



‘Besides You, 120 Other Bloggers Have Already Been to Thailand’: The Symbolic Economy of Russian Travel Blogging

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Abstract: As online booking services have introduced a new era of global travel culture, international travel has become one of the most important areas of post-Soviet cultural development. This article discusses the symbolic economy of Russian travel blogging through the example of independent online community sites created by Russian world travelers for sharing information and combating the dominance of commercial service providers. ‘Symbolic economy’ here refers to the set of representations and interpretations that give travelers their social value as members of the travel bloggers’ community on Runet. My analysis starts with the hypothesis that by supporting the inflow of travel recommendations by ‘ordinary’ people, based on ‘authentic’ experiences into the networks, independent community sites reinforce the horizontal, peer-to-peer quality of the internet. Travel bloggers’ community sites introduce technology-savvy internet users who are not only contributors to the increasing number of travel representations online but also to the architecture of online social networking, and, ultimately, to the architecture of the entire Runet. These qualities emphasize the role of bloggers’ community as an alternative symbolic economy, within which popular contributors become cultural intermediaries who define and frame global travel as a social and cultural construct. As a result, the bloggers’ community becomes an important learning environment for beginning bloggers where they can acquire new digital skills that potentially help travelers to manage the post-industrial economy both at home and abroad.

Keywords: blogging, community sites, Runet, travel, tourism, symbolic economy, post-industrial globalization

The quote in the title is from the Russian community site Storyfinder.ru, built around an advanced search engine for browsing the vast amount of blogs by Russian world travelers.¹ Currently, the website's database consists of 224 blogs and it has an average of 2,500 users a month browsing the overall amount of nearly 73,000 blog posts (Giatsintov n.y.b). The comment highlights the recommendation for new candidates who consider adding their blogs to the database: The website is meant to provide as diverse information as possible on different travel destinations around the world and therefore, 'your overwinter in Samoa is not that unique of an experience'. As seen from the statistics of the website, 'Thailand' is by far the most popular key word used for searches during the past month (as of February 2017). The website's architecture is simple. The main page introduces the search engine and a list of countries in order of the number of blog posts written on that country. Thailand is the number one on this list as well. The other sections include an interactive map showing how bloggers' posts accumulate geographically; a live news feed of the newest posts; a rating list of the blogs based on the overall number of posts, photographs, comments and the degree of activity taking place on the blog's website; and a discussion forum where users can post suggestions for improving the website. In addition, there are sections that offer brief information on the website's creator and instructions on how to add a blog to the database.²

Although not hugely popular, Storyfinder.ru contributes to the Russian world travelers' community both technologically and symbolically. It offers a tool for organizing the rather unstructured field of online information on tourism and travel simultaneously giving certain clusters of this information a specific symbolic meaning. 'Thailand', for example, figures on the website as the most popular travel destination that has apparently lost its symbolic status among independent travelers by becoming already too familiar and too *familiarized* for the online audience through the number of blog posts available on the internet. We can thus argue that the website is a node of a complex construction of Russian world travelers' online (sub)culture.

The aim of this article is to discuss the symbolic economy of Russian travel blogging through the example of independent online community sites. The term 'symbolic economy' refers here to the set of representations and interpretations that give travelers their social value as members of the travel bloggers' community on Runet. The two commercial markets and professional fields that underlie this symbolic economy are the tourism business and digital industries, which facilitate the bloggers' global mobility and enable them to identify as a community through online networks. Through this symbolic economy travel blogging becomes a field of creating, accumulating and distributing 'cultural power' (see Duffert

¹ I would like to thank Galina Miazhevich and the reviewers of *Digital Icons* for their insightful feedback on the article. This research is supported by the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds and Kone Foundation.

² Storyfinder.ru is maintained by a young Russian man in his twenties who identifies as 'traveling webmaster'. He is a self-trained web designer and coder who earns his living through miscellaneous web projects and supports traveling as his primary lifestyle. Respectively, his personal website is divided in to two major sections: the blog about his web designing projects and the second describing his travel around the world. Storyfinder.ru, as he writes, is the second major website that he created but remains 'unfortunately, a small project'. Interestingly, Thailand was also the first foreign country where he started his world traveler lifestyle in 2011 (Giatsintov n.y.a).

2007: 41) through which individuals negotiate their agency in the world economy, as well as their feelings of belonging to a group of people with some shared norms and values.³

At large, the online travel community is here seen as a ‘lifestyle subculture’, ‘a subculture people enter by choice, one where they choose to construct a new reality for themselves’ (Macbeth 1992: 322). Jim Macbeth points out that those extreme travel subcultures that seek an alternative way of living detached from organized societies set ‘an example for the wider society’ through the trope of modern utopian thought (2000: 22). In this light, the lifestyle traveler’s ‘escape’ to faraway countries can be perceived as a form of agency and resistance. Attuned to cultural diversity and individual mobility as a lifestyle choice, world travelers have a chance, for instance, to point out the institutionalized cultural chauvinism in their own societies. However, as Macbeth remarks, travelers may live long periods of time as detached from structured society but at the same time they cannot live as fully independent from them which makes the escapist resistance at least partly an illusory project (Macbeth 2000). Russian travel bloggers’ community is a lifestyle subculture in a loose sense. It includes travelers with different degrees of commitment to the escapist or subversive travel ideology discussed by Macbeth and others.⁴ At the same time, travel blogging on the Russian internet (Runet) creates an important digital resource, through which tools for individual empowerment, from symbolic to technological to economic, can be achieved. Through an analysis of world travelers’ community sites on the Runet, I intend to answer the following research questions: How different worldviews and meanings of world travel are constituted, organized and contested in the symbolic economy of travel blogging? What kind of forms the relationship between the traveler and technology acquires on the community sites? And ultimately, how bloggers and world travelers define and negotiate their sites of agency in the global economy?

The internet and social media have significantly changed the ways people share and circulate information on travel.⁵ As, for instance, Cody Paris argues, there is a ‘continuing convergence of physical travel with information and communication technologies’, which helps a certain segment of world travelers stand out through a high degree of social media savvy and which, in turn, can turn regular tourists and travel enthusiasts into media celebrities (Paris 2011: 1094). This happened to the Russian couple Nataly and Murad Osmani who became famous through their Instagram project #FollowMeTo, which has gathered millions followers over the past five years. The project has grown into a lifestyle concept, including a weekly travel show on the Russian First channel [Pervyi kanal], recognition from multiple world-leading glossy magazines and a book deal.⁶ Their fame is based on a single visual idea

³ Several examples of lifestyle industries, such as tourism, fashion and popular fan cultures have shown that social distinction and economic revenues in these fields are carried out as the result of the exchange in representations and meanings (Grazian 2004; Askew 2007; McGillivray & Frew 2007; Duffett 2009). For example, in his analysis of popular music performances, Mark Duffett explains that the symbolic economy that determines the distribution of roles between popular music stars and their audience during live music performance also motivates a fixed set of discourses and unequal social relations in popular music industry (Duffett 2009). David Mac Gillivray and Matt Frew discuss the accrual of cultural capital and social prestige through trade in and exchange of visual representations of excitement and exhilaration in the field of leisure industry. They argue that the contemporary practice of accumulating cultural capital on social media results in the increased visual objectification of experience—commodified experiences acquired at tourism sites are later put on display for others to evaluate on social media, which stresses the roles of the audience and performance (Gillivray & Frew 2007).

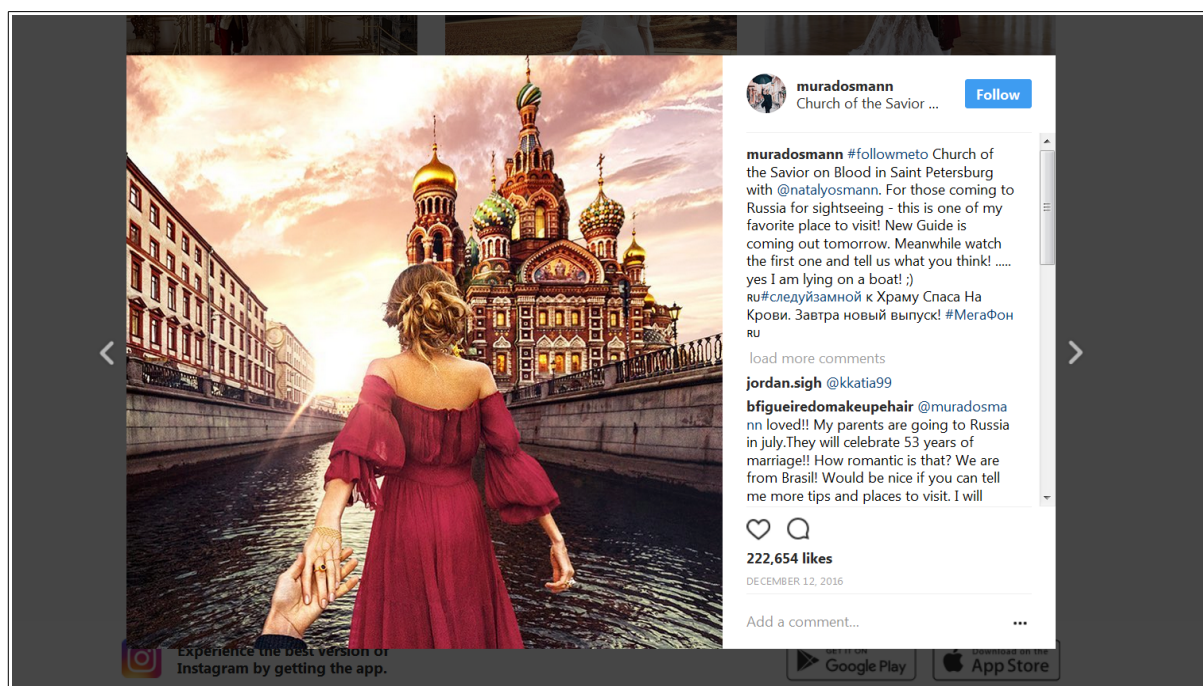
⁴ For more analysis on the cultural meaning of the traveler, see, for example, Culler (1981), Bauman (2011).

⁵ See, for example, Munar & Jacobsen (2013), Zeng & Gerritsen (2014).

⁶ See Pemberton (2015) and Goldberg (2016).

applied to a generic tourist selfie: Nataly, photographed from behind, leading her husband Murad by hand towards a staggering scene somewhere on earth (image 1). Notwithstanding their strong online presence and willingness to make world travel more than just a hobby, Nataly and Murad Osmann are not travel bloggers in the traditional sense and therefore not enrolled on Storyfinder's database. However, their photographs and stories make their way to the bloggers' community through other contributors. One blogger and experienced traveler appearing in the Storyfinder's newsfeed, for instance, reviews their book, describing it as 'a photo album of someone else's journey', continuing to write, 'you are reading about the cities you've been to, you see the photos and think, "I should go back"' (Satova 2015). This comment demonstrates how different travel representations coming from various sources assemble into a symbolic network online, and how active internet users quite instinctively change roles from members of the audience and fans to content providers to experts and authorities.

Image 1. Screenshot of Murad Osmann's Instagram profile, one of the main platforms for the concept #FollowMeTo created by Nataly and Murad Osmann. In December 2016, the couple produced a series of their trademark photographs at famous sights of St. Petersburg.



Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BN7Q-_bjMfR/?taken-by=muradosmann&hl=en (1 June 2017)

Increased use of mobile communication technology has prompted new travel subcultures, 'embedded in complex hybrid virtual-physical spaces', which allow their participants 'to maintain constant states of personal mobility' through alternative channels (Paris 2011:

1110).⁷ As compared to #FollowMeTo's success of monetizing leisure travel through a global corporate social media platform, travel community site creators provide an alternative whose aim is to support individual (both geographical and social) mobility through self-made, non-commercial platforms. In other words, the online activity of community site creators aims at expanding the number of fellow travelers and potentially also the number of co-creators of travel representations, not followers to an individual social media profile who would then copy and multiply the trademark visual concept (which characterizes the #FollowMeTo online community). Travel bloggers' community sites introduce technology-savvy internet users who are not only contributors to the flow of images as beautiful and as striking as each other but also to the architecture of online social networking and, ultimately, to the architecture of the entire Runet.

Russian travel culture and post-industrial globalization

My analysis concentrates on two particular cases representing technology-savvy community creators in the field of Russian travel blogging in particular and online travel culture in general. Besides Storyfinder.ru, my research materials comprise the community site TravelBloggers.ru created by Russian long-term independent travelers Mariia Dubrovskaja and Adzhei Verma in 2010. In addition, I analyze the website 'Academy of independent travels' [Akademii vol'nykh puteshestvii, hereafter AVP] initiated by a long-term extreme traveler and travel guide writer Andrei Krotov. I consider these websites as being important nodes in the symbolic economy of Russian online travel culture: They function as resources for those interested in independent, long-term global travel and create an interactive community of Russian-speaking travelers as the result of which transnational communication technology becomes the defining factor of geo-spatial mobility. My approach to these research materials is two-fold: first, I monitor and analyze the newsfeeds and discussion forums (or analogous content) of the community sites; second, as additional data, I will analyze the contents of the personal travel blogs kept by the creators of these websites/online communities.

This article contributes to the nascent scholarship on the interaction between new communication technologies and post-Soviet tourism and travel culture (Rukomoinikova 2013, Lunevich 2015, Ratilainen 2016). Historically, mass tourism has been significant to (western) culture of modernity and the modernist idea of the individual, 'an extension of modern technology' and 'activity that increasingly erases differences even as it seeks them out' (Garlick 2002: 293). In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976, 1989, 1999), sociologist Dean MacCannell relates mass tourism in the postwar period with the emergence of postindustrial modernity. Anticipating the break from modernity into postmodernity, he sees tourists with their removal of focus and capital from their immediate surroundings to remote countries as significant agents of this cultural/philosophical/ideological transition.⁸ The net-

⁷ Digital booking services and review applications (feeding off the unpaid digital labour of users) have disrupted the industry of traditional travel agencies. This 'online travel revolution' ('How technology...' 2016) has significantly increased independent travel and it is part of the overall digitization and automatization of middle-class professional sector. The questions introduced in this article would deserve more research from the point of view of the organized travel industry but are out of the scope of my analysis.

⁸ See especially the introduction to the 1989 edition of Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1989: 1-16).

worked and interactive communication technology contributes to the evolvement of the postindustrial and postmodern travel culture where the division between work and leisure as well as cultural dichotomies between the center and periphery, elite and low culture are rendered under constant renegotiation (see Urry & Larsen 2011). It is possible that ‘extreme travelers’, ‘digital nomads’, ‘downshifters’ and other contemporary agents of postindustrial mobility framing and defining their agency through interactive communication technologies reshape world culture in equally significant ways as mass tourists in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹

International travel is one of the most important fields of post-Soviet cultural development. Travel abroad has integrated individual Russians into the global economy. Despite the economic sanctions and Ruble’s low exchange rates after the international conflict around the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian federation, Russian tourists remain as an important economic force in a number of countries (for example in Finland, see Gurova & Ratilainen 2016). Furthermore, the strained situation in world politics (not only between Russia and the West, but also through terrorist attacks to popular tourist resorts) has given tourism new ideological and geopolitical meanings in the Russian public discourse. For example in 2016, the federal brand ‘Polite Crimean’ [Vezhlivyi Krym] was created in order to promote inbound tourism to the Crimean resorts (‘Vezhlivyi Krym’ 2017). The idea of Crimean hospitality and tourism became also an integral element of the 2016 episode of the ‘Direct Line with the President’ (Priamaia liniia s prezidentom, December 2016), the annual media spectacle in which Vladimir Putin answers to Russian citizens’ questions in a multiple-hours-long call conference aired live from Moscow.¹⁰ One of the inserted narratives presented from a linkup location in the Russian regions was transmitted from the island of Tuzla located in between the Crimean Peninsula and Southern Russia, from the construction site of a gigantic bridge that would connect this island (that belongs administratively to the Crimean) to the Russian mainland. A woman at the construction site, introducing herself as a ‘representative of tourism field’, warmly welcomes all Russians to the Crimean for a holiday and then asks the President when is he coming there to relax [na otdykh]?

All these examples point to the fact that the Russian Federation has included tourism more tightly in its economic and political discourse thus aiming to redirect Russian people’s consumer choices and, ultimately, also to rearrange the symbolic economy around individual mobility and Russian citizens’ role in globalization. However, the online resources maintained by and for independent world travelers aim to create a counter-power to both different commercial businesses and state institutions managing and regulating tourist flows and, more importantly, the money flows that are moving around as the result of traveling. Accordingly, I study contemporary Russian travel culture outside the state’s geopolitical discourse. With this approach, I aim to carve out some of the less well-known clusters of global connectivity on the Runet, which are based on a combination of visions about limitless mobility, anti-material values, and ubiquitous technology that are gaining importance in post-industrial societies all over the world.

My analysis is based on three major arguments concerning the symbolic economy of travel blogging in Russia. The first argument concerns the individual bloggers and their contribution to the travelers’ community: For some individual travelers, travel and global mobil-

⁹ Not to mention the refugees from current conflict zones and other victims of forced mobility, who, unfortunately, are not the subject of this study.

¹⁰ For more on the Direct Line with the President, see Ryazanova-Clarke (2013).

ity is to a great extent supported by their skills in different creative fields: web design, writing and visual arts. This combined with technological and/or social media savvy provides them with a higher degree of visibility and symbolic status in Russian travelers' online community. Through this visibility, they can also define what world travel as a lifestyle choice means, what kind of representations and media are used to express and organize this symbolic field. In other words, blogging for them is a 'sphere of the accumulation of the definition power through which dominant meanings and worldviews are created, diffused, constituted, reproduced and challenged' (Fuchs 2015: 30).

The second argument concerns the role of different publication platforms utilized by the bloggers and the symbolic hierarchies created through the design and technological features of the platform. This means that in blogs, on community sites and social media, individual global mobility is converted to accumulating text and image streams, which together create the infrastructure for the symbolic economy of travel lifestyle. This infrastructure, or environment, can enhance the traveler's visibility and status in the travel bloggers' community but it without doubt creates areas of exclusion as well.

The third argument of the article states that the symbolic economy of travel blogging is ultimately based on 'imagination as social practice', which Arjun Appadurai characterizes as the key to postindustrial globalization (1996: 31). He writes, 'the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individual) and globally defined fields of possibility' (Appadurai 2006: 31). Echoing Appadurai's ideas, now from a different angle, David McGilliway and Matt Frew write, 'extended commodification processes have produced a situation whereby signs and symbols (and their circulation) represent a crucial determinant of value and meaning' (2007: 57). In a broad sense, Russian travel bloggers' community sites contribute to the economy of digital leisure culture, in which individual imaginations and experiences of remote countries are turned into 'global databases of consumer information' (Munar & Jacobsen 2013: 46) through public (or semi-public) websites and social media. This information, as Anna Munar and Jens Jacobsen point out, can be utilized by the tourism business for marketing purposes. At the same time, self-made, independent community sites create and maintain technological and social tools for an individual internet user for blocking commercial content when browsing online information about travel.

My hypothesis is that by guaranteeing the inflow of travel recommendations by 'ordinary' people, based on 'authentic' experiences, the independent community sites reinforce the horizontal, peer-to-peer quality of the internet. This, I argue, emphasizes the role of Russian traveler bloggers' community as an alternative symbolic economy outside the direct/overt influence of the number of different type commercial online content providers such as for-profit tourism agencies or travel website companies TripAdvisor and Yelp. The analysis of Russian travelers' online communities thus advances our understanding of the relationship between evolving communication technologies and travel as business and lifestyle in post-Soviet context. It provides new avenues for thought on how individual actors become part of the symbolic economy through their 'digital labor' in the field of new media and outside the state, governmental and commercial institutions.

Understanding online communities

As of today, communication on different online media platforms that sustain some sort of community is a mainstream practice, which also means that it is increasingly difficult to use the term ‘online community’ as an analytical concept or even give it an exact definition in the way media researchers did fifteen-twenty years ago.¹¹ In a very broad definition, online communities require software infrastructure that is usually provided by corporate owned IT companies (such as Facebook and LiveJournal) and/or open source software developers groups (such as WordPress), frequent technological maintenance of and content created by one or few core members, as well as less frequent yet constant contribution by a diverse group of dedicated community members who can be both blog writers and readers. A closer look at the case of travel blogging, however, shows that there is a vast number of different platforms, online services and websites, both independent and commercial, that are used simultaneously and therefore it is sometimes impossible to see where one online community ends and another begins. Moreover, independent community sites can differ from one another greatly. For instance, Storyfinder.ru and TravelBloggers.ru are interactive community sites whereas AVP is a static website mainly based on text and references to other resources created by the key members of the society. These differences suggest that there are divergent ideas about the relationship between the website creators and the audience (i.e., different perceptions of community) among Russian travel bloggers but they also hint to different degrees of technological orientation of their creators. My focus on these selected nodes of Russian travelers’ online network and two different types of ‘information streams’ (i.e., community site newsfeeds and individual blogs linked to the community platform) can thus offer insight in to the diverse, fluid and flexible ways in which travelers communicate and maintain a sense of community online.

Online communities are often defined as ‘information-driven’ collectives and ‘cultures of information’ within which the exchange of expertise and information sharing happens voluntarily, based on horizontal social relations (Kollock 1999; Douglas 2002). Peter Kollock, defines online communities as ‘public goods’, ‘because the network makes it available to the group as a whole and because one person’s “consumption” of the information does not diminish another person’s use of it’ (1999: 225). Researchers explain online communities’ inner dynamics with the idea of a gift economy: by donating one’s expertise to the group, the member of the community can expect reciprocal help from others in the future, which constitutes the social ties among the community members. Another way to think about the economy of communication within an online community is that they help to manage the abundance of information available on the internet. As Michael H. Goldhaber (1997) argues, online communication is fundamentally based on ‘attention economy’; information on the internet is overflowing but audience’s attention is a scarce resource. Thus, the exchange relations within an online community are based rather on attracting and directing the potential readers’ attention towards the desired sources and channels of information. These ideas of ‘gift economy’ and ‘attention economy’ come together in Eric Raymond’s (2000) idea, according to which online

¹¹ One of the early theoreticians of online communities, or, ‘cyber communities’, Peter Kollock (1999) argues that unlike any other previous media technology, the internet has made it possible basically for any single individual to contribute a piece of information or advise in a way that it will become a public good, i.e., ‘goods that anyone might benefit from, regardless of whether they have helped contribute to their production’ (1999: 223).

expert communities are sustained as based on a certain ‘reputation-game gift economy’, which he connects especially to the open source software developer communities consisting of highly skilled and motivated members. This means that when a member of the online community ‘donates’ useful, high-quality information to the community, it works to increase his or her reputation and social prestige within the community. Raymond argues that good reputation earned within such expert online communities as software developers’ community, can eventually work to enhance one’s social standing also outside the community. This comes close to Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of ‘symbolic capital’, which ‘is to be understood as economic or political capital that is disavowed, mis-recognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a ‘credit’ which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees ‘economic’ profits (1980: 262).

Travel bloggers are a loosely organized online ‘community of information’, a network of people interested in independent travel and in sharing information about it. They are not only enthusiastic about travel but want to portray themselves as world travelers and identify through this lifestyle. Travelers’ community creators systematically seek to create and sustain independent travelers’ community by bringing together the expertise, experiences, concerns and questions of many different travelers on a Russian-language online platform. Both the entrepreneurial and socializing factors inherent in online networking play a role even though the community platforms where the communication takes place are independent and non-commercial. On the one hand, travel bloggers websites are efficiently monetized with the help of different online advertising services, such as Google AdSense, as well as used as a platform for all kinds of entrepreneurial activities such as distributing educational web courses for which people can sign up for a charge. Consequently, travelers’ online communities are ‘public goods’ (Kollock 1999) in at least two different meanings. First, they develop and maintain a free distribution channel and social network tailored specifically for the needs of Russian world travelers while providing collegial support for those who pursue a more serious ‘career’ as a successful traveler and/or blogger and in this way rely on their traveler’s lifestyle for a steady income.

This means that either one or a few dedicated individuals do the core work for the community. They create and maintain the website providing the technological infrastructure for communication and coordination among the community members. What is interesting when analyzing the symbolic economy of travelers’ online communities is that the administrator simultaneously defines the underlying ideological parameters according to which contributions from the community members are included in and excluded from the community site. For example, TravelBloggers.ru accepts only privately maintained blogs to be part of its newsfeed whereas Storyfinder.ru does not make a distinction between bloggers using private or corporate-owned platforms. This means, for example, that TravelBloggers.ru excludes contributions from those bloggers who are using the LiveJournal as their blogging platform, which actually excludes a large number of popular Russian travel blogs.¹² These choices also have an impact on the symbolic economy of Russian travel blogging. Due to these choices, the rating lists of the most ‘popular travel blogs’, and updating news feeds, which are an integral part of both Storyfinder.ru and TravelBloggers.ru, can look completely different. Conse-

¹² For instance, LiveJournal’s community blog *ru-travel* is one of the most popular Russian LiveJournal communities, currently holding the fourteenth place in the Russian community rating.

quently, the truth-value of the online community can only be evaluated within a certain information bubble.

Image 2. Screenshot of the interactive map on Storyfinder.ru showing the geographic distribution of blog posts by Russian travelers. A click on any of the pins directs the reader to a new page with a list of all posts written on that specific destination. In this picture, the pointer shows that the website's database includes 222 individual stories about Goa, India. The map is also a representation of the diversity of travel information available on this website.



Source: <https://storyfinder.ru/map> (1 June 2017)

Through their policies of inclusion and exclusion online communities also promote differing ideologies; TravelBloggers.ru encourages the maximum degree of independence, creativity and flexibility simultaneously reassessing the standards of technological know-how among travel bloggers whereas Storyfinder.ru supports maximum diversity and accessibility of information on world travel (image 2). Furthermore, Krotov's website avp.travel.ru and his LiveJournal blog exist separately from one another. His online publications are mainly aimed at promoting the expanding network of volunteer-based offline services and activities and educational events for independent travelers as well as his literary works on the theme of traveling. As a travel community creator Krotov thus differs from the two other examples as he clearly identifies as someone who is not investing time and effort in developing his own technological solutions but uses several existing platforms at a common user basis. For the other two community sites analyzed here, new technological solutions function both as a 'public

good', as discussed by Kollock (1999) offered to the community of Russian travel bloggers and as social assets identified by Raymond (2000) that make their creators stand out from the mainstream travel bloggers. Most importantly, the self-made community sites help the creators manage their own status in the overall economy of the Russian blogosphere. These community sites inspire their users also to imagine other ways to exchange immaterial goods and services so that it would make travel around the world easier for non-affluent travelers, as, for example, a contributor to the TravelBloggers.ru discussion forum suggests:

Information costs money. We could encourage, for instance, advertising one's individual project-blog-site-service (for example, photographer offers their services for the resource in exchange of information about a cheap house at the beach in Thailand or Goa). That is, we should make a resource that is allowed to become part of the project and at the same time to bring benefits to all (Mila 2010).

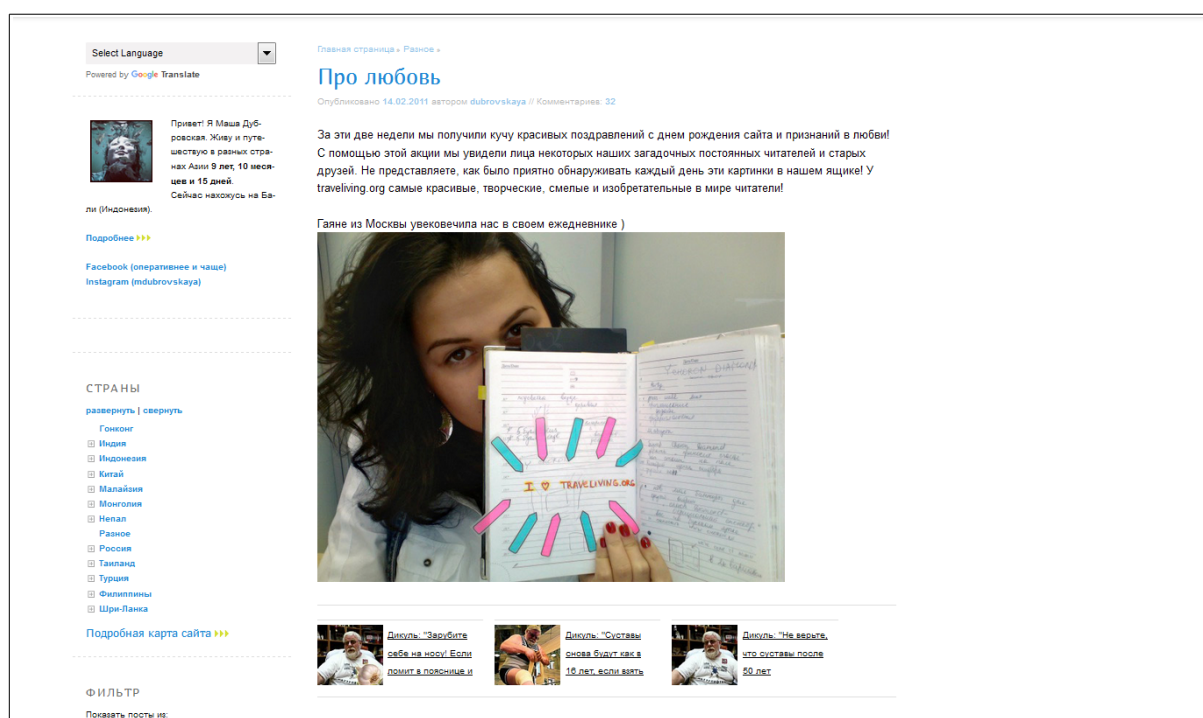
This quote exemplifies that there is an urge among travel bloggers to find solutions for managing and navigating the global terrain of travel by establishing an economy of exchanges and organizing new structures to support such an activity. This is also an information economy based on barter, exchange of useful information to creative labour.

In her individual blog, Dubrovskaja takes this idea a step further. During her travel blogger career, she utilizes exchange economy in a number of ways simultaneously making it a playful form of social interactivity between her and her readers. For example, there are two different 'flash mobs' in Dubrovskaja's blog highlighting the internet as a common good and a new platform for exchange economy to emerge. The first is called 'About love' and marks the blog's second anniversary. Dubrovskaja and Verma challenge their readers to reproduce the text 'I love TravelBloggers.ru' in any creative way and send a photograph, which they promise to publish later on in a separate post (image 3). They also promise that in case the photographs are published elsewhere on the internet, the bloggers will create a link to that resource on the Traveliving.org website. Here, as it appears, Dubrovskaja and Verma barter the online audience's attention for recognition on their popular website. In a playful birthday campaign, the bloggers also organize a way to exchange and reorganize online readers' potential attention. This type of advertising campaign among readers and friends allows Dubrovskaja and Verma to get publicity without buying advertising space.

Nearly four years later, Dubrovskaja organizes another action, this time for the New Years. It is called 'I draw for food'. She asks her readers to send her favourite Russian foods to the Philippines, where she is residing at the given moment. In exchange, she will send her artisan paper dolls. Another important element of this action is to exchange greetings written on postcards or fridge magnets. The idea here is to exchange greetings between the global South and the North, as Dubrovskaja assumes that most of her readers are in Russia. She writes, 'I'll send you dolls and a greeting from the tropics and you'll send me treats and greetings from the winter'. At this point, she is already able to utilize her accumulating fame as one of the most popular Russian travel blogger, i.e., her 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1980), to achieve material goods. These examples show the range of creative ways of using blogging and online communication to exchange talents, experiences and material goods relying on the information economy infrastructure based on the ideology of the common good. It is generally acknowledged that the more attention the blogger receives, the better off he or

she is. Therefore it is a commonplace to create a community-creating action that is based on the barter of online attention among bloggers.

Image 3. Screenshot of a birthday greeting by a reader published as the result of the popular flash mob on the Traveliving.org website



Source: <http://traveliving.org/i-love-traveliving-org/> (1 June 2017)

Traveling for passion, blogging for profession?

Efforts to gain recognition within the online community intertwine with the discussion on the professional identity of the travel blogger. For a number of travelers, blogging is a significant part of the half-utopian project articulated through such catch phrases as ‘remote work’ (udalennaia rabota) and ‘downshifting’ (daunshifting). These terms as connected to the theme of travel refer to either temporary or full-time escape from not only the severe Russian climate (the North) but also from the white-collar office jobs and corporate work regime to self-employment and symbolic self-determination.¹³ Not only money but also time is considered as an important resource by the travel bloggers and global mobility combined with remote digital work offers a means to balance out work, leisure and family commitments. The travel segment of the Russian blogosphere thus reveals that ‘digital nomadism’, increasingly popular among young professionals working in the information and telecommunication fields, characterizes the contemporary labor market in Russia as well. Most commonly, digital nomadism is defined as a voluntary, location-independent lifestyle allowing simultaneous paid

¹³ For similar ideas, see, Macbeth (1992, 2000).

work and leisurely, adventurous travel around the world. Over the past years, international media have made an effort to glorify digital nomadism as a new global lifestyle phenomenon and one of the many freedoms brought about by the digital age. Yet, digital nomadism can also characterize the post-industrial precariat, the group of young professionals, short-term contractors and freelance digital workers seeking to make ends meet by staying in countries (usually located in the global South) with a lower price level (see Mohn 2014).

Discussing the potential pitfalls and benefits of *udalennaia rabota* and considering the different ways of monetizing both individual blogging and travel lifestyle are among the most discussed topics of the community sites. As based on my case study, I see that professionalization and professional identity present a complicated issue for Russian travel bloggers, mainly due to two reasons. First, travel is first and foremost conceived as an escape from the standardized lifestyle, stressful career and everyday life in urban centers. For the bloggers analyzed in this article, travel lifestyle also means rebellion against the traditional middle class values, and thus, it should not be discursively linked to work and professionalism but to the values that the bloggers deem more profound, such as freedom, personal growth and seeing and perceiving people and life in different countries ‘as they are’ (‘takimi kak oni i est’). This also implies that the mainstream media, including both glossy travel and tourism publications (travel programs on television, magazines and tourist brochures) and international news, are not trustworthy, as they transmit only polarized representations: either reports on international conflicts and terrorism or sleek and glamorized images of luxurious holidays not available for the average internet users. Therefore, the independent bloggers evaluate countries and people according to how closely they associate with organized, package tourism.

For example, in an interview on a LiveJournal blog about downshifting, Verma remarks that the most popular tourist destinations among Russians Turkey and Egypt are countries where you can meet only ‘uninteresting’ people whereas India is a ‘filter for interesting people’ (mustafaibrahim 2008). India, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and other countries in the South East Asia, on the contrary, constantly figure in the discourse of travel bloggers as countries of the most exhilarating experiences, local people, foods, culture and natural sights. For a number of long-term travelers, one of these countries has also become a place of particular personal significance as their children have been born there. For example, a blogger with the username ‘Agenda’ has created a special online resource for Russian women who want to give birth and raise a family in Thailand based on her own experience. Furthermore, the authors of the blog ‘Family Blog Life with a Dream’ (Semeinyi blog – zhizn’ s mechtai) decided to settle in Bali Indonesia in spring 2016 to wait for better economic times (as the low exchange rate of ruble significantly limits Russian travel budgets). Bali, they write, feels like home because their daughter was born in there five years ago. For Andrei Krotov, in turn, short-term trips to popular resorts located anywhere in the global South, including both Egypt and Thailand, means ‘bourgeoisie travel’, ordinary tourism in the meaning of ‘consumption of holidays’. One of the most significant differences between the ‘bourgeoisie travel’ and ‘independent travel’ (vol’noe putestestvie), Krotov highlights, is that on bourgeoisie trips one only encounters local people who work in tourism business. Independent travelers are more apt to encounter people not forced to interact with foreign visitors through their profession but with those who offer rides or accommodation to visitors as private people.

Based on these examples, we can conclude that independent travelers trade stable, standardized life in urban centres for increased feeling of freedom and agency through individual mobility from the global North, to the global South. In this geographical transition, the global South becomes a site of active symbolic labour. The South is associated with exotic, authentic and thus meaningful cultures that can be familiarized and appropriated through key life experiences such as childbirth. Simultaneously, the global South acquires meaning as a site of wild tourism industry and raw competition for livelihood that needs to be spotted and kept at distance. Individual agency is thus achieved as the result of successfully navigating this new landscape of opportunity. Additionally, continuous blogging and posting on travel bloggers' community sites means creating and developing resources that would work against commercial travel sites and web services supported by corporate travel agencies, which the community site creators see as their 'enemies' in the field of online travel information. In consequence, anti-commercial values ideologically determine both fields, individual blogging and independent travel.

Accumulating and sharing information on efficient internet use and the art of online writing become an important sidetrack of blogging. As a result, the internet becomes the primary field of professionalization as well as a fluid and flexible work environment for a number of travel bloggers. In the best-case scenario, it connects flows of income from multiple different sources and from multiple different countries. All procedures of online economy mentioned above (monetization, networking and gaining visibility) are managed through the symbolic economy, in which appropriation and commodification of information determines the ground rules. Eventually, serious attachment to the symbolic economy of travel blogging is as labor-intensive and time-consuming as any other job. As one blogger remarks, 'keeping a genuinely useful blog, takes up all your free and not-so-free time, eats up all your energy, and demands enormous moral and physical investment' (Liubimova 2015).

One of the most important questions concerning the analysis of the symbolic economy of Russian travel blogging is thus how the bloggers gain recognition within the blogosphere by creating a sense of community through positive competition. Here, the site administrators and creators play an important role by channeling support from different sources to those interested. Positive competition here means that the more support there is for budding bloggers, the better the overall quality of travel blogging will be, which will ultimately, hopefully, increase the number of dedicated readers as well. The creators of the community site TravelBloggers.ru, for instance, emphasize that visibility can only be 'caught' by increasing the possibilities for more people to write successful travel blogs:

[W]e try to raise the number of fish in the pond in order to increase our chances for a good catch. The forum TravelBloggers.ru was created with this goal in mind: it contains information on how to start your own travel blog and thereby develops our segment of the internet, makes it livelier, more interesting and generates a feeling of competition among bloggers, which increases the demand for quality of the published material. Undoubtedly, this will lead to the expansion of the overall number of readers of travel blogs and, respectively, the proportional increase in the readership of our site (Dubrovskaja 2011).

As the solution to the underlying problem of the attention economy, where ‘a wealth of information means a scarcity of attention’ (Simon 1969 cited in Yardi, Golder & Brzozowski 2009: 2072), TravelBloggers.ru suggests that a wealth of high-quality information produced and organized with the support of other bloggers will eventually also mean a wealth of attention from an increased number of readers. A sense of efficiency and influence on the community can be seen as the main motivation behind the practice of sharing one’s expertise on the community site for free (see Kollok 1999: 228). Altruistic motivations of offering technological aid, helping develop a sense of community among Russian travelers and gain more visibility to this particular internet segment intersect with more egoistic (and ultimately economic) motivations of increasing the chances of a particular blogger to draw more attention to all different resources, services and purchasable products that are available through their online resources.

Consequently, the internet provides an important field of self-education for a global traveler and travel blogger. Those actively and efficiently seeking information are able to learn new skills such as programming, web design or travel writing, and, over time, anyone can become a significant contributor to the common information resource by sharing their experience and knowledge with others on the discussion forums attached to the community site. These additional skills will not only help the blogger to design increasingly attention-worthy websites but they will also help them to find several new ways of making money ‘on the road’ and ‘for the road’. Therefore, it is no wonder that on the community site TravelBloggers.ru, the internet is defined as an immense resource of group intelligence, offering answers to all imaginable questions. The ways to recognition are reached through supportive interaction within the travel bloggers community as a whole.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that the symbolic economy of travel blogging is based on representations of social and power relations, as well as the exchange of attention between writers and readers of blogs. As the result, popular travel bloggers and community site creators become cultural intermediaries, through which global travel as social and cultural construct is defined and transmitted to a wider online audience. The three cases examined in this article, reveal that the symbolic economy of Russian travel blogging entails at least three parameters, or axes of evaluation. These are, firstly the degree of the appropriation of the internet as technology, secondly the degree of appropriation of the internet as a communicative environment and social construct, and thirdly the level of creative input (quality photography and writing, for example) that will increase the amount of ‘quality content’ of the internet in general. The most successful projects are of course high on every degree, but the community of travel bloggers appears to be also an important learning environment, in which different qualities of blogging while traveling are openly discussed, put into test and refined. The internet in this way provides the bloggers agency in the field of transnational economies in more varied ways than the traditional tourism business, which has been a common source of income for many long-term lifestyle travelers.

My analysis also demonstrates how bloggers engage with the transnational economy and postindustrial labor market, characterized by precarious professional life, on the one hand, and increased emphasis on information technologies and networks, on the other. To a certain extent, an independent online community can replace professional collectives for people who are not capable or willing to attach to the institutionalized labour market and office work. This is interesting from the point of view of the 'neoliberal' ethic that is said to predominate virtual work in creative fields. The boundaries between work and leisure, professional and private identities become indefinite, and some travelers conclude that to be a successful blogger means to be constantly working, i.e., hunting for interesting things to photograph and write about to their readers, revealing their lives to the public.

I wonder whether this is the reason why Maria Dubrovskaja quit her blog *Traveliving.org* during the process of writing this article. With the latest entry from 7 July 2016, *Traveliving.org* is now declared 'abandoned' on the *Storyfinder.ru*'s database. However, it still holds the fourth place on the website's ranking list of most popular travel blogs (as of February 2017). Of course, this did not happen without being noticed by the travel blogger community. A number of Dubrovskaja's committed readers try to find reasons for her blog's abandonment on the comments section, suggesting that maybe the blog does not bring her enough revenue and wondering, once again, about the livelihood of long-term world travelers in general. At some point Dubrovskaja enters the conversation saying that the blog was never really economically profitable and that she actually has to pay money for the domain. At the end, she reminds her readers about the anti-materialist and anti-entrepreneurial values that prompted her to embark for the first long-term trip to India in 2006 and start a 'life of travel'. Simultaneously, she continues to update her profiles on Facebook and Instagram and other ready-made corporate social media platforms. This all proves that even as a 'retired blogger' Dubrovskaja continues to be an important node in the Russian traveler bloggers' community. This also indicates that corporate social media platforms circulate the majority of travel images and experiences on the internet because from the viewpoint of a common user, they offer easy platforms without the administrator's responsibility.

What, then, is the role of travelers' community sites and independent travel blogs if even the most dedicated advocate of anti-capitalistic lifestyle and individual freedom opts for corporate social media after nine years of independent blogging?¹⁴ As this article demonstrates, community sites efficiently accumulate the symbolic meaning of independent blogging in the way that it starts to correspond with the core ideas of independent travel lifestyles. Being an independent blogger and community member also shows that it is more important to create and test new technologies for optimising the amount of travel representations than increasing the *de facto* number of online representations of alternative lifestyles. In other words, in the symbolic economy of travel blogging, independent platforms represent an ecologically sustainable choice of communication technology. In the same manner, as the independent traveler chooses to hitchhike across Africa in order to avoid leaving a mark on the face of earth through the superfluous mobility of organized tourism (see Krotov n.y.), the independent travel blogger fights cyber pollution by producing high-quality content for alternative online resources. I therefore conclude this article by quoting a popular travel blogger who elo-

¹⁴ Dubrovskaja writes in the comment on her last blog entry that she does not want to monetize *anything* (Dubrovskaja 2016).

quently brings together the themes of (utopian) freedom and collective responsibility for one's communicative surroundings in her praise for independent blogging platforms. Referring to the amount of false information and 'GS sites' [govno saits] in the internet, she writes,

Friends, the internet is not a resource of second-rate information The internet can be alive and kind, filled with true knowledge and personal experiences vividly described by real people. Let's set up original [avtorskie] blogs that are meant for people. It is exactly these blogs that furnish the internet with quality resources, to which you want to turn in order to find useful, verified information, not copied material (Liubimova 2016).

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