The Faces and Spaces of a Russian Culture-News Portal: www.openspace.ru

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Abstract: OpenSpace.ru is both a Russian-language culture news portal and a digital home for Russia's creative vanguard. This article posits the project within the international cultural-news media landscape, to then analyze the site's history, interface, its socio-cultural profile, and the extent to which its editors opt for user interaction.

Keywords: cultural news-portal, creativity, interactivity, web archaeology, Russia, online culture

OpenSpace.ru is a Russian-language culture news portal. It provides viewers with news and background information on a variety of cultural domains: the site menu includes links to the categories of cinema, visual arts, (popular and contemporary classical) music, literature, theatre, media and society. Contributors report both on Russia-related and international developments, with perhaps a slight preference of the first.

As most contemporary news sites, OpenSpace.ru serves as an interactive cultural experience rather than a static venue for news consumption. In some respects, it functions as a social rather than a traditional news medium, although—as I explain in more detail below—news deliverance does rank at the top of the editors' agenda. Users are faced with a transmedial rather than a text- or image-only resource: they can opt for script-based items—think news analysis, reviews, columns, interviews—but also for visual links (slide shows, online exhibitions), audiofiles, or videos; they can engage in online surveys, (dis)like or comment on items and participate in web contests.

Its similarity to other news sites notwithstanding, OpenSpace.ru does not have a direct equivalent outside Russia. The site both boasts a more refined design and features a more regularly updated news feed than such English-language siblings as, say, the *Bomb* site (www.bombsite.com), or the online version of the *New Yorker* (www.newyorker.com).

Figure 1. OpenSpace.ru's red-and-black logo.

Source: http://img.lenta.ru/news/2008/06/25/openspace/picture.jpg (accessed 12 April 2011)

Unlike these websites, OpenSpace.ru not only monitors, but also generates cultural production in a variety of disciplines: the portal presents numerous new literary texts, art works, lectures, videos, and musical compositions devised exclusively for (or first published at) this venue by Russia's creative vanguard. Not surprisingly, for such a high-profile intellectual enterprise, the site attracts a substantial and regular audience: according to site-traffic information site bizinformatsiya.ru, OpenSpace.ru generates nearly 40,000 daily views and close to 20,000 daily viewers.[1] If dwarfed by the number of visit(or)s to traditional news sites, these numbers place the site firmly among the world's most popular intellectual/cultural e-venues. According to the same site-traffic data service, such internationally renowned cultural news providers as the *New Yorker* (www.newyorker.com) or *Artforum* (www.artforum.com) attract around 83,000/57,000 and 5,000/3,000 daily online views/ viewers, respectively.[2]

History of OpenSpace.ru

OpenSpace.ru is a relatively new kid on the digital block. The site was launched by the largest media company within the Russian art scene, the Art Media Group, in 2008. Main responsibility for the site's conceptual outlines has resided from the start with Mariia Stepanova (b. 1972), a renowned Russian poet who acts as OpenSpace.ru's editor-in-chief. Having selected a contributors' collective from the pick of Russia's intellectual vanguard, she rapidly catapulted the site to fame among intellectuals and creative professionals. Its success proved as consistent as it was instantaneous.[3]

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[1] Today, the widest-used site-traffic monitoring service is www.alexa.com, but this site's monitor does not always render reliable results for Russian-language websites. Alexa, Bizinformatsiya/Bizinformation and other site-traffic trackers all warrant a sceptical approach, at the very least. For a critical discussion of site-traffic statistics, see the sections devoted to this problem in Langville & Meyer 2006.

[2] All numbers extracted from www.bizinformation.org/us on 26 March 2011.

[3] Having visited the site from the early days onwards, I personally remember how it attracted instant attention as an intellectual platform, and I have seen its popularity persist steadily until today. In a conversation that we had

OpenSpace.ru's persistent popularity can be explained by a number of factors. It sprang partly from the resource's solid financial position. Its link to the lavishly funded Art Media Group project enabled the founders to commit the Russian creative-cum-intellectual elite to their project through adequate financial arrangements.[4] The site's success was further endorsed by socio-cultural factors, such as the disproportionately strong presence of creative professionals on the Russian-speaking Internet as a whole. Scholars have repeatedly pointed to the massive migration, from the early 1990s onwards, of Russian intellectual debate and creative production to online spheres (cf. Gorny 2009; Schmidt & Teubener 2006; Etkind 2008; Rutten 2008). They explain this move with a mixture of socio-economic factors. First, the formative years of Russian digital media coincided with the economically unstable *perestroika* era, and many creative professionals originally turned to online platforms due to the absence of an institutionalized offline cultural scene. Second, in the highly normative climate that Russian public culture comprises, 'the Internet'—in the words of Runet experts Henrike Schmidt and Katy Teubener (2006: 15)—'offered a space for free articulation of non-normative cultural activities'. Finally, in Putin-cum-Medvedev's Russia, digital media form the one discursive space where controversial political or social views can be more or less freely expressed (for a discussion of the relative absence of direct cybercensorship in Russia until 2010 see Reporters Without Borders 2011; on recent intensifications of government-led cybermonitoring see Heacock 2011).

The result of these socio-political ramifications is dazzling creative activity within the Russian-speaking Internet. Illustrative is the critic Dmitrii Kuz'min's claim—in a 2004 discussion of literary writing, a creative discipline that enjoys a particularly strong online presence in Russia—that 'practically all authors of the latest literary generation … entered the scene through the Internet' (Kuz'min 2004). Akin to similarly popular online projects as Vavilon (vavilon.ru) and Snob (snob.ru; see, for a discussion, Roesen 2011), OpenSpace.ru both sprang from and maximally exploited this vibrancy of online cultural activity.

In 2010, the site's growth stagnated as it faced a short but substantial crisis. In February of that year, Art Media Group owner Valerii Nosov was arrested on fraud charges; as a result, OpenSpace.ru—among other Art Media-funded projects—experienced serious financial difficulties. Funding to pay the editors and authors faltered and the site shut down in May. A mere three months later, it was re-launched after a take-over by well-to-do banker Vadim Beliaev. In a not humorousless reflection on creative patronage among Russia's contemporary rich-and-famous, Beliaev himself shared the story of the transaction in his blog on snob.ru—in a post with the straightforward title 'How I bought OpenSpace.ru' (Beliaev 2010).

When commenting on the site's re-launch, editor-in-chief Stepanova denied rumours that the change in ownership would result in any 'serious changes in the resource's conceptual direction' (Stepanova in Bakharev2010). The OpenSpace.ru that welcomes viewers today indeed differs little from the site as it was in its early days. Illustrative for the type of content

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in April 2011, this impression was confirmed by contributing editor and critic/linguist Ilia Kukulin (personal conversation with Kukulin in Bergen, Norway, March 24 2011).

[4] Without naming concrete sums, in personal conversations several OpenSpace.ru authors told me that they are properly, if not sumptuously, paid for their contributions. Some speculated that the editors might adjust payments according to the status of the contributor within Russia's cultural economy; however, as they themselves acknowledged, this hypothesis is hard to test.

that the site presents is the news selection with which it opened on a random spring day in 2011, as this review was in the making. The moving picture gallery with which the main page opens linked readers—in the following order—to:

- an interview with Cami Delavigne, the script writer of the American film *Blue Valentine*;
- a discussion of alternative mass media formats by media reporter Egor Mostovshchikov;
- a review of new stagings of a Shchedrin opera at St. Petersburg's Marinskii theatre;
- an account of the earthquake in Japan;
- an essay on contemporary poetry by poet-cum-critic Mikhail Aizenberg;
- a selection of exam work of the Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography and Multimedia;
- an interview with Polish film director Krzysztof Warlikowski; and
- a presentation of 13 tracks that were submitted to an online songwriting contest titled Record 2.0.

Cinema, media, opera, poetry, photography and pop music: the selection is unwavering in its strict focus on cultural events. Admittedly, the earthquake report is an odd inclusion; however, even when analyzing sociopolitical news events, OpenSpace.ru often tackles them from a cultural perspective. Exemplary was the site's coverage of the bomb attack at Domodedovo airport in January 2011. OpenSpace.ru focused on the 'cultural aspect' of the events by including a news analysis written by poet Elena Fanailova and an obituary to drama writer Anna Iablonskaia, who died in the explosion (Fanailova 2011; Angel 2011).

OpenSpace.ru Interface

The OpenSpace.ru homepage boasts a sophisticated design. Upon entering the page, visitors are welcomed by a set of variously sized content areas, whose bright colours stand out against the site's white background. Extending to about three vertical display areas, the homepage is on the long side—upon opening it, most users will see some mere 9 of the total of roughly 30 multimedial sections of which it is composed (see Figure 2).

At the heart of the homepage is the largest and most prominent section: a landscape-sized moving picture gallery that leads users to the main news items of the moment. Across the pictures, transparent text boxes display a header for each individual item. On another random spring day in 2011—April 21—the homepage featured three more prominent news sections, which linked readers to a film review contest, a portrait of the Beastie Boys, and a news report on the detained Chinese artist Ai Weiwei—all introduced through a lead and one image. The news section as a whole is updated every other hour, approximately.

Figure 2. The OpenSpace.ru homepage as it looked on 12 April 2011.
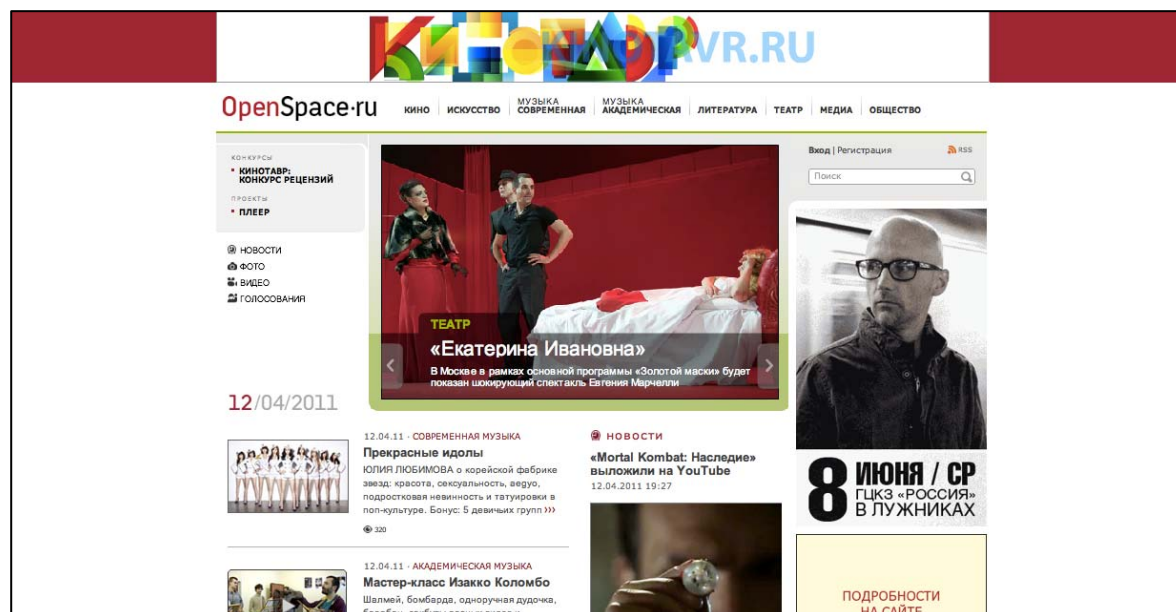
Source: http://www.openspace.ru (accessed 12 April 2011).

That the site is set up as a cultural news portal is clear from the tabbed menu navigation bar on top of the page. As stated, it links readers to news on highbrow cultural domains, mainly—cinema, visual arts, popular music, academic music, literature, theatre, media, and society (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Cinema, visual arts, and more: the OpenSpace.ru menu bar.


Source: http://www.openspace.ru (accessed 21 April 2011).

The left side of the screen features an additional navigation bar: here, the site content is organized along the categories of 'news', 'photography', 'videos', and 'contests'.

Thanks to the site's relative financial independency, advertising on OpenSpace.ru is unobtrusive. The homepage section that is immediately visible features two ad banners; both promote cultural and/or site-related products rather than exclusively commercial goods (on April 6, viewers were invited to visit a Polish film retrospective and to submit work for the Nos literary prize).

As a whole, the homepage presents a data-dense, but intellectually coherent and visually delicate interface. Its visual refinement is no coincidence: opting, again, for the cream of the crop of what is now popularly called, after Richard Florida, Russia's *kreativnyi klass* [creative class] (Lenta.ru 2009), the owners attracted a selection of prizewinning Russian designers and programmers. The outlines of the current site are defined by Ally Design (responsible for the page designs) (see Figure 4), Studio Valerii Komiagin (programming), and Studio Letterhead (fonts). All are acclaimed professionals in the field.

Figure 4. The homepage of Ally Design, which signed for the OpenSpace.ru page designs.
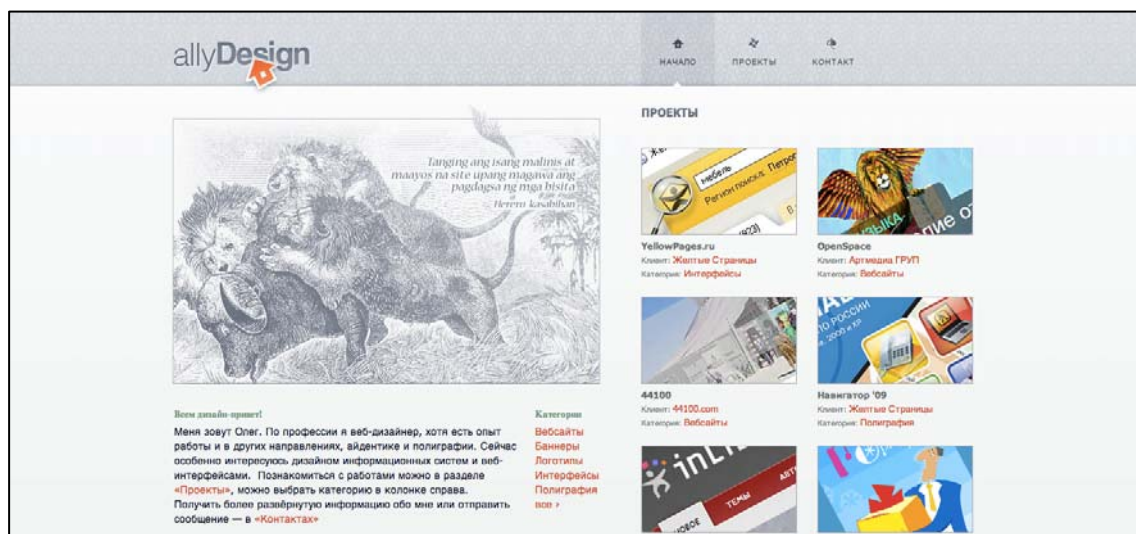
Source: http://ally.com.ru/ (accessed 12 April 2011).

In other words, from an aesthetic point of view OpenSpace.ru boasts an extremely appealing platform. Its appeal is also grounded in its interactivity: the site invites users to join, too, and it has (a modest) participatory potential that I discuss below. Paradoxically, however, the site interface does nothing to generate contact with users in another sense: that of offering viewers insight into its aims and profile. If its digital sibling snob.ru excels in elaborate and multi-language self-descriptions (see Roesen 2011), then OpenSpace.ru shrouds itself in silence. Neither on the homepage, nor elsewhere on the site do users find any self-reflective texts on the platform at stake. A mission statement, an 'About' section: the openspace editors provide no profile description of any kind, apart from the oneliner that appears below the site name in search result lists ('Readings of various aspects of contemporary culture. Cinema, art, music, literature').

Curiously, this absence of self-descriptive elements is a common genre feature of news websites (neither the *New York Times* site nor that of *Die Zeit* feature 'about' options or alternative self-reflective sections; why, one wonders, do news media not present themselves to online readers more actively?). But in the case of OpenSpace.ru, the lack of a portal profile is yet more pronounced as it extends beyond the site proper. The site has no Wikipedia entry, and a Google Search for OpenSpace.ru generates mostly internal site links. Given the professional set-up of the project, this lack of online self-presentation is unlikely to result from inexperience: it rather joins a viral trend in current (especially online) marketing (Penenberg 2009). Modelling its PR policy on such successful predecessors as YouTube and Facebook, so it seems, the site targets an audience that is or wants to be 'in the know'—a public, in other words, that is sensitive to viral rather than traditional marketing strategies.

Faces of OpenSpace.ru

OpenSpace.ru is a digital home for the pick of Russia's creative vanguard. I stress this point with a specific intention. More than many other cultural news sites, OpenSpace.ru would be

unthinkable without the outstanding creative collective that launched and governs the site. Including internationally renowned artists, academics, writers and musicians, the list of contributing authors is lengthy—by March 2011, it featured 518 names—and reads as a 'who is who' of Russian intellectual and creative life. The artist Ilia Kabakov, literary scholar Mark Lipovetsky, media theorist Boris Groys, the writer Vladimir Sorokin, composer Boris Filanovskii—these and many other canonical names of 21st-century Russian culture participate(d) in the project. Within the transmedial cultural environment that OpenSpace.ru forms, most of them simultaneously figure as news objects and cultural producers. Within Open-Space.ru Vladimir Sorokin, for example, stars as 1. an interviewee, 2. an object of literary news reports, 3. a key figure in a playful video series on 'giants' of contemporary Russian culture (see Figure 5), and 4. the author of an illustrated play launched exclusively on the OpenSpace.ru site.

Figure 5. Vladimir Sorokin caressing a portrait of Lev Tolstoy in the video interview series 'Giants [of contemporary Russian culture]'.

*Source*: http://www.openspace.ru/mediathek/details/6949/ (accessed 12 April 2011).

It is seductive to draw a parallel between the OpenSpace.ru collective and the so-called *snob-shchestvo*—the 383 creative invitees who feed content into the snob.ru project.[5] On both sites, the list of contributors is an alphabetically ordered inventory of clickable names (many of which recur in both projects) of leading Russian cultural figures. A closer look reveals crucial differences, however. Most importantly, these include the very format in which the names are embedded: snob.ru presents itself as a club, upheld by a collective that is explicitly—and provocatively—framed as such, and whose members are introduced with photographs and elaborate personal profile pages. By contrast, OpenSpace.ru adheres to the more

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[5] The number is based on Tine Roesen's (2011) count as reproduced in her review on Snob.

traditional model of a contributing-authors list. Its 'authors' page differs, therefore, little from that of the *New Yorker* and other cultural-news websites. Upon clicking on an author's name, users are led to a list of contributions that this particular person has generated for the site—not, as would be the case with a *snobshchestvo* member, to a personal profile. In this respect, OpenSpace.ru adheres to the more traditional role of news provider rather than to the more personalized club model of its cultural sibling.

Within the collective as a whole, the most prominent positions are upheld by the site's columnists—who, again, have been recruited from among post-Soviet Russia's most talented and respected cultural practitioners. Architect Kirill Ass updates users on recent developments in architecture, composer Boris Filanovskii writes columns on modern classical music (see figure 6), and artist Liza Morozova is responsible for an essay series on contemporary art and performance.

Figure 6. 'Boris Filanovskii's Column': snapshot of a recent column by composer Boris Filanovskii on contemporary classical music.
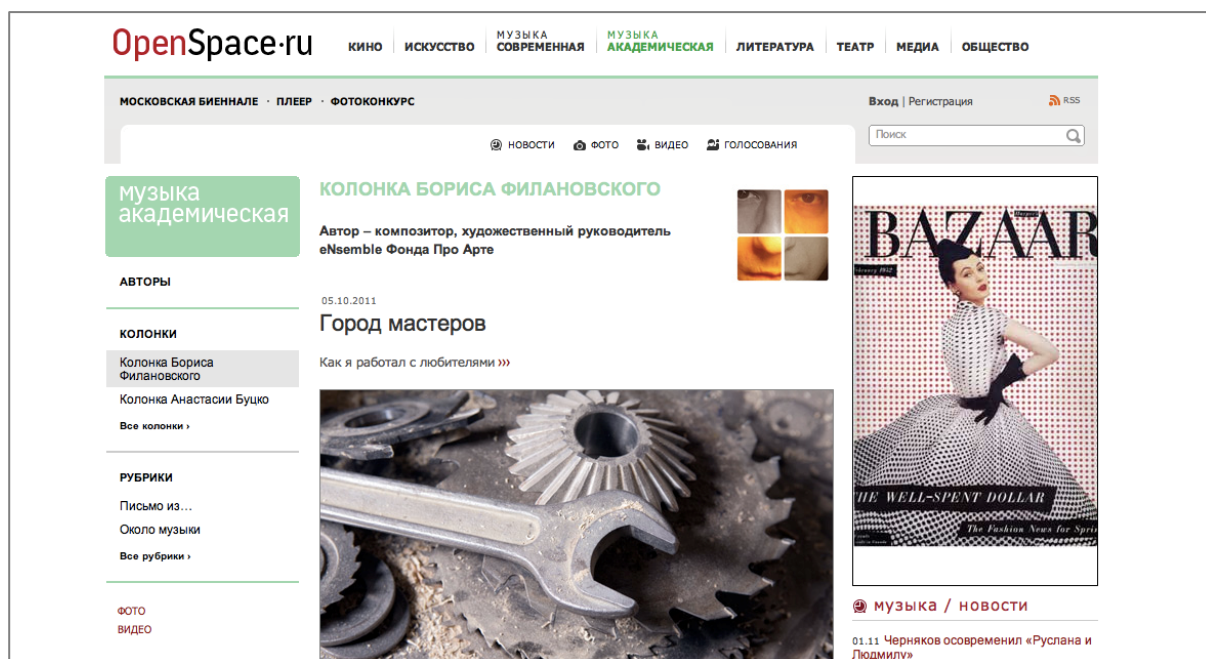
Source: http://www.openspace.ru/music_classic/projects/117 (accessed 12 April 2011).

There is little doubt that these and other news items target an audience whose social profile matches that of its contributors: urban, highly-educated professionals with a heightened interest in the cultural and creative industries. And OpenSpace.ru indeed reaches this particular group, as suggested by the site usage data provided by renowned web information company Alexa. According to their unintentionally comical site description, '[c]ompared with all internet users, this site's users are disproportionately low-income, and they tend to be highly educated men under the age of 35 who browse from home' (Alexa.com 2011).

Spaces of OpenSpace.ru: By Way of Conclusion

A young homebird who lacks the means to roam around town: this depiction—as the Alexa.com statistics provided above suggest—captures the average OpenSpace.ru user to a T. One thing is clear, however: a stay-at-home user who surfs the OpenSpace.ru site long enough is likely to want to leave that home at some point. Contributors draw attention to such a multitude of cultural events and gatherings that the site begins to function as an agenda rather than a news provider. The social function dominates especially for users residing in Moscow, where a substantial portion of the presented activities takes place.

This brings me to a last feature of the site—the types of 'spaces' or items to which viewers are led when browsing it. Aside from agenda-bound items (artist X exhibits on dates Y-Y at venue Z), viewers can move back and forth between a plethora of multimedial content areas: they are invited to watch (opera and/or popular) music videos, read literary texts, philosophical essays and (cultural) news analyses, listen to and watch poetry performances, watch visual art works and photographs, watch samples from newly released films or interviews with film directors, engage in theme-related polls ('Why do writers in Russia earn so little?'), submit work for online contests ('Write the best film review'), or comment on existing items. Some items are strictly news-based ('The best concert of the month'), others have a more reflective character ('Russia will soon disappear'). For me, a typical browsing session entails moving from the homepage to a report, interview or video, then perhaps to the (either textual or audiovisual) related entries that follow below the item in question, and often I conclude with another quick glance at the homepage and some clicks on the most alluring sections.

The user-led potential of some of the genres mentioned—polls, comment options—is exploited by users, albeit to a limited extent. Unlike the fan site animeforum.ru that Sudha Rajagopalan portrayed in issue 5 of *Digital Icons* (Rajagopalan 2010), OpenSpace.ru was not set up to promote interactivity and cultural production by site consumers. Its first goal consists in news deliverance rather than interaction with users. This producer-led model is reflected in the modest degree of interactivity on the site. To be sure, it does serve as a platform for expressing opinions and for participatory action of a substantial amount of readers: OpenSpace.ru's most popular polls attract between 1,500 and 1,800 voters, and controversial items spark some 100-200 comments. That processes of user intervention matter to the editors is suggested by prominently placed sections that link viewers from the homepage to 'all poll results' and 'the most commented items'.

Many contributions spark little to no comments, however, and on the day that I wrote this conclusion, the five best-commented pieces of the past two weeks generated between 53 and 16 responses. What is more, commentators rarely enter into a full-fledged discussion with others, or with the contributor to whose work they respond. But then a moderate degree of user participation, as the site design suggests, is precisely what OpenSpace.ru's creative fathers had in mind when devising the project.

Historically, 'open space' is a phrase that refers to areas of land that are left open, either for usage of the public or for future development or recreation. The term is aptly chosen, for a digital project that enlightens and interacts, to some extent, with the public on Russian and international creative developments and their future.

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