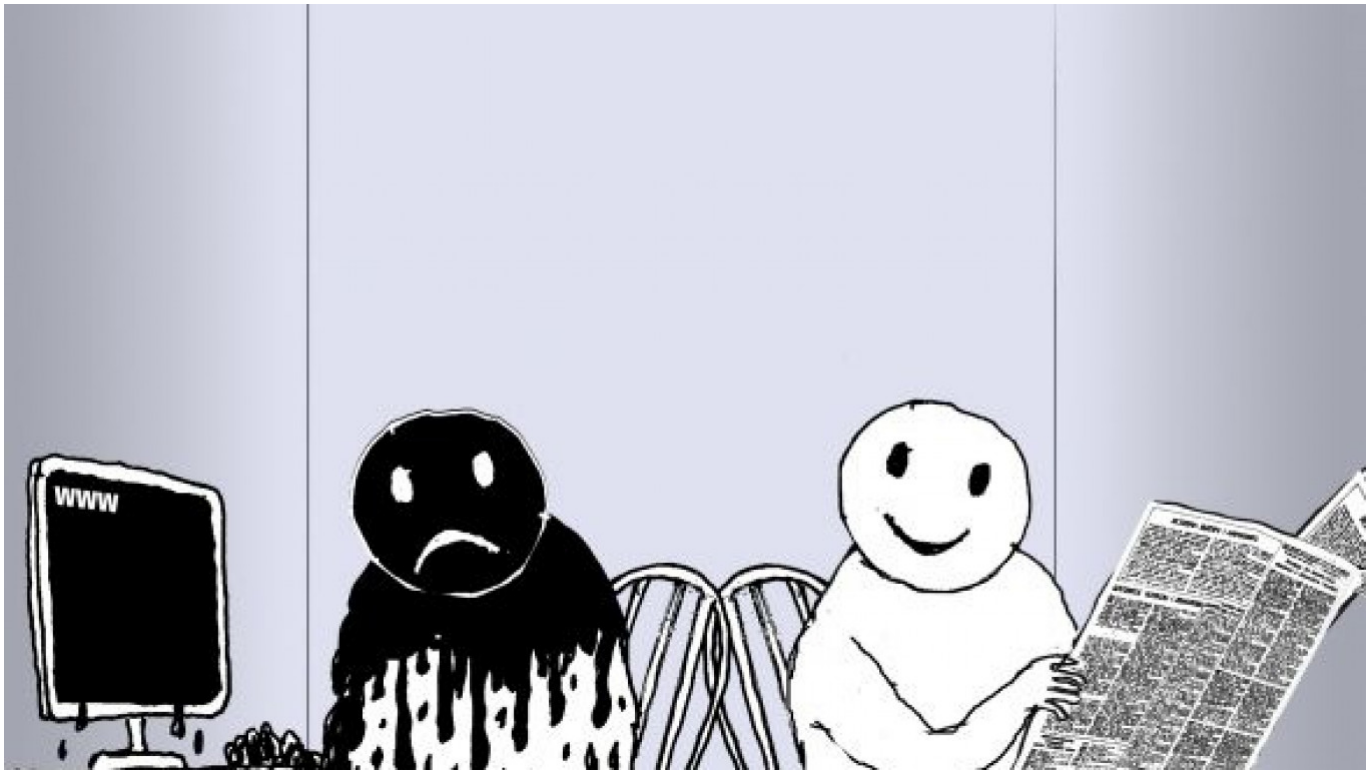
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Blogs Are Harmful to Your Health

By Victor Davidoff

August 22, 2010



Everyone over the age of 40 has a good collection of failed doomsday prophecies. One of the most recent is that the Internet &mdash especially Web 2.0 &mdash will kill newspapers.

This prediction isn't so far-fetched. The ritual of reading the morning newspaper over a cup of coffee has long become extinct, and now we rush to our computer screens instead. Web 2.0 is a great source of information, even better than conventional news services. In Russia, it's virtually the only way to keep informed and definitely the best way to get a sense of people's reaction to the news. All you need is an extended friend list in LiveJournal, and every time something happens you'll get news and reaction faster than the wire services. And when there's a whiff of scandal, news travels at lightning speed.

Some scandals are imported. For example, ethnic Russian bloggers in Ukraine were infuriated by a series of television videos released by one of the channels in commemoration of Ukrainian Independence Day. Each of the 10 videos gave a portrait of one of the ethnic groups populating Ukraine. "Armenians are working," complained one of the bloggers. "Jews

are at school, but Russians ... "

So what were the Russians doing? An old, bearded man with the look of a retired sea captain woke up and poured himself a big glass of pickle brine, a favorite Russian remedy for a hangover. Then his son arrived with an accordion and a group of pretty young women, and they all sang the Ukrainian national anthem. Judging by the video, Russians are the happiest people in Ukraine. What's the problem?

Bloggers by definition are known for concentrating on the negative, but Russia's political bloggers are some of most unhappy people in the world. Bloggers who support United Russia got very upset with LiveJournal user doctor_liza &mdash or Dr. Yelizaveta Glinka, who is actually a Russian mini-version of Doctors Without Borders. Several years ago, she set up a charitable organization that provides medical assistance to homeless people and terminally ill patients. During the recent fires that swept Russia, Dr. Liza was one of the first to collect aid and to distribute it to homeless victims.

When fires became a hot political issue, United Russia asked Dr. Liza for a comment. She refused to talk and gave no reason for doing so.

Every person has a right to remain silent before the media. Even Russians know this version of the Miranda rights. It's not clear why Dr. Liza didn't want to speak to United Russia. Perhaps she was simply too busy. Or perhaps she didn't like the clumsy attempts of United Russia to portray itself as volunteer corps battling raging forest fires. One of its regional branches posted a photo of United Russia volunteers supposedly extinguishing a fire. It took bloggers just a few hours to declare that the original photo was actually taken two years ago, and then wisps of smoke had been photoshopped in.

In any case, United Russia was upset by Dr. Liza's snub and retaliated in full force. On its site, the party posted a humiliating photoshopped image of Dr. Liza with her mouth shut by an industrial-sized zipper. Then a squad of its supporters accused her of every mortal sin. The most far-

fetched accusation came from well-known political analyst Mikhail Leontyev, notorious for his Cold War mentality. He said: "It might not have been Dr. Liza's personal choice not to comment. She might have been ordered not to speak for political considerations."

Thank you, Misha. You opened our eyes. Before, we all thought that Dr. Liza was a philanthropist and great volunteer organizer. Now we know that she is actually an agent of unnamed &mdash but probably foreign &mdash forces of evil.

And here we have the main peculiarity of surfing the Russian political blogosphere: No matter what links you follow, in two hours you get to some wacky Elvis-is-alive and Jews-rule-the-world post.

When you hit that post, it's a sign from above that it is time to shut down the computer and get a second cup of coffee along with a good old, politically correct and mentally stable newspaper. No, we won't let newspapers die. We need them. They are good for our health.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist.

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