Wireless in Cyberia: Glocalization, Siberian Internet and Online Community

Natalia Sinitskaya

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Introduction: My Interest

- Challenge the notion of the 'global village': access to Internet Communications Technologies (ICT) is not ubiquitous around the globe
- Local contexts play a significant role in the distribution and use of ICT
- Research has recently started looking at social and cultural implications of digital technologies in post-socialist countries of Europe (Lengel, 2000; Marchart, 1998)
- How do countries that were traditionally disenfranchised in access to technology negotiate their experience with the new digital media?
- What role will these countries play in the global digital culture?

Context of the Study: Development of the ICT in Russia

- Internet access in Russia is growing at an explosive rate: 664% growth from 2000 to 2007

- Still, only 16.5% of the population have access to the Internet (compare with 67.5% in Canada)

- Internet boom is affecting primarily the major cities in the European part of Russia, the regions are lagging behind
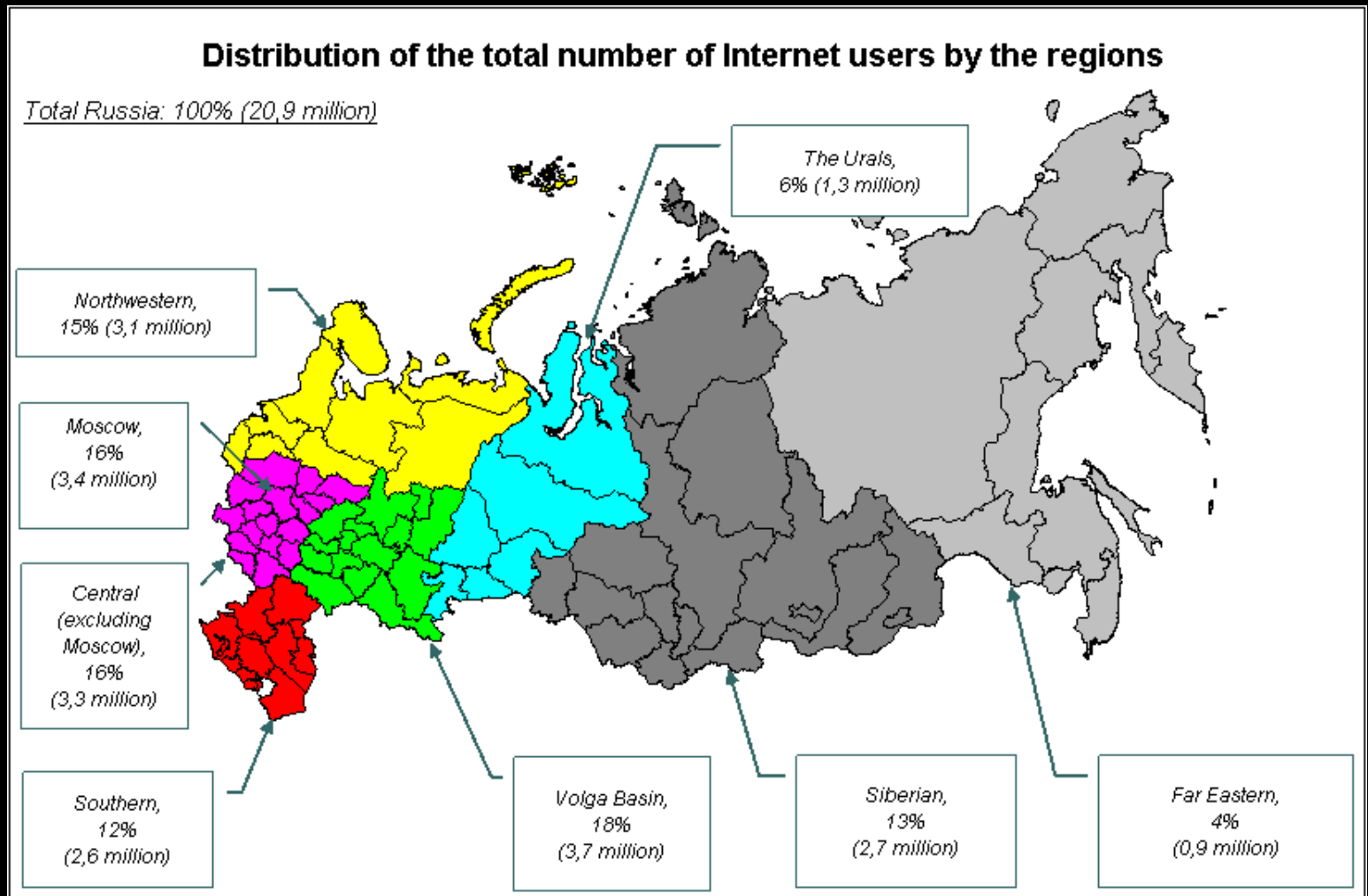
Internet Usage Statistics

Country	Population (2007 Est.)	Internet Users, Latest Data	% Population (Penetration)	Usage Growth (2000-2007)
Canada	32,440,970	21,900,000	67.5 %	9.4 %
China	1,317,431,495	132,000,000	10.0 %	486.7 %
France	61,350,009	30,837,592	50.3 %	262.8 %
Germany	82,509,367	50,616,207	61.3 %	110.9 %
India	1,129,667,528	40,000,000	3.5 %	700.0 %
Italy	59,546,696	30,763,848	51.7 %	133.1 %
Japan	128,646,345	86,300,000	67.1 %	83.3 %
Latvia	2,279,366	1,030,000	45.2 %	586.7 %
Romania	21,154,226	4,940,000	23.4 %	517.5 %
Russia	143,406,042	23,700,000	16.5 %	664.5 %
United Kingdom	60,363,602	37,600,000	62.3 %	144.2 %
United States	301,967,681	210,080,067	69.6 %	90.5 %

Internet Access in Regions (2005)

Distribution of the total number of Internet users by the regions

Total Russia: 100% (20,9 million)

The Urals,
6% (1,3 million)

Northwestern,
15% (3,1 million)

Moscow,
16%
(3,4 million)

Central
(excluding
Moscow),
16%
(3,3 million)

Southern,
12%
(2,6 million)

Volga Basin,
18%
(3,7 million)

Siberian,
13%
(2,7 million)

Far Eastern,
4%
(0,9 million)

Cyberia in Siberia?

- How does access to ICT shape the face of the Siberian Internet: who has access, how do they negotiate the new digital technologies?

- What place does the local digital culture play in the global digital culture and vice versa?

- How is glocalization - the multidimensional interplay between the global and the local processes - played out in local Internet communities?

Wireless in Cyberia: The Study

- Site: a web message board of a Siberian city of Novosibirsk located at http://forum.ngs.ru
- Part of the NGS web resource including a job portal, internet dating service, email and other services
- Established in 2001
- Started off with 19 topics
  now it has 18 categories and over 70 topics
- Over 23,000 registered users
- Most popular resource in 2006 among Novosibirsk Internet users
- 50% of all Internet users in Novosibirsk use the resource

Theoretical Framework: Glocalization

- Term 'glocalization' is modeled on Japanese *dochakuka*, literally global localization – global outlook adapted to local conditions

- Popularized by sociologist Robertson (1995) – incorporation of localities into the global, with localities in turn shaping the global

- Cyberglocalization (Morbey, 2006) – the interconnection of digital spaces with cultural and geographical spaces; adapting global cyber culture to local processes

- Hampton (2001) defines glocalization as the combination of global and local connectivity that may be facilitated by computer-mediated communication

Research Questions

- The study will investigate how a local Siberian city resource manifests itself on a global network, and how that contributes to the formation of a glocal online community.

Research questions:

1) What characterizes a glocal online community?
2) How is glocalization manifested in an online resource's architecture, language, topical organization?
3) How is the membership of a glocal community formed?
4) What is the relationship between the online and offline communities?

Research Methodology

- Virtual ethnographic method (Hine, 2000; Wilson, 2006)

- Defining a 'site'

- Seeking support of site moderators, participants; identifying candidates for in-depth interviews and focus groups

- Analysis of website architecture, topical organization; development and decay of threads:

- What are the underlying ideologies of the local web:

  – Does the forum's architecture represent the beliefs of what a Russian web user needs?

  – Is it modeled on a North American counterpart?

  – How is the selection of categories carried out?

Research Methodology (Cont.)

- Membership analysis: user demographics
  - Who uses the resource and how does it shape its architecture (discussion of cars, movies, places to go to – young professionals?);
  - Identifying local users from the city of Novosibirsk; and global users from outside of the city and primarily outside of the country; member's profiles
- Longitudinal analysis of messages:
  - How does the discussion shape the resource's local and global flavour: questions about where to buy things in the city to discussions of global politics;
- Online and offline communities:
  - "Mini-communities" analysis: How do they form? What is the online-offline relationship between communities? Are there purely online communities? E.g. Auto community

Research Methodology: Language

- Language: how do the trends of cyberimperialism (Marchart, 1998) clash with the subversive scripts of the local Internet?
    - discourse of the local (discussion of issues specific to the city) and the global (discussion of the global issues);
    - language use: borrowings from English Internet lingo:

        e.g. LOL - ЛОЛ, IMHO - ИМХО;
    - original Russian net lingo: emerged in cyberpunk websites, conveying obscene language through modified spelling; further evolved through blogs and message boards to reflect local Internet subcultures;
    - 'Speaking English' topic: the only topic where English is the accepted language of communication: what was the purpose of this thread? What are the topics discussed? Is it *de facto* 'English only'?

Research Methodology: Interviews

- Interviews (via email or MSN) and focus groups (via a threat in the forum):
- How do members view themselves in this online community?
- What does their participation bring socially?
- Do they perceive the resource as a glocal community?
  Administrators and moderators:
  - Discussion of their role in the resource;
  - Designing the website, selecting topics, moderation of threads;
  - How they initially perceived the forum – as a local or a global resource;
  - Has their perception changed over time?

Research Methodology: Interviews (Cont.)

- **<u>Local users</u>:**
  - How did they start using the resource?
  - Is there a community being formed online?
  - How is it different from a community offline?
  - Has their online participation resulted in offline community development?
  - How is the resource representative of the city of Novosibirsk?
- **<u>Global users</u>:**
  - How did they start using the resource;
  - Why and how do they use from outside of Novosibirsk;
  - How is the resource representative of the city of Novosibirsk?

Closing remarks

- Issues pertaining to ICT access and use in local cultures is of great importance
- How communities around the globe negotiate their access to and interaction with digital technologies contributes to the unique shape of digital culture
- Moving away from globalization and cyberimperialism to glocalization
- My research will help uncover the local trends in global Internet culture, in particular how a city with relatively low access to the Internet manages to be glocally connected through a web resource

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Questions