

29 February 2012 BBC

LiveJournal: Russia's unlikely internet giant

By Robert Greenall
BBC News



As Russia prepares to elect a new president this weekend, voters are more fired up than they have been for a decade. It's partly due to an internet revolution that has challenged the state's power to control public opinion - and to the blogging platform LiveJournal.

A month before the election, a liberal opposition group carried out a brazen stunt, hanging a massive anti-Putin banner across the river from the Kremlin. It showed the prime minister's face crossed out, and the words "Putin, leave".

The banner was hastily removed, but photos of the action reached millions of Russians via the blog of Ilya Yashin, the group's leader and one of a small army of opposition activists currently spreading their word through the Russian blogosphere.

Accounts on LiveJournal



Source: LiveJournal (28 Feb 2012)

In a country with tightly controlled TV and few independent newspapers and radio stations, the internet is a vital space for alternative opinion. Almost all of it appears on the blogging platform LiveJournal, known in Russian as Zhivoy Zhurnal, or simply ZheZhe.

Set up by US developer Brad Fitzpatrick in 1998, as a way to communicate online with his friends, LiveJournal - complete with its mascot "Frank the goat" - may seem at first sight a strange medium for Russia's new-found political vibrancy.

It's not in anyone's interests either business or political to put any pressure on the internet - it has always been an island of freedom and it will remain so"

Anton Merkurov
Independent web expert and consultant

But Russians have made LiveJournal their own, turning what is in the West a relatively obscure and nowadays rather dated platform into a huge, seething mass of political anger, colourful prose and clever

repartee.

It all started by accident.

Roman Leibov, a Slavic literature lecturer at Tartu University in Estonia and the first Russian to start writing on LiveJournal, said he came to it via a link on a forum in 2001.

"First attempt at writing. Let's try it in Russian... how funny!" was his first entry.

"I liked it because there had been a demand for something like this for a long time... and I got involved in it quite quickly and started actively showing it to my friends," he told the BBC.

Russian blogosphere researcher Eugene Gorny, another early adopter who joined two months after Mr Leibov, said they were really just playing around.

"At the time we didn't think of ourselves as pioneers, we were just enjoying ourselves," he said.

Even at this early stage, there was a difference between the Russian and American parts of LiveJournal, with Americans using it mainly for diaries rather than for interaction.

The Russians, meanwhile, were creating a community. For them it felt more like a social network.

Russian LiveJournal

5,791,138 users and 171,915 communities using the Cyrillic alphabet

Average user is 25-year-old male graduate living in Moscow

Most popular interest is "music", followed by "photo", "movie", "book", "travel", "psychology", "internet", "sea", "love", "sex" and "cats"

Most popular blogs as of May 2011 were tema (more than 1.9 million comments) and drugoi (more than 1.6 million)

200 millionth post registered in November 2010

Source: SUP media

"They started showing it to their friends and then the nucleus appeared of an initial online community," says Mr Leibov. "It was genuinely the first in that medium of diaries and social networks simultaneously."

Newcomers often started as readers of other blogs but soon began writing their own, he adds.

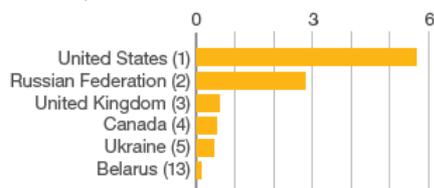
ZheZhe soon became a plaything of an elite group of Russian internet professionals. Many of them were journalists who publicised the platform further and took it to a still wider readership - it seemed to be fulfilling a basic need in Russian society.

"If there hadn't been ZheZhe, there would have been something else," says Oleg Kashin, a reporter at the newspaper Kommersant, who has also blogged with LiveJournal for 10 years.

It became what Mr Gorny describes as "the most fashionable address on the web", and even a generic term for blog in Russian. By the mid-noughties, 44% of Russian bloggers used it.

Top countries using LiveJournal

Accounts, millions



Source: LiveJournal

Analysts say there are a number of reasons why LiveJournal became so popular and permanent among

Russians.

Its servers were in the US - at a time when the Russian government was tightening the screw on private media, this was seen as a guarantee of freedom of speech

It was devised as a multi-language environment, and by 2004 its interface was thought to have been translated into more than 30 languages

It fits well into the Russian mentality, which values friendships and informal networks

Being established long before any possible competition gave it a natural advantage

Transferring blogs to a new platform is relatively easy, but LiveJournal has social network elements which are very platform-specific so leaving it can be problematic

In 2006, though, many Russian users' faith in LiveJournal was shaken.

The Russian-language pages were licensed to the Russian company SUP media, founded by US entrepreneur Andrew Paulson and a Russian banker thought to be close to the Kremlin, Alexander Mamut. Just over a year later, SUP bought LiveJournal.



LiveJournal members embody the spirit of passionate individual expression - we are continually grateful to be a part of your daily life"

2012 "State of the Goat" address to LiveJournal members

It was the largest-ever Russian takeover of a US internet company, with media reports saying SUP paid about \$30m (£18.8m) for the privilege.

Bloggers responded with outrage, suggesting the Russian government was trying to crack down on LiveJournal ahead of the March 2008 presidential elections.

A blogger with the handle "halph" wrote that the Kremlin had "something to fear" from LiveJournal, "the only platform for free speech in Russia".

"There was a wave of fear," says John Kelly, one of the authors of Harvard University's 2010 Berkman Report on the Russian blogosphere.

"There was a lot of speculation at the time that everyone was going to defect and go to other platforms - it didn't happen."

Also, LiveJournal's new owners had seen a business opportunity, in a rapidly growing Russian internet market. Apparently they had no intention of curbing bloggers' passions.

And even if they wanted to, they could not, maintains Anton Nossik, currently media director at SUP and himself a long-time LiveJournal blogger. The platform is hosted by a separate California-based company called LiveJournal Inc, set up after the deal.

"If a blog has a Russian hosting, police can check up on the blogger," Nossik says. But if someone has a blog on LiveJournal, the Russian authorities have no way of getting to them other than approaching their counterparts in Sacramento. "The typical answer from the state of California is: 'No can do'."

By March 2009, ZheZhe had a monthly audience of 8.7 million, according to global market research specialists TNS.

But with the decade coming to a close, LiveJournal was no longer the only game in town. It faced rivalry from blogging platforms like LiveInternet, and perhaps more importantly from social networking sites - both Facebook itself and vKontakte, a Russian site closely modelled on Facebook.

Crackdown coming?

With Russia's internet space (Runet) virtually free of censorship or government control, there has been talk for years about some attempt being made to curb it. Now elections have galvanised opponents of the regime via the web, analysts say the authorities have severely underestimated the power of social media in a country where TV has long been king.

Some see a crackdown after the election as virtually inevitable. But few believe such curbs could have more than partial success - they say there's no question of the genie going back in the bottle. Russia is not China, which created an internet framework it could easily control. Runet evolved in the liberal political climate of the late 1990s, and does not easily lend itself to interference from above.

It could be that jailing bloggers is the only way to stop them speaking out. But even in countries like Iran where this has been tried, the blogosphere remains an active space with all kinds of dissent.

Independent web expert and consultant Anton Merkurov does not see this as direct competition, though.

"[LiveJournal] is not a social network in the same way that Facebook etc are... LiveInternet may be popular like LiveJournal but it's for a very young audience," he says.

He adds that there are about 10 stand-alone blogs with media influence - and the vast majority are on ZheZhe. Research by John Kelly's social network analysis company Morningside Analytics has found that 93% of election-related blogs active over the last six months are on LiveJournal.

Nevertheless, in the first eight months of 2011, according to market researchers Comscore, the number of unique users on LiveJournal worldwide fell by 8.2 million to 27.7 million compared with the previous year - though in Russia, the decline was not so steep.

Bloggers from across the political spectrum have come to LiveJournal as a way to put their messages across. In April 2011, **President Dmitry Medvedev started his own blog**, viewable both on the Kremlin website and on LiveJournal.

"If you're not in ZheZhe, it's not guaranteed that anyone's going to read what you write... It's a place where it's easy to get together with people," says Mr Gorny.

But for the Russian establishment, the informal, wild and uncontrollable world of ZheZhe can be a double-edged sword, with state officials vulnerable to ambush.

Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov made his debut in the blogosphere in October 2009.

"Greetings, respected bloggers and all readers of my journal," began his rather pompous message.

Immediately, he was compared by users to elderly apparatchiks delivering speeches at Communist Party congresses in the old days.

Countries that have blocked LiveJournal

China - for 2009 Tiananmen anniversary

Turkmenistan - since 2009

Kazakhstan - 2008-10 for hosting blog by Rakhat Aliyev, disgraced son-in-law of President Nazarbayev

Kazakhstan - 2011, for "propagating terrorism and religious extremism", including during recent unrest in the oil workers' town of Zhanaozen

"Err, Borya, this is the internet. We can tell you to get lost here," wrote a user by the name of "radulova".

Although opposition bloggers can also come under attack here too, they tend to feel more comfortable about expressing themselves.

Alexey Navalny - one of the figureheads of the current protest movement - rose to fame as a campaigner against corruption, launching online campaigns that resulted in hundreds of complaints being sent to watchdogs and investigators.

"For me, there are no opportunities to publish materials about corruption in, say, [state gas company] Gazprom or [oil company] Transneft," he told [the New York Times](#) last year.

"Through LiveJournal, I can bring this information to a few million people, which is comparable to a television audience."

Oleg Kashin has also become famous for his muscular attacks on the powers-that-be, so when he was beaten almost to death with metal bars outside his front door in 2010 there was an immediate wave of online outrage. News of the incident spread across the Russian internet within hours, and a demonstration was rapidly organised in central Moscow. Many of the participants were internet users with no history of street protest.

"I was surprised by the scale of the reaction," he says.

So it was natural for ZheZhe to become a focal point of activity when last December political passions became inflamed during and after parliamentary elections, which the opposition claims were rigged.

An opposition rally on 5 December was ignored by the mainstream media but actively discussed in the blogosphere. And when bloggers Mr Navalny and Ilya Yashin were arrested on 5 December, a live stream outside the police station in the middle of the night attracted 3,700 users.

Unlike some other countries, Russia has never made any attempt to block LiveJournal - perhaps because it would alienate too many internet users.

"We know based on technical testing... that Russia does not technically filter the internet, so I would not expect a Chinese or Kazakh style approach to Internet control," says Bruce Etling, director of the Internet and Democracy Project at the Berkman Center.

"It seems unlikely that they will start to do so in the near future, since the political costs of doing so are significant."

Famous Russian LiveJournal bloggers

President Medvedev

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov

Mikhail Prokhorov, billionaire and presidential candidate

Tatyana Yumasheva, daughter of former President Yeltsin

Moscow sculptor Zurab Tsereteli

Boris Akunin, author of novels featuring the detective Erast Fandorin, and now opposition activist

Mr Merkurov agrees. "It's not in anyone's interests, either business or political, to put any pressure on the internet," he says.

"It has always been an island of freedom and it will remain so."

But a number of DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks on LiveJournal, and on some independent media, at sensitive moments suggest someone would like to close it if they could.

Attacks in March-April 2011 led Mr Medvedev to personally order the police to investigate, describing them as "outrageous and illegal". LiveJournal went down again just before the December elections.

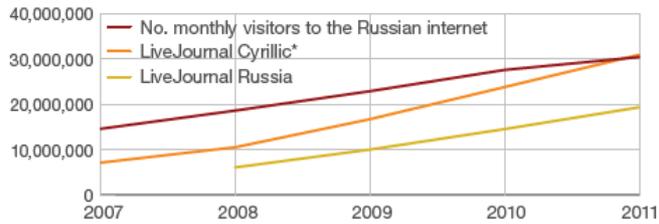
SUP development director Ilya Dronov wrote in his blog of the April attack: "The attack was directed at the service itself. Someone very much wants LiveJournal to cease to exist as a platform.

"The question now is whether we will succumb or not. This is war, and, alas, will not be without casualties."

So can LiveJournal survive, or will further attacks send its users elsewhere? It lost its monopoly on Russian blogs long ago, and younger internet users are choosing Facebook or vKontakte in droves.

How LiveJournal has grown in popularity

Unique users



*includes Russian speakers outside Russia, also possibly other languages such as Ukrainian, Bulgarian etc

Source: SUP Media

"It's a problem, of course, because people need to publish immediately, and if a service doesn't work right now the user switches to another window or browser, to Facebook, Twitter or whatever," says Merkurov.

According to a [2010 Berkman Center report on DDoS attacks](#), the bigger hosting sites are much better defended against this kind of attack.

However, Anton Nossik believes LiveJournal will weather the attacks, saying it has the "best DDoS protection in the world", with "hundreds of thousands of dollars put into decoys".

"They failed miserably to shut down LiveJournal on election day, the day before and the day after," he says.

It appears there is life in the old goat yet. A few weeks ago, LiveJournal [unveiled a new initiative called LJ Media](#), a social publishing group set up to turn selected LiveJournal communities into media sites - like online newspapers - and thereby try to bring its extensive content to a wider public.

No-one on vKontakte or Facebook has written 10 pages of text - on ZheZhe it's easy"

Eugene Gorny
Blogosphere researcher

And it still has an appeal - especially among older bloggers - which doesn't seem to be fading. At least not yet. A breakdown of users internationally shows a site still popular with people in their 20s.

"It survives simply because people are conservative, because that community which was created at the beginning of the century from quite interesting people is still there, they're still writing," says Roman Leibov.

"They may complain about technical imperfections, changes in the rules of the game. They may start on Twitter, then they transfer their tweets to LiveJournal."

He explains that, as a writer and lover of literature, it is important for him to have a platform where his and other people's work can be preserved.

"I'm bewildered by Facebook... how can a service exist where people say certain words, and those words disappear?" he wonders.

"No-one on vKontakte or Facebook has written 10 pages of text. On ZheZhe it's easy to publish," adds Eugene Gorny.

"Those things are not for writers. ZheZhe is very convenient for people who have something to say."