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VIRTUAL NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS:
LITERARY VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES IN RUSSIA
Gennadi Kazakevitch, Monash University, Australia Gennadi.Kazakevitch@Buseco.monash.edu.au
Luba Torlina, Deakin University, Australia lubat@deakin.edu.au

ABSTRACT
This paper is a study of one of the “unknown” segments of the Internet - non-profit ventures in the Russian language. Based on the understanding of the concept of virtual community we consider the family of free publishing literary websites. We discuss their experience to demonstrate their contribution not only to the national culture, but also to the creation of open and democratic society in the former communist world, and to new forms of literary life. Some of the innovative concepts, principles and practices, adopted on those sites may be of interest to the Internet developers and communities worldwide.

INTRODUCTION
Inter-cultural information flows, concerning the latest developments in different language based sub-sets of Internet, appears to be directed one way only. 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 contrary, not very much is known 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 world, that are advanced and innovative in their own right, and that could significantly contribute to the world-wide Internet culture if there were no linguistic barriers.

This paper is an attempt to study one of such “unknown” segments of Internet - non-profit ventures in the Russian language. The study uses a particular case of literary virtual communities. Based on the understanding of the concept of virtual community we consider the family of free publishing literary sites. We discuss their experience to demonstrate their contribution not only to the national culture, but also to the creation of open and democratic society in the former communist world, and their contribution to new forms of literary life. Some of the innovative concepts principles and practices, adopted on those sites may be of interest to the Internet developers and communities involved in analogous virtual community life in the English language.

In this paper we will discuss technical and social aspects of the selected model, and the factors which play important role in turning this family of sites into a significant cultural phenomenon with a unique creative atmosphere. 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 Rayport & Jarowsky (2001) framework as a basis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
For the purposes of this study we have adopted a case study research based on the interpretative or phenomenological approach. In accordance with interpretative research philosophy, the aim of our study was 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 aspects 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 key factors of success as they are viewed by community members and the owners of the site. This aspect of the research analysis has been based on the review of literature on virtual communities, interviews with the community members, observations, and personal experiences.

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 play an important role in the community building process. We show that the particular fundamental (democratic) principles, which form the structural basis of this community, being successfully facilitated by the particular technologies, have an immediate impact on the individuals, and also affect the societal change in the long term.
Finally, we discuss the difference from analogous on-line processes in the English speaking world, contribution of this case to the creative use of technology, to the body of knowledge, and experience which may be relevant to many communities worldwide.

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. Creating 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 in the geographically dispersed groups of employees.

Three main directions can be clearly distinguished in academic and professional publications on online communities. The first one is concerned 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, that 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, shift in political influences, effective learning and knowledge management rather then direct revenues. Reinhold (1999) argues that it is unlikely for virtual community to 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 non-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), 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 extremely little 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 really large open to the public family of literary sites, which serve as a national resource and meeting place affecting both broader on-line and off-line cultural processes.

ONLINE LITERARY PROCESS IN RUSSIA

There are currently rather many literary sites in the Russian language situated either on Russian severs or established by Russian migrants abroad. Many of them are, by their nature, high quality on-line literary journals with editorial boards. They are operated on the same principles as hard copy journals, and the only difference is the media. Others represent some features of virtual clubs, supported by certain elements of interactivity. The most distinguished feature of virtual clubs is their closeness. They introduce principles and criteria that are the basis for admission. (The most recent such a creation is RUKOMOS (http://rukomas.liter.ru, accessed 23/10/2002), established by a dozen of already well known poets. There are also literary sites that combine features of on line journal (filtering of publications) and comprehensive interactivity.

In contrary to English-speaking literary sites on the Internet, which in most aspects follow the tradition of physical publication process moved on-line, 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 initiators of such internet projects believe that the 21st century literature will be created and will live on-line. (Kravchuk, 2002) 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. We know that it is a very competitive process in the Western world as well. It has become even more difficult in Russia for a number of reasons. Already obsolete printing infrastructure has become overwhelmed by low quality commercial literature and advertising materials. Publishing resources, previously dedicated to quality literature, are still controlled, to some extend, by the old literary establishment.

Such conditions make the on-line facilities especially attractive. Internet allows for immediate exchange of information and immediate publication. There is no waiting period before the next issue of a hard copy literary journal or before a book comes though the production process. There are no administrative barriers, and freedom of the press is virtually unlimited. The on-line reviewing of new pieces of literary work immediately follows publication, and feedback is received and replied to in the real time mode.

THE CASE OF THE RUSSIAN LITERARY NETWORK

The on-line venture considered in the paper includes the family of four literary sites stihi.ru, proza.ru, hi-hi.ru, and liter.ru. The sites are devoted, respectively to poetry, prose, and humor. Liter.ru is the meeting point of earlier three ones and serves as a news facility as well as the place where all the information about their literary competitions is published. Even though the sites do not have any official status, are sponsored by a commercial entity, and run predominantly by volunteers, they call themselves The National Server of Modern Poetry (stihi.ru), The National Server of Modern Prose (proza.ru), Journal of Humor (hi-hi.ru) and the National Literary Network (liter.ru). The latter one is the framework and resource for all of the above mentioned sites. All of them were established as private no-profit sites providing space for free publishing of literary work.

The venture has been started in early 2000. Initially it was entirely sponsored by a private person (a young prominent businessman) and at a later stage has embarked on a banner advertising program as an additional source of revenue. 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. During the period of just two years and a half the venture has grown to 559305 publications, 818049 reviews and 35589 authors (Aggregated on-line data from three sites – www.stihi.ru, www.proza.ru and www.hi-hi.ru - accessed on 23 October 2002). Compare this to the fact, that not more than 5% of the 147 million population of Russia have access to Internet. (www.rambler.ru, Accessed 1/09/2002)

Each registered user has a right to freely publish his or her 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 all economic, trade, customs and other restrictions that accompany hard copy editions. The literary works are stored and backed up on the electronic media in sophisticated databases that are supposed to become “the gold fund of the electronic libraries of the future” (Kravchuk, 2002). Access to authors’ literary works, in these databases, is organised by different keys, such as authors names, 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 calculated using a special formula.

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.

Analysis of the current situation on the considered web site, using above mentioned concepts, gives an understanding that we are dealing exactly with the phenomenon of 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 stile, 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 boarders of those groups is always possible. However, people choose to read, review, and socialize with the members of their own informal group.
The 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, the books are sold in mainstream bookshops, and they 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. The more surprising is, how naturally competitive is the virtual environment of literary sites. Members compete for nominations, ratings, reader numbers, and nominations, discuss factors affecting success and allege editors for would be unfair nominations. Those discussions clearly indicate, that, within the community there are virtual interest groups and “parties”, including “loyalists” (supporting the site leadership) and dissidents.

At the same time, like in any society, limited resources (ratings, nominations, and readers’ attention) tempt some members to undertake “illegal” activities. They create “clones” writing favorable reviews on their own literary works, intensively emulate hits of their pages. Such activities as using abusive language against fellow members cause adaptive development of self-regulatory measures, up to suspension or exclusion of misbehaving members.

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 development of young talented writers. The on-line processes, with no distances or time consuming hard copy publishing technologies, allow for very efficient creative environment benefiting both authors-members and visitors. In conclusion, the unique experience of Russian virtual literary communities may be useful for other cultures.

REFERENCES


