

www.snob.ru: A Social Network Site for the Elite

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Abstract: Since its launch in 2008, the Russian project *Snob*, involving a printed magazine and a website, has fascinated observers as the first example of a self-proclaimed Russian elite, joining the league of *asmallworld.net* and *affluence.com*. Sponsored by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, the project initially resembled yet another invention by New Russians who are eager to flash their riches, with its online social network serving as yet another exclusive club. However, in 2009 the site was opened for guest access and membership by subscription; it is now possible not only to establish the basic facts of the site's interface, design, membership numbers and profile options, but also to analyse the interests and characteristics of the so-called *Snobshchestvo* community. The result of the analysis reveals that we may have to reconsider not only our perception of this particular elite, but also, more generally, our understanding of the social aspect in online social networks.

Keywords: social networking sites, accessibility, elite, community-generated content

Launched in November 2008, the website *snob.ru* continues to be a fascinating phenomenon of contemporary Runet. First, the site functions as a window to an impressive multimedia project, owned by *Media Group ZhV!*, in which celebrity billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov is the majority stockholder. Second, this project makes the best of current trans-medial possibilities. It consists not only of a printed journal (the first issue came out in September 2008) but also of a social network site (SNS), boasting e-mail updates, podcasts, rss- and Twitter-feeds, etc. Allegedly, there are even plans for a TV channel. Third, the very name of the project—and, with it, the claims to exclusivity—have provoked analyses, debate and critique ever since the project was announced in April 2008. And last but not least, in the international context *snob.ru* represents the first, and so far, the only Russian-language social network site for an elite, in the league of the English-language sites *asmallworld.net* (launched in 2004), *outorin.net* (2007), *elixio.net* (2007) and *affluence.org* (2008). Beginning with *beautifulpeople.com* (2002), these sites for the select few have for the last decade established something of a countertrend to increasingly popular open social network sites (SNS). This tendency is but one example of rapid developments within new social media: even as

the many aspects of SNS are only just emerging as a defined field of research (boyd et al. 2007; Thelwall 2009; Papacharissi 2011), social life online is continually reorganising itself and defying our categories and characterisations.

While SNS such as *LiveJournal* (launched in 1999) and Facebook (open version available since 2006)—both of which are among the 20 most popular websites in Russia in terms of visits¹ and thus have substantial Russian-language subnetworks—as well as the immensely popular, purely Russian-language SNS *Vkontakte* (2006)², by their very design, aim at growing bigger, the elite SNS are characterised first of all by restricted access, peer-confirmed membership and membership criteria such as professional success and/or wealth. When open SNS introduce restricted access, such as *Vkontakte* did in 2011 (Il'in 2011), it is because their platforms suffer from the overload of redundant profiles and spam. When elite sites restrict access, they not only avoid this technological problem, but also gain an aura of selectiveness and elite status (boyd et al. 2007: 218).

At the same time, even elite SNS cannot exist if they have almost no members at all. Maybe this problem has caused *Snob* to gradually become more open. Initially, underlining privacy and security, the founders called *snob.ru* 'a protected area on the Internet' [okhrani-aemaia territoria v Internete], and insisted that their project was a "non-mass media" [sredstvo nemassovoi informatsii] (Mazur 2008). *Snob* was thus announced and launched as an elite site, and invitations were sent out to a maximum of 5,000 people, while additional members were to be accepted on the recommendation of at least two existing members (Halpin 2008). However, it would seem that few accepted the invitation, with the number of invited members running today at only 383 (see section on statistics below). Since spring 2009, however, the *Snobshchestvo*, as the community jokingly calls itself (with a pun on *obshchestvo*, the Russian word for society or community), has also included freely subscribing members and seems to be rapidly growing in numbers. According to the estimates of *Bizinformatsiya*, the site presently has as much as 77,540 daily views and 37,800 daily viewers, ranking 675 in Russia.³ The possibility of membership by subscription, on top of increased accessibility for guest visits, obviously compromises the exclusivity of the site, and the question must be asked whether *Snob* is still an elite SNS.⁴ In comparison, *Snob's* Anglo-American siblings continue to offer either extremely limited access or none at all, except via the login box. In the following sections, I will describe my findings as a subscribing member of *Snob*. I will present the website's interface, the differences between guest and member access, the size and composition of the network, and the characteristics of this network as a possible subculture.

¹ Statistics from alexa.com and bizinformatsiya.ru on 5 May 2011.

² As of 5 May 2011, alexa.com ranks it number 5 in Russia, bizinformatsiya.ru number 3 (with almost 107 mio daily views and more than 5 mio daily viewers).

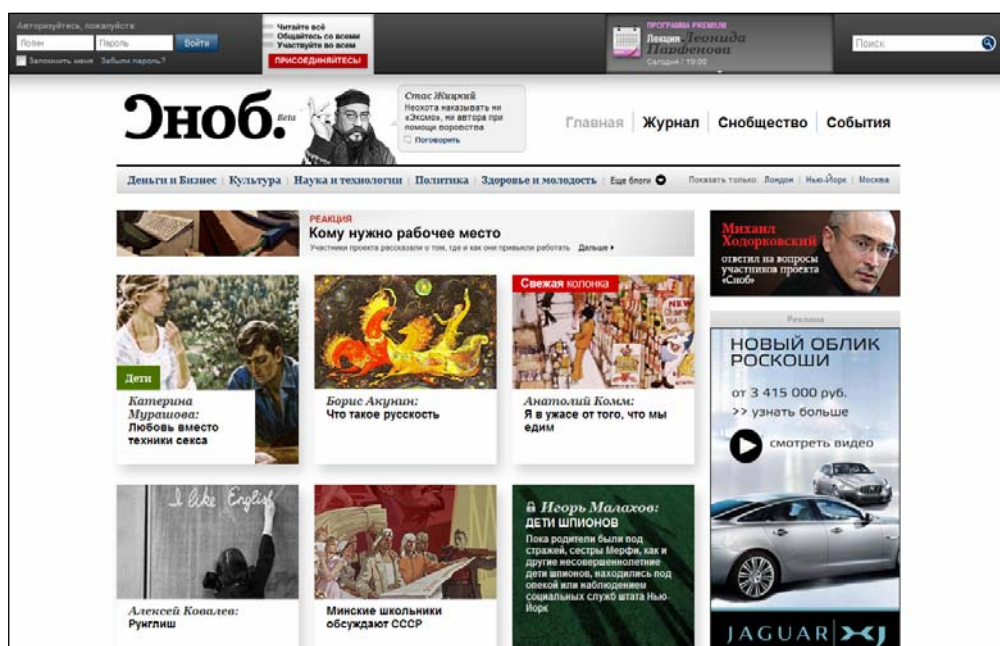
³ bizinformatsiya.ru statistics, accessed 5 May 2011. alexa.com (accessed 5 May 2011) ranks *snob.ru* 968 in Russia.

⁴ Paradoxically, it is because *Snob* is now apparently sacrificing its exclusivity, that we can finally explore its elitist features

The Snob Interface

The index page of Snob is carefully designed and its individual menus, boxes and content areas are stylishly unique and inviting. As a whole, however, as you scroll down, the page appears somewhat overfull and almost messy in its composition, compared to its aesthetic twin, *OpenSpace*.⁵

Figure 1. Screenshot of snob.ru index page.



Source: <http://www.snob.ru> (accessed 11 April 2011).

The top bar is quite straightforward, featuring only a login box, a subscription link, a Premium programme mini-calendar and a search box, all set off from the rest of the page by a dark grey background. The main, white-background page is headed by a menu bar presenting the *Snob* logo with its characteristic f-clef character S, followed by a profile picture that appears almost like a puppet looking over the site and presenting an excerpt from his recent blog post or comment in a speech bubble. Next to this inventive crowning of the page, there are clearly visible links to the main sections of the site: beyond the Main page, these are the Magazine, the *Snobshchestvo* and Events. Below, the website has a discreet submenu bar with thematic headlines for the site's blogs (15 categories) as well as the option of viewing only blogs from or about London, New York, or Moscow.

The main part of the page is taken up by an uneven grid of about 25 content areas. Significantly, only a single, narrow vertical area is an ad banner (on the day of my analysis, the 11th of April 2011, alternating between ads for World Master Card Black Edition and for Jaguar). The rest of the areas are excerpts from, lists of and links to interviews, correspondents' columns, blog posts and comments from the site community. Profile photos abound,

⁵ For a discussion of *OpenSpace* see Rutten 2011.

so do expressions of topicality in the headings: Reactions, The comment of the day, The discussion of the day, Right now, a list of most popular blogs⁶, a list of most active discussions, and, finally, statistically generated lists of newest and most popular individual blog posts (the latter in April 2011 headed by a discussion on ‘What is Russianness?’ initiated by Boris Akunin). In the lower left corner one finds a series of embedded podcast readings, arranged by *Snob*. Everything is hyperlinked and generously illustrated with a mixture of original art, new photography and well-known motifs from Russian and Soviet art and culture. The predominance of Russian themes on this day is typical, if quite overwhelming. However, world news also shapes the blogs and discussions, a predominant issue in the second week of March 2011 being the earthquake and nuclear plant catastrophe in Japan, while in the first week of May 2011 it was the death of Osama bin Laden.

The index page thus offers a vast number of access points to prominent, active and commented blogs, and visitors can quickly find themselves lost in details or repeatedly coming across the same posts and discussions. On April 11, 2011 the page had no fewer than five prominently featured links to the very same blogpost by Stas Zhitskii (on his boycott of the publisher Eksmo because of their book series ‘Stalinist’, which, for example, presents Beria as the most talented manager of the 20th century). To help visitors find their bearings in this maze, the bottom of the index page has a menu bar that contains additional links to the Main page, the Magazine, *Snobshchestvo* and Subscription. More importantly, it also has a whole *Snob* menu with extensive project-relevant information: About the project, Where to buy the magazine, How to become a member, FAQs and Rules. Furthermore, there is a contact menu with various possibilities of asking, commenting or getting in touch, and a menu linking to a list of editors and others working in the project. The editor-in-chief, Vladimir Iakovlev (b. 1959), is famous for his success in the 1990s with the *Kommersant* newspaper. He has two deputy editors-in-chief, acclaimed journalist and author Masha Gessen and glossy magazine pioneer Sergei Nikolaevich. The marketing director is none other than the young poet, journalist and computer programmer Linor Goralik; the art director is the prize-winning designer Il’ia Baranov.

The general impression of a high level of interactivity combined with openness towards guests and new members is further supported by links in the lower right corner to *Snob* project profiles on *LiveJournal*, Facebook, Twitter, Vkontakte and LinkedIn. Moreover, links to Rambler and mail.ru statistics of visits to Russian news blogs and mass media magazines (in which the *Snob* website ranks number two and one, respectively) testify to a certain openness about the project. A focus on interactivity and openness also characterises the project’s self-description (I cite from the recently added English ‘About’ section, retrieved on the 11th of March 2011):

Snob is an international project and a one-of-kind social medium for people, who live in various countries around the world, speak various languages but think in Russian.

At *Snob*, a famous writer from Moscow can engage in a conversation with a student who loves cinema, or start a conversation with an outstanding British fashion designer

⁶ On April 11 2011, the most popular blogs were written by designer Stas Zhitskii, writer Grigorii Chkhartishvili, aka the immensely popular writer Boris Akunin, sexologist Mikhail Dubovskov, designer and photographer-cum-blogger Rustem Adagamov and astrophysicist and journalist Sergei Popov.

or a software developer from Boston. Participants of the project are not divided by geography, social status, age or beliefs. Whatever they do, and wherever they live, they are united by a common interest in the world that surrounds them and a desire to act in order to make this world a better place.

Snob—daily news and discussions at snob.ru;

Snob—magazine available in print and [online](#);

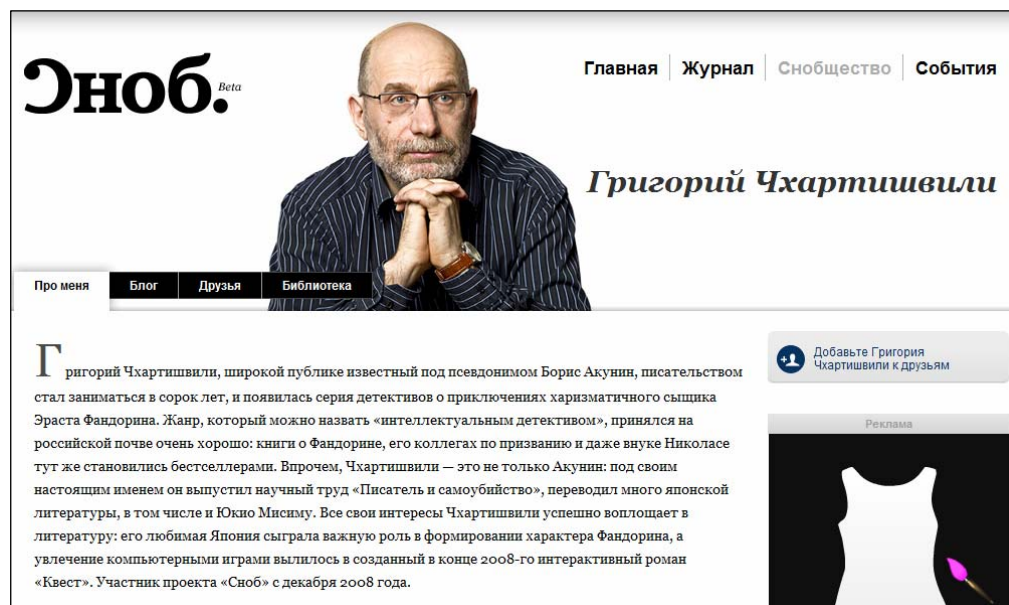
Snob—renowned Russian and world authors, illustrators, photographers and artists;

Snob—exclusive events for the participants of the project.

But most importantly, *Snob* is a unique infrastructure of people. And yes, you can become a part of it.

Every guest visitor is thus invited to become a member. This is quite different from the initial plans of a ‘protected area on the internet’ (Mazur 2008) and a closed, invite-only club for people with a monthly income above \$10,000 (Ganiushin et al. 2008; OpenSpace 2009). Nowadays a lot of people would be able to afford the lowest subscription fee of 1,000 rubles per annum (\$40), which covers online membership only. Others may enter the project at higher levels of this new subscription hierarchy: online access plus the printed journal costs 3,750 rubles (\$140); this basic subscription in addition to extended interactivity features, costs 6,400 rubles (\$235); while the most expensive, Premium subscription costs 30,000 rubles per annum (\$1,100) and includes special access to cultural events and special offers in bars, restaurants and stores.

Much of the site’s content, including many magazine articles, is already accessible to guest visitors browsing the pages. Why should anyone then choose to become a member? One benefit is full access to the newest articles and to personal information displayed in members’ profiles, as well as to (a very limited number of) blog posts marked with ‘members-only’ access. Apart from researching observers, few would probably be motivated to pay for such a small upgrade in access. The most probable motivation for subscription is to gain access to the site’s interactive discursive spaces: members can establish their own blog, library and lists of friends (although the last is not a commonly used feature among existing members) and they can comment on all posts, discuss with and establish contact with other members. The growing number of subscribers indicates that these possibilities have a broad appeal.

Figure 2. Screenshot of Boris Akunin's profile, guest visit access.

Source: <http://www.snob.ru/profile/about/5232> (accessed 11 April 2011).

Figure 2b. Screenshot of personal profile information options: home town, birthday, profession, education, family, interests, other (my profile, logged-in).

город, в котором я живу	[Редактировать]
день рождения	[Редактировать]
профессия	[Редактировать]
вуз	[Редактировать]
семья	[Редактировать]
интересы	[Редактировать]
прочее	[Редактировать]

Source: <http://www.snob.ru/profile/about> (accessed 11 April 2011).

The Snobshchestvo

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the involvement of Prokhorov, Western journalists writing about the *Snob* project have been heavily influenced by the existing reputation of super-rich new Russians, and have seen the project as decadent and displaying bad taste (Kilner 2008; Halpin 2008; Le Matin 2008; Dolnick 2010). However, it would seem rather that the target

members were and are successful middle-class professionals (Walker 2008). It has even been suggested that the editor-in-chief Vladimir Iakovlev, who influenced the style and identity of new Russian businessmen of the 1990s with his newspaper Kommersant, may have spotted a new class, a class of self-made men (Ganiushin et al. 2008). When announcing the project in April 2008, the project's general director Andrei Shmarov said:

There are networking sites for all types of people, but none for the sort of educated, independent and successful professionals that mix in my social circle. We want to create a closed online club where people can talk to each other. Such people are not poor as a rule, but wealth will not be the only criterion. A scientist who demonstrates professionalism and success could also be with us (Halpin 2008).

Initially, the members of the exclusive club, the 'people, who live in various countries around the world, speak various languages but think in Russian' (*Snob*, 'About' section) were dubbed 'Global Russians' (OpenSpace 2008a), and this name is still used by members and commentators, although it has disappeared from the self-description.

At the same time, the name of *Snob* has not disappeared, but seems continually to help the community gain a common identity. Initially, the founders were eager to explain the special 'Russian' meaning, and the positive attributes of the word and phenomenon (Kilner 2008; Walker 2008), while also playing ironically on the word. Likewise, the acronymic pun of *sostoiavshiisia* [fulfilled], *nezavisimyi* [independent], *obrazovannyi* [educated] and *blagopoluchnyi* [well-off] (Mazur 2008; Halpin 2008) should hardly be taken too seriously. Nevertheless, the fact that editors and members as well as commentators still discuss the name contributes to the self-identification of the community. Undoubtedly, *Snobshchestvo* takes pride in the fact that lenta.ru has included a whole *Snob* vocabulary reference (published 2009 and conceived by Gasan Gusejnov) in their creative, online dictionary of current words that are not explained in ordinary dictionaries. For example, there are words like *snob* [snob], *global'nye russkie* [global Russians], *attitud* [attitude], *kreativnyi klass* [creative class] and *novaia identichnost'* [new identity] (Lenta 2009).⁷

Like other elite network sites, *Snob* still signals excellence and good taste in its design and advertising. Moreover, judging by a row of scandalous departures from the project,⁸ the latest of which has resulted in the creation of a competing website with the name *NewsNob* that mocks *Snob* (Cherkudinova 2011), a strict editorial line is being upheld. But how can it prevent the 'wrong' kind of people from joining the *Snobshchestvo* as subscribing members and compromising the elitist style of the site? A quick examination of subscribers' profile photos suggests that this is not yet a problem, since only very few of them in fact appear different from the well-dressed crowd.

As of spring 2011 the number of members could still be counted manually by going through the alphabetical lists of invited and subscribing members. The project had 383 invited members and 3,858 subscribing, while the editorial list counted 42, making a sum total

⁷ Many thanks to Gasan Gusejnov for this information.

⁸ Oleg Iur'ev, Oleg Divov, Dmitrii Romendik and Leonid Bershidskii all left the project because their articles were rejected (OpenSpace 2011).

of 4,283.⁹ If this is not a lot for a SNS, it is obviously enough to secure a great deal of interactivity and long discussions (the aforementioned Russianness-discussion triggered 108 comments by 6.50 pm on April 11, 2011). The age, location and profession of members would be interesting to know, just as analyses of personal blogs would allow us to go beyond the general impression of beautifully styled and confidently smiling people in their best years. Such detailed analysis could also test the self-description's claim that 'participants of the project are not divided by geography, social status, age or beliefs' (*Snob*, 'About' section). At the present stage of my research, I can provide only rough gender and activity statistics, combined with a note on the use of different alphabets.

The members lists are divided between the Cyrillic and Roman alphabets, and the choice of Roman characters by Russian or at least Russian-speaking members may be a signal of conscious impression-formation signalling a Western or globalised lifestyle, since Roman characters pertain to European languages in general and, within Russian language culture, to British, American and global English in particular. For the activity analysis, I counted profile photos, viewing the presence of a photo as indicator of involvement. Judging by the earlier issues of the printed magazine, and also by the ads on the website—often for cars and often showing female models—one might suspect *Snob* to be an exclusive male club. In fact, of the 383 *invited* members 75 percent are indeed men. They all provide their names in Cyrillic and all have a profile photo, indicating that they are comfortable with Cyrillic and active on the site. This core group of invitees within the *Snobshchestvo* may be regarded as bearers of the initial intentions and preferences of the online club: they have been found worthy of membership and form an exclusive group within the community. However, the male-dominated core is surrounded by 3,858 subscribing members of almost equal gender representation: 53 percent are men. 570 of the subscribers spell their names using Roman alphabet, and significantly 58 percent of them are women. Overall, 56 percent of subscribing members have profile photos: 58 percent host Cyrillic-lettered, 46 percent have Roman-lettered profiles. The Roman-lettered profiles may thus include quite a few passive, maybe even non-Russian observers (including me). The editorial office lists 42 journalists, editors, translators, photo-editors, illustrators and managers; 60 percent are women and the leadership, as we have seen, has almost equal representation.

***Snob* culture**

Both the magazine and website of the *Snob* project focused from the beginning on lifestyle features, business news and travel (Kilner 2008). There was also a clear preference for cultural issues, not least for the works and opinions of literary writers. Today, business features prominently, and literature has come even more to the fore, with new literary works being published on the site. It is no coincidence that the 'famous writer from Moscow' is mentioned first as the possible member in the SNS's self-description: Vladimir Sorokin, Boris Akunin, Mikhail Elizarov are all members by invitation, as are Boris Strugatsky and Ludmila Petrushevskaya. Consequently, the site is quite text heavy, not unlike the printed *Snob* magazine. The critic Natalia Ivanova in a recent review called the *Snob* magazine 'a challenge to

⁹ Counted by the author on March 14, 2011.

the thick journal society', but also seemed to recognise it as a kind of a 'new thick' journal (Ivanova 2010)—Russian literary-cum-philosophical 'thick journals' having traditionally played an important cultural role, until they were displaced by glossy lifestyle magazines. Several of the more prominent *Snob* members are writers (others are film directors, actors, musicians and journalists), and all members are apparently readers. Apart from literature, frequently discussed themes include food, film, fashion, design and software, as well as, increasingly, current affairs and political issues. The 15 thematic blog categories are: Money & Business, Culture, Science & Technology, Politics, Health & Youth, 2012, Food & Travel, How to Live, Children, Literature, Medvedev, About the project, From the editors, Events and The 20th Century.

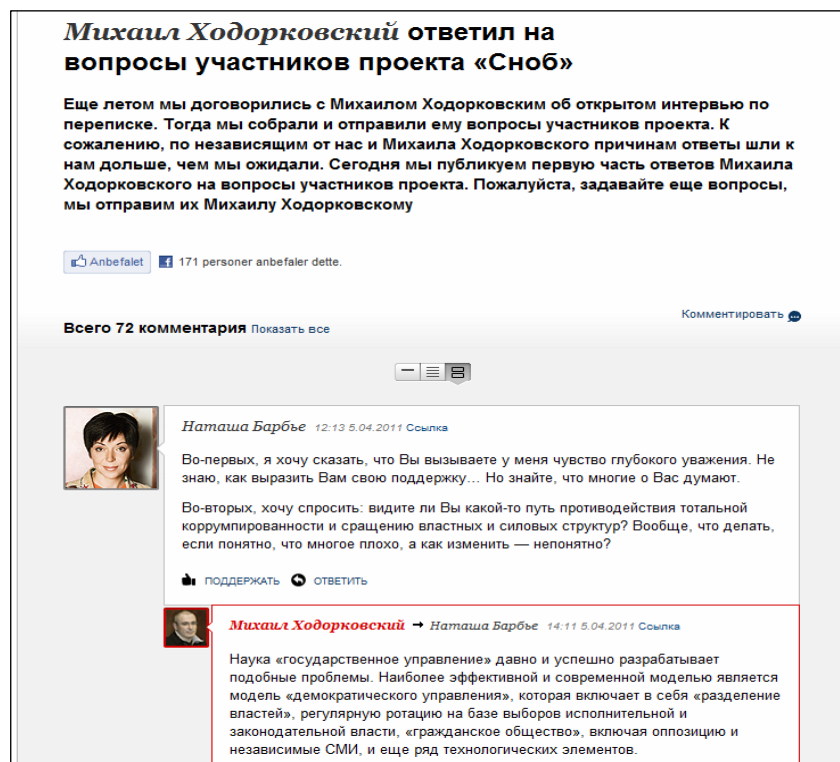
When the *Snob* magazine was launched in 2008, editor-in-chief Iakovlev stated in an interview with OpenSpace, the most loyal chronicler of the site, that a very important characteristic of his 'product' was that it would not be infantile, as opposed to much contemporary journalism (OpenSpace 2008b). Not only the magazine but also the website has obviously fulfilled this mission. Although very long discussions on subjects such as a proper breakfast¹⁰ may seem surprisingly 'light', most of the blog posts and comments on snob.ru display a serious interest in contemporary Russian culture and politics, and include well-formulated views on world issues as well as on more philosophical subjects. Thanks to a recent Anglophone extension, a 'highlights in English' page with the address wishicouldreadsnoob.com, non-Russian speakers may also get a glimpse of the project.

Another success of the site is that the self-proclaimed 'unique infrastructure of people' (*Snob*, 'About' section) actually seems to work. The 'uniqueness' is secured by an exclusive core of cultural personalities, and wherever you go on the site, the interface is dominated by interconnected blogs, comments and discussions.

Are the members then concerned about making the world a better place, as they proclaim? Are they ready to act? They are undoubtedly seriously involved in important issues in the world around them; however, the high class tastes that are also promoted on the site—in the form of exquisite design and high language norms—seem to a certain extent to contradict the political mission, or at least to add an air of distance to it, suggesting that the *Snob* members are not ready to get their hands dirty in any literal sense.

And yet, a recent interview with the imprisoned Mikhail Khodorkovskii proves that the *Snobshchestvo* does in fact have a political raison d'être in addition to its other purposes. In June 2010 *Snob* members were offered an opportunity to pose questions to Khodorkovskii, with his lawyer acting as intermediary not only between the 'interviewers' and the interviewee, but also between the online questions and the offline, written answers. 94 members participated, and the first answers were posted after almost 10 months (5 April 2011). This correspondence makes very interesting reading and is an impressive example of user-generated or, more precisely, community-generated content dealing with an extremely important and controversial matter.

¹⁰ 127 comments followed a Sorokin blog post on this theme January 27 2010

Figure 4. Screenshot of an interview with Khodorkovskii.

Source: http://www.snob.ru/thread/25#entry_33834 (accessed 11 April 2011).

Perhaps this kind of common discursive action around topical issues is the real force of the *Snob* community in its current composition. Unlike the more popular SNS, where social interaction is often the primary function, the *Snob* members seem less interested in their own and others' private lives than in news, knowledge and opinions. This is in line with the initiators' proclamation that, as a social network site, Snob would be mostly about the high-quality content produced by editors and readers together, whereas social interaction [obshchenie] would not be the primary function: "Snob is not only and not just a social network site" (Ganiushin et al. 2008). In this sense, however open the network may have become, snob.ru still hosts an elite. It is not unthinkable that their vanguard may inspire similar initiatives that will seriously challenge our perception of what the "social" in social network sites actually means.

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