Alyssa Marie Haerle, University of California, Los Angeles

Analyzing Dmitry Medvedev’s Use of the Internet as a Political Medium

For the Russian Federation, the year 2008 marked the end of Vladimir Putin’s eight-year presidency and ushered in the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev—a change in power which many considered merely a change in title, since Vladimir Putin was soon after named Prime Minister. Although the power relationship between the two executives is self-described as a power-sharing duumvirate, it is evident that Medvedev quickly moved to distinguish himself from Putin as a modern and progressive politician through use of internet resources and social networking media, taking as his model of success United States President Barack Obama. Venturing further into popular media than Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev has joined the ranks of politicians and businesses who have realized the potential marketing and campaigning power of social networking media, which allows one to reach out to the internet public in a far more direct and engaging way. Since the 2008 election, Medvedev has created and maintained a vast array of sites and blogs, including a personal website, a blog on the official Kremlin website, a Livejournal blog, a Youtube channel, and a Twitter miniblog. In conjunction with his other technology-based projects, these blogs and sites comprise the desired internet persona of Dmitry Medvedev, a modern and accessible democratic leader of a modern and sophisticated country; this image, though not entirely true, has had mixed and varied success in marketability to the Russian citizenry and to the international community.

Before elaborating on the different ways in which Russian President Dmitry Medvedev uses the Internet as a political tool, it is important to note the extent of Internet accessibility in Russia. As late as 2000, only two percent of the population of Russia had access to the Internet.
In 2002, the same figure had only grown to six percent; however, as of 2010 that figure had increased fivefold, with more than a third of the population having internet accessibility (Infact 2009). Nevertheless, this number is still much lower than most countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and is largely confined to more urban areas. The OECD is an international economic organization founded to stimulate economic progress and development, and most of the member-states are high-income nations with developed economies. Russia became a full OECD member as of 2007. Nevertheless, despite this comparatively smaller number of Internet users, the internet-using population in Russia shows a high level of sophistication and a large volume of use, which can perhaps be explained by the fact that while Russians largely did not have access to the Internet, they still had access to computers (Varnayev). In response to this reality, a significant part of Medvedev’s presidency has been devoted to promoting growth of the technological sector in Russia and encouraging more widespread accessibility and use of the Internet. In addition to using the Internet as a vehicle for self-promotion, Medvedev has ascribed further uses to the Internet and related technology—facilitating more direct relations between international leaders, providing transparency to fight corruption, and offering a vast array of readily available information. Furthermore, he has attached the Internet concept to his policies of modernization and plans for development as a nation, directly linking it to his potential legacy as president—a connection which itself seems part of the overall campaign.

The image Medvedev is trying to portray online is most strongly pronounced by his personal website—medvedev.kremlin.ru. The homepage of this website displays a collage of Medvedev in both presidential work-related settings and personal family settings. A quote from his biography beneath the collage suggests that the people should know what those in power are
doing, that their activities should be transparent (Personal Website of Dmitry Medvedev). Of these pictures, the more notable ones include Medvedev working behind an Apple Macbook, him and his wife at a picnic, and a couple of childhood pictures of him. These pictures, juxtaposed side by side, (Figure 1), represent the image Medvedev wants to project online: a personable, accessible, and modern world leader.

![Figure 1. Pictures from Dmitry Medvedev’s Website](image)

This is a stark difference from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin who focused more on seeming powerful, not personal. This could be seen not only in Putin’s handling of international affairs and domestic politics, but also in the videos of him performing and teaching martial arts (Darius), pictures of him in camouflage tranquilizing a tiger (The Times Online), and photos of him, shirtless, riding a horse (Marquardt). Medvedev’s homepage also includes links to more photo albums, including his amateur photography and a link to the personal site of his wife, Svetlana Medvedeva. In contrast to how opaque Putin’s presidency was, Medvedev is inviting the audience to look into his personal life and see what he is doing as president, although he offers a pre-selected and controlled view. Overall his personal website is very stylized, and
because it is not merely an account on a social networking site, it is completely customizable, allowing Medvedev to control the form, layout, and content to more freely shape the image he wants to project.

In addition to the personal website, as a part of his policy of modernization and transparency, Medvedev started a video blog on the official site of the Kremlin in October 2008, near the start of his presidency. Through this video blog, the Russian population and the larger Russian-speaking Internet audience are able to follow the activities of the president through videos rather than a written blog, which allows the audience to passively listen to the video, but also requires more bandwidth. A change introduced earlier this year allows the audience to view the videos in high definition and on different media players. The format of video rather than a written blog was perhaps influenced by United States President Barack Obama’s blog, which is also in video format. While the video blogs do include a written transcript, it is important that the voice and image of Medvedev are represented rather than just his words, which in effect brings him closer to the audience. However, there is one important innovation that distinguishes Medvedev’s blog from blogs of other world leaders and politicians—the internet audience is allowed to comment directly on the website to his individual blogs. In his 33rd blog post, Medvedev specifically highlighted the necessity and importance of an open dialog between the Kremlin and the people. This idea was perhaps an elaboration on the annual television show “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” of which the Russian people are allowed to submit questions to the show and the selected questions are answered directly by Putin; however, Medvedev takes this idea a step further by getting rid of the timeframe and allowing commentary and questions to be submitted at any time. Additionally, there is proof that this is not simply a novel feature, but
an avenue for Russians to express their problems and concerns, especially regarding local corruption, and in addition that either Medvedev or someone is listening.

In April of 2009, these same blogs were reposted onto Dmitry Medvedev’s newly created Livejournal account. Although there is no difference between what is posted on the official blog and the Livejournal blog, this expansion marked Medvedev’s first foray into the sphere of social networking. Along with Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, Livejournal is one of the most popular social networking sites in Russia. While expanding the potential audience, the Livejournal blog also allows for more branching out of discussion in the form of threads where users can comment directly on other users’ comments, not simply in response to Medvedev. This feature is likely a reason why there is a greater volume of comments on the Livejournal video blog than the Kremlin blog despite there being similar sized audiences of users for each blog—10 million on the official blog and 11 million on the Livejournal blog (Official Website of the President of the Russian Federation n.d.). Some optimistic opinions see the blog and Livejournal as very important indicators that the Kremlin is becoming more open and tolerant of the media and opposing opinions. Because anyone can post a comment once they register on the site and the Kremlin is promoting use of a medium they cannot control, there is a sense of increased tolerance. Furthermore, as distinguished from regular post or email, blog commentary is public and can be viewed by anyone. While there are many examples of critical and negative commentary on the Medvedev blogosphere, one comment in particular that stands out very starkly is the 600-word expletive-filled comment left by a blogger posting under the nickname “top_lap,” criticizing the administration harshly for their handling of the fires that ravaged central Russia during the summer of 2010. The editor-in-chief of the Ekho Moskvy radio station, Alexei Venediktov, sent the blogger’s comment to Putin and commented that he “purposefully
sent the text of the post to Putin, not Medvedev, because [he knew] for sure that Medvedev really reads blogs on the Internet himself, while Putin would never see that post himself.” This comment is interesting for two reasons. First, it suggests that Medvedev actually reads the comments posted to his blogs, which is a surprising assertion coming from Ekho Moskvy, which is considered one of the remaining independent news sources in Russia. Second, it suggests that, while Medvedev would have read this post, Putin is still in charge and complaints should be forwarded to him in order to get a government response. Furthermore, the post itself was not deleted and negative action was not taken against the blogger (Odynova). Still, due to the large volume of comments posted daily to the Livejournal and the official blog, it is exceedingly unlikely that Medvedev reads them all, much less personally responds to them. In March 2010 alone, the official blog averaged around 160 comments per day. Excluding posts mirrored from the official blog, which date back to before the Livejournal blog opening, Medvedev’s Livejournal blog averaged close to 550 comments per video blog entry between April 2009 and March 2010. Even so, it cannot be said that Medvedev’s blogs are merely decorative additions to a political Internet campaign.

On August 27, 2009, Dmitry Medvedev opened a Youtube channel, becoming one of the few world leaders to have one, alongside Pope Benedict XVI and American President Barack Obama. Many online blogs and newspapers commented on this fact when the channel was launched and suggest that he is joining the ranks of Obama, Beyonce, and the Pope (Sennitt). The Youtube channel features some videos not shown on the Livejournal video blog or on the official blog. While the rating option is enabled, commentary is disabled for all the videos on his channel; therefore, the blogs are the only real area for comment and discourse with the Russian president. There have been 112 uploads since Medvedev’s Youtube channel opened, with the
most viewed upload being his first (over 84,000 views). While there is no difference between the videos posted to the official blog and the videos posted to Livejournal, the videos uploaded to the Youtube channel do not directly correspond with either the material posted to the other blogs or the timing of when they are posted. For example, following the terrorist bombings of the Moscow metro in March 2010, the only videos posted on Medvedev’s blogs were on the Youtube channel, where one could not leave commentary. In contrast to the other blogs, the Youtube uploads are not transcribed, such that the Medvedev Youtube experience is purely auditory and visual. In addition to the videos, the channel’s main page has links to the “official site resources of the president,” including his blogs and the various pages of the official Kremlin website. Given the total views of his uploads, over 800,000 since it was launched, and the channel’s ranking as 30th most subscribed Youtube channel in Russia, it can be said that the site enjoys some popularity (Kremlin’s Channel). However, his channel’s popularity does not compare to comparable channels—Obama’s channel has over 146 million, Beyonce’s channel has over 425 million, and the Vatican’s channel has over 2 million. Apart from the popularity of Medvedev’s site internationally and in Russia, it seems as though he may have also chosen to utilize Youtube because it has become another aspect of the unofficial litmus test for modern world leaders.

Medvedev’s different uses of the Internet to reach the public suggest that the Kremlin is perhaps moving toward greater transparency and tolerance of the media. However, the increase in tolerance is only substantial when contrasted with the previous administration of Vladimir Putin. For example, Putin had the television show Kukly [Puppets] cancelled after it portrayed him negatively; but at midnight on New Year’s Day 2010, Channel One was allowed to broadcast an animated version of Putin and Medvedev singing rhyming couplets and dancing around as caricatures of themselves (Bratersky 2010). However, beyond this surface layer of
media freedom allowed, there are still cases of attacks on journalists (Crowfoot) and according to the international human rights watchdog organization Freedom House, the Russian media is not free (Freedom House).

Perhaps one of the more widespread beliefs about Dmitry Medvedev is that he is not really in charge: a poll conducted by the Levada Center finds that only 16% of Russians believe that Medvedev is in charge in Russia, 31% believe Putin is in charge, and 44% believe both are in charge. In Russia, the Prime Minister and the President are both executive figures in the government. The President is officially the head of government with separate duties, but Vladimir Putin has shown that the Prime Minister also wields power, evinced not only by the popular opinion of the Russian population and critics, but also by his actions and behavior. Neither Medvedev nor Putin directly opposes the other: in the words of Medvedev, they work in tandem. As such, with them both in power, Putin still holds influence in the government and his legacy in a way continues; therefore it is likely the Kremlin’s attitude toward freedom of the media will not substantially change in deed, even if it does so in word.

On the 23rd of June 2010, during his visit to the United States, Medvedev opened an account on the popular social networking site Twitter, sending his first message from the main office of Twitter in the Silicon Valley. Since then, the volume of his miniblog posts has quickly risen, reaching over 280 posts in English and Russian by the 9th of August 2010. Until the creation of his Twitter miniblog, Medvedev’s blogs had all been in the form of videos that required much preparation and video equipment. Now with his Twitter miniblog, Medvedev can rapidly post small, succinct updates about what he is doing and where he is, along with whatever message, pictures, or links he wants to add. This format allows the president to react to events when they happen in real time and allows him to post a far greater amount of these short update
messages, or tweets, rather than video blog posts. In the words of Marshall Mcluhan, “the medium is the message,” (Mcluhan) and truly, the format of a written miniblog as is used on Twitter is perceived and digested differently by the public than the format of a video blog. For example, in order to view and absorb the contents of a video blog, it takes more time and energy than a short tweet on Twitter, making it more likely that the Twitter miniblog will be followed and read, mainly because it is easier to do so. Furthermore, it seems as if Medvedev is partially using this Twitter miniblog as a way of appealing to Western governments and businesses, especially given the fact that he opened the blog from the Twitter head office, creating not only a Russian version but also an English version. Also indicative of this is the fact that his English Twitter account posts often differ in substance from his Russian Twitter account posts. What is not different appears very carefully translated, including shortened internet slang used by English speakers such as the short-form of the word “Thanks” as “Thx,” which he used in a post in which he tagged Arnold Schwarzenegger. Additionally, it seems as though he is developing his own style of Twitter use that differs from Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron, in that his posts are occasionally informal and make extensive use of links and attached pictures, or “twit pics”. In these ways, there is a higher potential of reaching wider audiences through his Twitter account than his other sites.

In the summer of 2010, Medvedev invited Russian citizens to take part in an experiment in lawmaking in Russia, in the form of an online discussion board, which Medvedev referred to as a “setevaia ploshchadka”, or a network square. Registered users would be able to view and discuss the entire text of a new law governing the police, article by article. As of August 2010, it appeared as though a considerable number of users had left comments, especially on the subjects of the rights of the police (“prava politsii”), the duties and activities of the police (“deiatel’nost’
politsii”), and the meaning of “police” (“naznachenie politsii”) as opposed to the former title “militia” (Zakonoproekt 2010). While it is difficult to determine whether or not these comments will actually be taken into consideration or if they will hold any bearing on the text of the law, the existence of this website is peculiar and may be of more significance than as merely an addition to Medvedev’s tech-savvy, modern image. If the comments are actually being used to determine whether something should be added, changed, or deleted, then this would be a form of direct democracy—a great departure from normal legislative practices in Russia. In creating this website, Medvedev may also be purposefully trying to draw attention to this law and how it changes the name and rights of the police. Attaching his name to the fact that he’s allowing the public to weigh in on the law is a form of campaigning and credit-claiming. This becomes more apparent given his posts on Twitter about it in English and in Russian where he specifically underlines the changes as a “transition from the soviet system to [a] modern, honest, and capable [system]” (Medvedev Aug 7, 2010). Thus, while introducing the potential for direct democratic participation in the Russian legislative process, this project also seems to be an attempt to get closer to the West, as it is considered important enough to international relations to also translate the post into English.

Just as the radio and television influenced how politicians address the people and appeal to potential voters, the Internet has also become an important and influential medium that more and more politicians are beginning to use. Furthermore, the growing popularity of social networking sites offers new opportunities to politicians just as it does to businesses. Additionally, because of the widespread popularity of these sites among younger potential voters, politicians who can adeptly use these sites are able to reach out and appeal to these voters

1.“Это переход от советской системы к современной, честной и дееспособной.”
in a much more modern way, creating a more youthful and modern persona for the politician. For example, in 2008, when Barack Obama ran for president, he used the social networking site Twitter as a part of his campaign. In some cases, the posts on his Twitter had more current news about his campaign and activities than did the mass media. Furthermore, one of Obama's recent additions to his blogging activities includes a video blog called “West Wing Week,” which exhibits exclusive video footage that not even the press are permitted to have (West Wing Week). Though it has been considered necessary in recent years for American politicians to maintain an official presence on the web, Obama became the first president of the United States to use social networking sites. These sites are used as political campaigns in order to construct a positive image of the politician, but they also make the politician more accessible, or at least seem more accessible—one of the many reasons social networking sites are considered good platforms for Internet campaigning. Given that in America a very large majority of the population has Internet access and a significant number of the population has Internet access on their mobile phones, it is logical and reasonable that politicians would extend their campaigns onto the Internet.

Although Medvedev launched his blogs on popular, established social networking sites in order to take advantage of the social networking phenomenon, the success of these efforts remains uncertain. This largely depends on the readers’opinions of the blogs in Russia, and whether Russians consider the blogs sincere. According to statistics I compiled from his official website www.blog.kremlin.ru from February 2010 to March 2010, users left an average 180 comments per day. On his Livejournal blog, this number tended to be much higher. These numbers show that there are not only viewers each day but also active participants in the online discussion of these blogs. Although Medvedev started out posting only one or two blogs per
month, he is now posting around one per week as shown in Figure 2, which proves that the blog is active and not merely something to show that he is modern.

The frequency with which Medvedev posts his video blogs is similar to the frequency with which Obama posts his. Moreover, Medvedev has proven to be a very active Twitter user, although not as prolific as Barack Obama and Arnold Schwarzenegger, which can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 2. Number of Blog Posts per Month from October 2008-April 2010 on blog.kremlin.ru

Figure 3. Number of Tweets per day from August 2010 to November 2010 by Dmitry Medvedev, Barack Obama, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Graph generated using Twitter Counter).
However, taking into account the fact that Medvedev runs two Twitter accounts, one in English and one in Russian, his combined posts are much closer to the frequency of Obama and Schwarzenegger. Another interesting aspect of this graph is that over the summer, Medvedev’s posts exceeded that of Obama and Schwarzenegger, but that changed dramatically in the fall, most likely due to the 2010 midterm elections in the United States. Nevertheless, there is an overall positive trend in the number of Twitter users following Medvedev over time, as can be seen in the Figure 3.

![Figure 4](https://twittercounter.com)

**Figure 4 Trends in Followers and Status Updates for Twitter Account KremlinRussia (currently known as MedvedevRussia) (Graph generated using Twitter Counter).**

Additionally, in May 2009, the Russian sociological research organization Fond “obshchestvennoe mnenie” or FOM conducted a poll among Russians about Medvedev’s blog and their opinions of it. Fond “obshchestvennoe mnenie”, which loosely translated as Public opinion foundation, is one of the leading polling organizations in Russia. According to this May 2009 poll, 49% of those polled had not heard of his blog on Livejournal. Of the 33% who used the Internet, 50% had a positive impression of the blog (“otnosiatsia polozhitel’no”), while 40% reported more of an indifferent attitude (“mne eto bezrazlichno”). Of the real and potential audience of the blog, the majority consisted of women between the ages of 18 and 44 (In
In accordance with this data it seems as though among the majority of Internet users in Russia, Medvedev’s blog use has been somewhat successful. Also, looking at the influences of Medvedev’s and Obama’s blogs on a global scale as shown in Figures 5, 6 and 7, the global reach of both appears to be comparable.

Figure 5. Medvedev's Russian Language Twitter Account Global Reach. (screen shot of map generated by Twitter Analyzer).
Figure 6. Medvedev's English Language Twitter Account Global Reach (screen shot of map generated by Twitter Analyzer).

Figure 7. Obama's Twitter Account Global Reach (screen shot of map generated by Twitter Analyzer)
In answer to the global cultural phenomenon of social networking, politicians across the globe have started to use these social networks as political tools in order to elevate themselves and portray themselves in a positive light. This tendency will only continue to increase. Medvedev launched his websites to portray himself as modern and to appeal to young Russians, international businesses, and Western governments. Today, an increasing number of world leaders, including Hugo Chavez and David Cameron, launch blogs and social networking accounts. It becomes increasingly apparent that Obama and Medvedev are setting the standards for how a modern politician uses these social networking tools. The success and appeal of Medvedev’s blogs from a statistical standpoint show the growth and expansion of Medvedev’s activity online as well as his Internet audience. Nevertheless, the question remains whether or not his political campaign online through the activity of his various sites will prove to be a successful political instrument in rallying support for him, his projects, and Russia as a whole.

Works Cited


