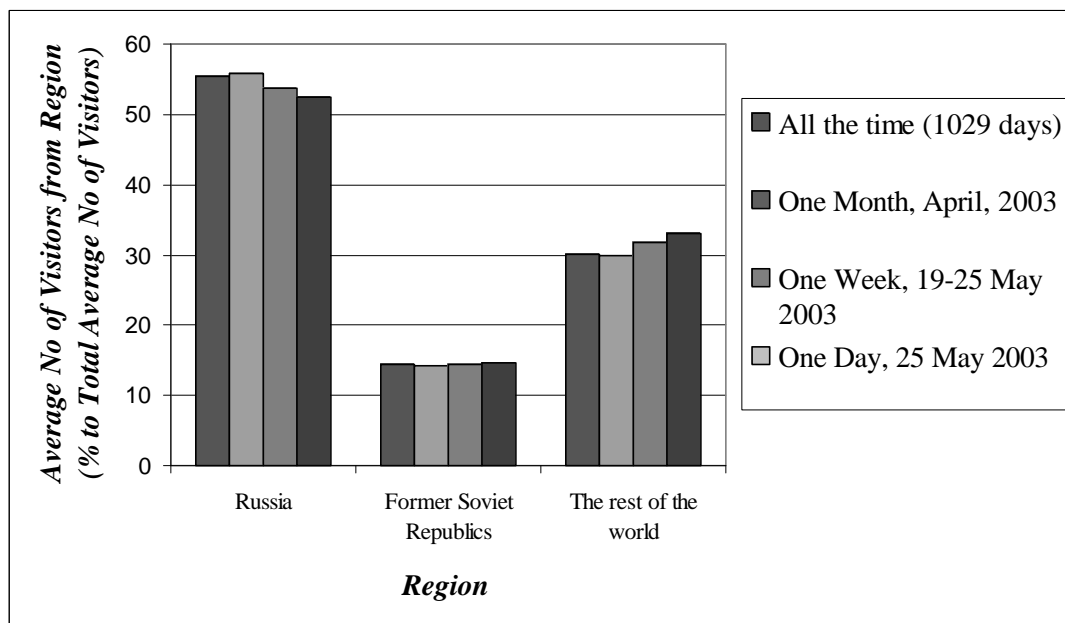


Figure 2. The Geography of Visitors of the stih.ru site.

Period of time	Ratings by Site Categories			No of hits
	Overall Russian Internet (No of Sites: 120,772)	Culture/Arts (No of Sites 11,123)	Literature (No of Sites: 1,641)	
Recent day (27 May 2003)	39	5	1	95,837
Recent Week	41	6	1	370,824
Recent Month	42	7	1	3,961,261

Table 3. Mail.ru Ratings of the Poetry Site sthi.ru

The geography of the membership and audience is shown on Figure 2. The visitors are attracted from all over the world. The proportions of visitors from Russia, other former Soviet republics and from the rest of the world seem to have stabilised and are not very much

different measured for different periods of time. The majority of visitors access the site from Russia and former Soviet republics. The data also demonstrates a very strong presence of the Russian speaking expatriates from abroad, compared to their proportion in the total Russian-speaking population. This can be partially explained by higher availability of computers and internet connections in the countries designated by most Russian-speaking migrants. Another reason is relatively high average social status of emigrants compared to the broader population of Russia and former Soviet republics.

In addition, the overall ratings of the site stihi.ru, with relation to different site categories, are shown in Table 3. For quite some time, stihi.ru site alone, has rated No 1, by the number of hits, among other literary sites of the Russian Internet.

Conclusion

The Russian virtual literary communities appear to be quite a new phenomenon, positively affecting some aspects of cultural development of a recently established post-communist democracy. The virtual communities facilitate and accelerate the development of young talented writers. On-line processes, with no distance or time consuming hard copy publishing technologies, allow for very efficient creative environment benefiting both authors-members and visitors. In addition, the implemented communication model and web technologies conduce to the use of innovative literary forms. Authors and readers make comprehensive use of hypertext, and get involved in “collective writing” and literary discourse. The ability of web-based communications to reach the Russian speaking community worldwide leads to inclusion of immigrant communities in the “melting pot” of modern Russian literary process. The experience of Russian virtual literary communities may be useful for other cultures.

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