

Developing Cultural Literacy Through Social Media in the Russian Language Classroom

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Introduction

For L2 students of Russian engaging with Russian language materials outside of the classroom is often daunting. Simply typing in Cyrillic is a challenge, not to mention the difficulty of searching for and navigating content of interest. Moreover, while the textbooks that the Berkeley Slavic Department uses in Russian 1-4 (e.g. *Mezhdunami* and *Welcome Back!*) provide a solid background in grammar, they offer less in the way of contemporary culture and authentic materials.¹ My BLC project supplements the language curriculum and encourages sustained contact with contemporary Russian language and culture by providing students with a structured point of entry to explore Russian language materials on social media.

Social media in the classroom is nothing new. Many articles have been written on how to integrate social media for communicative learning models, having students blog, find pen-pals, or interact with classmates in the target language. My goal here though is to engage with social media in the classroom as a model of contemporary culture. As Richard Kern explains in *Language Literacy and Technology*, “literacy is more than the ability to interpret written signs or produce well-formed sentences but the ability to engage in social practices involving texts and the discourses and technologies to which those texts are connected”.² To produce literate students, we need to teach them how to engage in relevant social practices, including the use of social media. Social networks allow students to engage with the language in a dynamic dialogic

¹ Lynne deBenedette, et. Al. *Mezhdunami*. <http://www.mezhdunami.org>. 2017. // Irina Dolgova and Cynthia Martin, *Welcome Back!* (Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2009).

² Richard Kern, *Language Literacy and Technology* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 12.

discursive environment through which they can better understand current news events, public opinion, relevant debates, and cultural production.

Why this Project for Russian?

Why this project for Russian? Russian is the second most widely used language on the Internet after English.³ The Russian language Internet sometimes dubbed “Runet” is a particularly vibrant cultural community. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University just completed a two-year study, “Impact of the Internet on Russian Politics, Media and Society,” which speaks to the unique space of the Russian language Internet and compared with English its relatively high frequency of cross-linking debate across political and social groups.⁴ Many of the major cultural and intellectual figures in Russia maintain an active web presence on public profiles, combining their professional and personal lives in a manner that lacks the gloss of PR management that we see often see in the web presences of prominent American cultural figures. Finally, Russian language media has recently taken on an outsized role in the news, so this is a timely and relevant project.

The Russian Social Media Landscape

The Russian social media landscape is quite varied. The most popular site is VKontakte (which translates to ‘in contact/in touch’). At its inception, it looked remarkably like the early version of Facebook. The founder Pavel Durov saw Facebook, which at the time was not compatible with Russian language, and created a similar site, which quickly took off and has

³ “Russian beats German as Internet’s second most-used language” *RT*, 24 March 2013, <http://on.rt.com/e9xj6i>.

⁴ The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University just completed a two-year study, “Impact of the Internet on Russian Politics, Media and Society,” which speaks to the unique space of the Russian language Internet and its relatively high frequency of cross-linking debate across political and social groups (<https://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/russia#>).

maintained majority market share. Its vast popularity can in part be accounted for by its lenient approach to copyright, which results in users being able to find nearly any film or TV show dubbed into Russian available for download, file sharing or streaming. Odnoklassniki was also founded in 2006 with the premise of connecting people with former school classmates and is primarily popular with an older demographic (most users over 35) in the provinces. Facebook was relatively late to enter the Russian market in 2008. Its main user demographic is primarily based in Moscow and St. Petersburg and is used by a younger and generally more politically liberal population.

The difference in user bases does have a socio-political aspect to it. Research shows that users of Twitter and Facebook were significantly more likely to believe that electoral fraud occurred during Russia's 2011 parliamentary election.⁵ Instagram, on the other hand, has managed to avoid the political and geographic divisions and is quite popular among students and youth. Russians are the largest user base of Instagram outside of the US.

Lesson Plans

The lesson plans I created are aimed for use in the Russian Conversation course (Russian 120) a course taken by a range of students: those who just completed Russian 4, those who are returning from study abroad in Russia, and heritage speakers. This is typically the highest level of Russian taught at UC Berkeley other than content-courses taught in the language and thus is

⁵ Vladimir Barash and John Kelly, "Salience vs. Commitment: Dynamics of Political Hashtags on Russian Twitter" *Berkman Center Research Publication* No. 2012-9. 10 April 2012. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2034506. // John Kelly, et. al. "Mapping Russian Twitter," *Berkman Center Research Publication* no. 2012-3. 26 March 2012. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2028158. // Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi, "Online Social Media and Political Awareness in Authoritarian Regimes," *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 45, issue 1 (Jan. 2015) pp. 29-51.

often the last Russian course may of our students take, so it is an important point to introduce long term strategies for Russian proficiency maintenance.

My project consists of three-modules to be distributed over the course of a semester. The first is a foundational background unit, while the other two are discrete lessons. These modules are as much concrete lesson plans as they are strategies for incorporating social media in the classroom. The reality of using social media is that the data, events and objects of interest change by the minute, these are not meant to be static units to always be taught, but are strategies to be filled in with other timely and relevant content.

1. Unit 1 is an introduction to the Russian social media landscape and a guided comparison and exploration of content in English and Russian on Facebook and VKontakte (Russia's most popular social networking site).
2. Unit 2 introduces students to an artistic performance project on Facebook by a young Petersburg-based artist Roman Osminkin.
3. Unit 3 follows the online debates about a controversy that unfolded in early January of this year, when a prominent journalist Serguei Parkhomenko was expelled from the PEN-Russia club.

Although my project will introduce students to each of the major social networks and we will look at the differences between VKontakte and Facebook in depth, the lesson plans I created are based primarily on Facebook. Even though Facebook is perhaps not the most "Russian" of social networks, using Facebook best aligned with the learning objectives of my project: to help students incorporate Russian language materials into their daily social media digest (most of my students already check Facebook daily anyway), and it avoids the initial hurdle of an entirely new interface.

Unit 1: Russian Social Media Landscape — A Guided Exploration

The first unit of my project is a comprehensive introduction to the Russian social media landscape. Students will have short assigned readings in Russian that will guide them through much of the information that I introduced at the beginning of this talk about the demographic differences between Facebook, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Instagram to get them to start thinking about the different discursive spaces that each social network represents and to have an initial familiarity with the major platforms.

The second part of this exercise takes students through a guided exploration and comparison of VKontakte and Facebook. They will experiment with setting the language of their profile to English and Russian and by searching the site in English and Russian. Students will be asked to search for a controversial figure (ex. Vladimir Putin, Aleksandr Navalny (opposition leader), Edward Snowden) in Russian vs. English on Facebook and on VKontakte and report on the differences in results. Next, they will search for a favorite hobby, TV show, or interest in Russian and report on what they found most interesting. Hopefully, if they are logged into their page and find something interesting they will like it and continue to follow it. Finally, I will have them look at the differences in what information you can put on your profile. In the US in English on Facebook you can have a wide variety of gender identities (70+), but in Russian language Facebook you are limited to male or female. For VKontakte, if you Select Russian language you have the option of selecting historical versions: pre-revolutionary Russian or even soviet Russian. I hope these differences will have students think more deeply about identity as it is culturally constructed and informed by the technological medium or platform. This active exploration will encourage students to begin to explore Russian language materials on platforms they already access regularly.

Unit 2 – Kommunalka on Gatchinskaya St.: Art and Poetry on Facebook

The second unit is a standalone unit that explores art, poetry, and history through a contemporary performance project and blog. The young Petersburg based poet, activist and performer Roman (Roma) Osminkin and his wife Anastasia (Nastya) live in a room communal apartment. These apartments are a historical legacy of the communist times when large apartments were taken over and subdivided into rooms. Families with little in common each lived in one of the room and shared the bathroom, kitchen, and communal spaces. These still exist in St. Petersburg and tend to be among the less expensive living options. Roman Osminkin live blogs his life in a present day communal apartment.

This would be a two-day lesson. The first day students will watch a news clip of about the historical legacy of the apartments and the government's attempt to dissolve and sell the apartments – this will be our cultural context cultural context. On Day 2 students will explore the materials on the site with guided discussion questions, looking at the cast of characters, what kind of information about the neighbors is shared and how they might respond if they were the neighbors to some of the posts and compared life in a kommunalka with life in shared living situations in Berkeley. Osminkin also produces installation and video-poetry projects in his home, which are also posted on this site that students can explore.

In the course of designing this lesson plan, I ran into one of the difficulties of using Facebook for teaching, the site suddenly disappeared from the internet. I had taken screenshots, so I was able to proceed with my pilot lesson, but be aware that Facebook and social media sites are not on the Wayback machine or other web archives. I contacted the artist and discovered the site was temporarily taken down because they had enough followers that they were afraid the neighbors whose real names were being used would find out, so the site is down while they change names to protect their neighbors.

Unit 3: PEN-Center Russia – Cultural and Political Debates on Facebook

The third unit gets to the heart of the project of engaging with social media as a network. This lesson aims to teach students to identify and traces political and cultural debates as they unfold on Facebook or twitter through using contextual clues and keywords to find out more information. The unit was designed around a controversy that unfolded over 3 weeks in January 2017 over the Russian PEN-Center. The controversy addresses a number of key topics in Russian political and cultural debates: free speech, censorship, political prisoners, protest, and the Russian annexation of Crimea.

The story goes back to the May 2014 arrest of the Ukrainian film mater and writer Oleg Sentsov in Crimea on suspicion of plotting terrorism. He was held by the Russian federal Security services and charged with 20 years in prison. His confession was reportedly given under duress and the Russian presidential council for human rights has appealed the ruling: EU, US and Amnesty call for his release.

In January 2017, the prominent liberal Russian journalist Serguei Parkhomenko called for the PEN Center in Russia to support Sentsov after Russian refused to extradite him to Ukraine, and was kicked out of PEN-center as a result. The PEN center is an international writers' organization that aims to promote free speech. It entered the USSR in 1989 as a way to open up Russia, so this move was widely considered by liberal intellectuals to go against its founding principles. In the coming days and weeks, many prominent writers and urban intellectuals (which is a tight knit circle in contemporary Russia) followed suit in commenting on and debating the issue, critiquing PEN, free speech, Russian/Ukrainian relations and calling the PEN-Center a new version of the Soviet Writers Unions.

The project is a three-day assignment. For the first day, the students will watch a news clip of the famous director Aleksandr Sakurov defending Sentsov before Putin and read a brief excerpt about the Sentsov arrest and trial as background to mimic an awareness of the cultural/political zeitgeist, which will be discussed in class.

For day 2, I have prepared screenshot clips from the public Facebook profiles of the major players. They have over 10,000 subscribers on many of these pages (Parkhomentko has 146,000 subscribers). The profiles feature personal details such as where they live, who are they are married/related to, where they work and in some cases political leanings etc. that students can read into to determine context for their comments. Then each student also has a Facebook post. I will ask the students to determine any information they can find about their person. Then in class they will act as their figure and try to piece together the pieces of who their post responds to based on the date and links and where their figure falls on the issue pro/against the PEN-Center and why. Ideally by the end of class, we will be able to make a list of arguments pro/against and to reassemble a social network of who is involved with/responding to whom. The final third day of the assignment will be for students to follow up on the issue online to find out what has happened in the intervening months related to the topics of debate and in class we will have a guided discussion/debate about the major themes that were addressed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my objective with this project is to make Russian language social media more approachable and encourage students to use it as a platform for sustained language contact.

I want to give students the tools to encounter Russian materials in a complex semiotic universe, outside of the contained dialogues and reading passages that we typically give them. I

hope that by comparing different social media platforms students will consider more deeply what kinds of discursive worlds are represented or structurally possible within each of these spaces.

Each of my lesson plans guides student through an exploratory experience of a specific microcosm of social media to build a tool box for independent exploration and increased cultural awareness. Through taking my lessons offline (in particular - the PEN-CENTER lesson), I have prepared a microcosm of Facebook, which lets students engage with authentic social media materials, and perhaps most importantly to visualize the network dynamics and differences in public opinion within a contained model (something that can be hard to do with the infinite world of posts). It prepares students to consider what it means to participate in a dynamic discursive environment.

Each of the activities at the end calls for students to take the next step and return to the internet to find out what happened next or to explore topics of personal interest. The primary goal is to teach them to navigate these resources on their own to promote sustained contact with the target language and self-directed proficiency maintenance when/wherever they are checking their Facebook or Instagram feeds.⁶

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