

## VOICE OF AMERICA RUSSIAN WEBSITE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

### A. JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

1. Accuracy: Is the content on the website factually correct? Did you find any errors in the posted news and feature stories, including the video reports, and photos?

I didn't notice any factual errors that would be of consequence. The scene of David Kramer's presentation ([http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/09\\_03\\_2011\\_kramer\\_reset-117701538.html](http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/09_03_2011_kramer_reset-117701538.html)) was wrongly identified as Washington-based John(!) Hopkins University, instead of SAIS. Kramer's position in the State Department in 2008-2009 wasn't indicated correctly either. Blueberry Hills (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/AI-Putin-Concert-2011-03-09-117673903.html>) in Russian is Chernichnye (not Golubichnye) Holmy. There are numerous if minor errors in spelling and punctuation, which cannot possibly be listed. Capitalization and quotation marks are especially erratic. Some stylistic norms should be observed more strictly: for example, March 10 in Russian is written as 10 marta, not 10-go marta (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/US-RF-Georgia-2011-03-12-117855784.html>).

An interesting example of syntax error becoming factual is here: (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Libya-Russia-2011-03-18-118246844.html>) Due to incorrect Russian preposition, the headline of this news story reads as Why Did Russia Refrain from Adopting the Resolution on Libya. Of course it should be Why Did Russia Abstain from Voting on the Resolution on Libya.

Many Russian users might be unhappy with the 'politically correct' spelling of the names of some post-Soviet states: Belarus, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan. Most publications in this country, regardless of political orientation, stick to traditional Russian spelling (Byelorussia, Moldavia, Kirghiziya). This does not imply any disrespect towards newly independent states.

Overall, as far as accuracy is concerned, the website doesn't seem much worse than most Russian online media outlets.

2. Objectivity/Balance: Is reporting free of bias? Are opposing and/or alternative positions fairly represented and reported on controversial issues.

Before answering this one, I would like to present some general considerations. It seems pretty obvious that, to put it mildly, today's Russia has big problems with freedom of the press. Even in the Russian segment of the Internet, which is not controlled by the authorities as closely as big TV channels and much of the printed media, objective information and free comment on politically sensitive issues are not readily available. Therefore, in my view, VOA should primarily concentrate on such information and comment which are relatively hard to come by elsewhere for political reasons. This applies to thematic balance (see below) and to representation of various positions as well. Of course I don't mean to say that Russian

official positions on controversial issues could be ignored or underreported; however, it would seem fair that in news coverage and comment on such issues as YUKOS affair or human rights violations in the North Caucasus some kind of special consideration be given to alternative facts and viewpoints.

Now, my impression is that VOA has been too careful in avoiding anything that might look like 'anti-Russian' bias. A telling example of this attitude can be found in the coverage of Vice President Biden's visit to Moscow. The reporting focused on Biden voicing support for Medvedev's 'modernization,' traveling to Skolkovo etc., all of which was amply covered by national TV channels. But Vice President's speech in Moscow University, in which he criticized Russia's leadership on democracy and human rights, was clearly downplayed. The report on this event (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/russia/Biden-students-2011-03-10-117738384.html>) was titled 'Joe Biden to Moscow Students: Future is Yours'; a headline as cheerful as meaningless, reminding of Soviet newspapers. What is worse, the report failed to mention that Biden spoke about the Khodorkovsky case as an example of Russia's 'legal nihilism' - an important fact noted both in Russia and abroad. One might suspect that the omission was deliberate. If so, that could be regarded as a case of 'pro-Russian' (or, rather, pro-Putin) bias.

3. Comprehensiveness: Given the medium, does the news and information provide the essential elements needed to understand a story? Was there sufficient background, text, photos, and context so that you came away with a good understanding of the information presented?

Generally, stories are comprehensive enough. Some other websites (e.g. BBC) would normally provide more background information, but I don't believe in putting too much strain on the reader. However, omissions occur. A good report on David Kramer's comments on U.S.-Russian relations in the context of human rights ([http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/09\\_03\\_2011\\_kramer\\_reset-117701538.html](http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/09_03_2011_kramer_reset-117701538.html)) lacks basic facts and figures about Freedom House - not many Russian readers know enough about this organization. Perhaps additional background info, such as Russia's place in Freedom House international rankings, would have been relevant, too.

4. Thematic Balance: Is there an appropriate selection of topics on the site, or too much political or non-political coverage?

The answer to this question depends on how one understands VOA's mission. As I see it, the purpose of the VOA Russian website is to provide objective information and free comment, especially where these are limited for political reasons, and to promote American (or, for that matter, universal) values, such as democracy, human rights etc. Based on this, I don't see much sense in trying to produce a comprehensive picture of all kinds of events all over the world (something like a 'complete body of all arts and sciences' at the Academy of Lagado in 'Gulliver's Travels'). It appears to me that the site should mostly (by no means exclusively!) focus on selected fields, above all Russian domestic and foreign politics, American life and U.S.-Russian relations. This would imply that political coverage should generally dominate over non-political themes. After all, modern Russians, especially Internet users, are anything but short of

information about current developments in science, arts, medicine and other non-political fields and it's hard to imagine many people turning to VOA's website for this sort of knowledge. Besides, the Science, Health and Culture sections of the site do not look appealing at all; they should be either revamped and improved or discarded, and the latter option seems more reasonable, let alone easier.

Needless to say, this suggested 'rule' should have exceptions dictated by events. Thus, the current focus on the disaster in Japan is only natural and could even be enhanced. At the same time, a lengthy report on the plight of animals in the Kyiv Zoo (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/ukraine/Kiyev-Zoo-03-12-2011-117857049.html>) doesn't look necessary.

5. Overall Impression of Journalistic Quality: Is the journalistic quality of the website at a high professional and informational level?

My answer is 'sorry but no'. The site provides information of satisfactory quality, but it is mostly derived from other sources. Even the report about American Vice President's meeting with Russian opposition figures (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/russia/Biden-opposition-2011-03-10-117733859.html>) was based on Ekho Moskvyy and Gazeta.Ru information (VOA's own interview with Leonid Gozman was added later.) The selection of topics and timeliness leave much to be desired (see below.) The language, if mostly grammatical, tends to be bland and colorless, which reduces the appeal very much. This applies especially to headlines: new Russian journalism has developed a special culture of catchy and witty headlines, and an advanced user expects to find them. Many photos lack expression and appeal. (See more below.)

## B. RELEVANCE

1. Market Focus: Is the content of interest to an Internet audience that uses this language? Which content topics and themes were most appropriate and which ones seemed irrelevant to intended users in the market niche?

Much of the content doesn't seem of interest to the Russian Internet audience. This applies more to non-political sections (see above); for example, an interview with a retired American professor of history on Russian movies (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/russia/Menashe-book-2011-03-14-117931004.htm>) is shallow and superficial. Many 'political' pieces are less than inspiring, too. A brief account of the presentation of a new book on Cold War ([http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Analysis-and-perspectives/Cold-War-book-DC\\_2011-03-10-117772903.html](http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Analysis-and-perspectives/Cold-War-book-DC_2011-03-10-117772903.html)) lacks substance. A report on Australian Prime Minister's speech before the U.S. Congress (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/US-Australia-2011-03-10-117724264.html>) may be cogent enough, but is unlikely to capture the Russian audience. Such examples could be easily multiplied. On the positive side, I would like to mention an excellent article on government corruption in the North Caucasus (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Caucasus-Corruption-2011-03-09-117655418.html>); it is particularly praiseworthy that it offers an American perspective on the issue; Fatima Tlisova is known as a prominent expert on the region, and VOA is lucky to have her as a contributor. The report on David Kramer's presentation ([http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/09\\_03\\_2011\\_kramer\\_reset-117701538.html](http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/09_03_2011_kramer_reset-117701538.html)) and Galina Kozhevnikova's obituary (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Galina-Kozhevnikova-2011-03-09-117701538.html>)

[www.voanews.com/russian/news/russia/AP-Galina-Kozhevnikova-2011-03-08-117615768.html](http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/russia/AP-Galina-Kozhevnikova-2011-03-08-117615768.html)) are very good, too.

Regrettably, some interesting topics were underreported. Thus, the story of an alleged prisoner swap scheme involving Viktor Bout, which featured prominently in independent Russian media (Kommersant and others), was only reflected in a brief news item (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Bout-swap-2011-03-10-117750703.html>) based entirely on Russian sources; an American perspective one could have expected from VOA was lacking completely. The same can be said of the scandal involving Vladimir Putin, Western stars and charity money (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/russia/AI-Putin-Concert-2011-03-09-117673903.html>): VOA's website failed to provide any information or comment from the American side, missing a good opportunity to raise its profile.

As for the 'market niche' mentioned in the question, I'm afraid it can hardly be located at the moment.

Timeliness: Is the content fresh and updated in a timely fashion, in line with your expectations for this type of website?

This is probably one of the website's weakest points. As far as I could monitor, all big ongoing stories (Biden's visit, Japan's disaster) were reported with long delays compared to Russian online media. The piece on Biden's planned meeting with human rights activists on March 10 was among top news a few hours after the meeting actually took place (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Russia-Biden-Opposition-2011-03-10-117722039.html>) (later the verb in the headline was changed to past tense without changing the content.) On March 12, information on the explosion at a nuclear power plant in Japan, which was distributed in the morning Moscow time, did not appear on the site till evening. The news on Russia's accession to sanctions against Libya (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/world-news/Russia-Lybia-sanction-2011-03-10-117727733.html>) was also reported with a huge delay. On the homepage one can see many headlines of news stories dating from a day or even two days before. This drastic situation could be reason enough to undermine VOA's competitive position vis-à-vis 'native' online resources. Perhaps the problem is partly attributable to an objective factor - the time zone difference between Moscow and Washington. I don't know whether this obstacle is insurmountable, but surely something should be done about that.

2. Usefulness: Does the content provided on this site increase understanding of topics or events, and does it provide a basis for forming opinions, making decisions and rendering judgments?

My general answer to this one would rather be negative. The site provides quite an amount of diverse information, but not all of it seems relevant to the interests of the audience. A clearer focus on specific issues linked to VOA's mission is needed. Independent forming of opinions by users could also be encouraged by more perceptive comments by high-level contributors - this is where VOA's competitive position is rather weak. There are few if any bright columns by good authors; the Poedinok (Single Combat) section (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/crossfire/>) is entirely about international politics, doesn't seem appealing to users and is updated at a slow rate. The Editorial section (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/editorials/>) appears somewhat more useful; I wish it carried more on human rights and democracy in Russia.

The site could potentially excel in offering objective information on different aspects of American life - especially where such information is ignored or distorted by Russian pro-government media. To give just one example: many Russians, even among the educated class, are convinced that all talk about freedom of the press in the U.S. is mere eyewash and media are effectively controlled by the government or business interests. Systematic exposure and refutation of such myths could be one of VOA's main goals; however, the site doesn't seem keen on this sort of work. The Otkryvaya Ameriku (Discovering America) section (<http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Discovering-America/>) could be helpful in forming sound views about American life, but at this point it's not good enough: stories seem rather superficial, updating rate very slow. It's unclear why the name of Matvei Ganapolsky (a popular host and commentator at Ekho Moskvu Radio) is seen on top on this page. And finally, this section looks suspicious in terms of 'pro-American' bias: seeing headlines like America Is a Land of Great Human Opportunities, America Is No. 1 Country, In America One Always Feels Change for the Better etc., a Russian Internet reader gets the impression of crude propaganda.

### C. PRESENTATION

1. Usability/Navigation: Is the web site well organized? When browsing through the site, do you find what you expect? Do you find any pleasing surprises, or do you experience any frustrations as you click?

In terms of navigation, the website seems user-friendly enough. Browsing brings no pleasant or unpleasant surprises.

2. Appearance: Is the website attractive, uncluttered and contemporary? Is the layout commensurate with local expectations for this type of website?

In my view, the site doesn't look attractive or contemporary. On the home page, one would expect more expressive photos and other visual elements, with fewer headlines - especially since, as I said, headlines are rarely catchy enough. I am not happy with the top story in the left corner: as it keeps changing, you don't immediately see what the top event is at a given moment while the "top news" headlines (glavnye novosti) in the center are far too many and not all of them seem that important. As a result, one cannot get an immediate picture of news stories ranked by importance - something that most other online news organizations provide. As for far too numerous "other news" (drugie novosti), their classification is not consistent: America, World, Russia, Politics and other sections clearly overlap, which is why on the homepage one can often come across the same news story twice or even three times. Such repetitions produce an unfavorable impression. The overall picture is anything but appealing. Perhaps the layout could be made flexible, enabling the site to emphasize events and issues of extraordinary importance - such as Japan disaster and its implications.

3. Readability: Is the writing style modern, current and understandable? Are the fonts clear, easy to read, and the right size? Is the font type appropriate for this kind of content?

Having commented on this already (see A5), I'd like to add that much of the texts posted on the website are in fact translations from English. This is only natural - but, unfortunately, the

Russian style of these translations is not natural enough, which might alienate many readers. A systematic effort is needed to make the language more modern, vivid and expressive - with a special focus on headlines.

The fonts are basically OK if somewhat monotonous; as I said the number of headlines on the homepage could be reduced allowing for larger and more attractive fonts.

#### D. TECHNICAL QUALITY

1. Functionality: Did the website work as expected? When you clicked on links did they function properly?

No particular problem with that.

2. Search: Find a story on the web site using the search box – were you able to find what you were looking for? If not, did the results make sense?

The search box works all right.

3. Photos/Graphics: Did the images on the website enhance your understanding of the stories presented? Do they meet the standards you expect of a news organization publishing on the web?

The photos are mostly all right but tend to be 'conventional' - very few can really catch the eye or throw more light on the story's content.

4. Video/Audio: Did streaming elements on the web site and on the You Tube Channel function as expected? Were the links accurately identified? Did files play on-demand, as expected? Did the video and audio quality match the standards expected of an international news website?

The video and audio quality is good enough. Maybe streaming elements should be indicated more prominently on the homepage.

5. Podcasts: Are you able to download and playback multimedia files from the site? Do the format options seem appropriate for this type of website? Describe your impressions about the content and presentation; do they sound contemporary and appealing?

Multimedia files work all right, but it seems that their function is limited to supplementing the textual content: few if any of them provide unique information or comment. One would expect them to be more original and appealing. Besides, their visibility on the homepage should be enhanced.

6. Branding: Is the site clearly identified? Is it clear what URL you could use to easily return to the site later? Try typing that URL in another browser – does it return you to this site?

The URL is clear enough, but VOA (unlike, say, BBC) doesn't ring a bell to the average Russian user. GOLOSAMERIKI.US is likely to work better than VOANEWS.COM, just as SVOBODANEWS.RU is better than RFE/RL.ORG

#### E. UNIQUE VOA QUALITY

1. Does this site fill a clear niche that positively distinguishes it from others in the target area? Please explain.

Based on what I said before, my answer to this question is definitely negative. The site provides little if any unique information or bright and perceptive comment, it appears rather mediocre in terms of journalistic quality or design, and it lacks focus on the topics where it potentially could excel. Reaching somewhat beyond the scope of this evaluation, I talked to several people I know in Moscow; some of them are professionally involved with online media, others are not, but all are avid Internet users. The result of this informal poll was about as I had anticipated: nearly half of the respondents never heard of the VOA website, others just knew about its existence, and only a couple of media professionals had a more or less clear idea about it. I don't recall VOA being quoted or referred to in the Russian segment of the Internet including social networks or in offline media. On March 18, I found VOA ranking 219th in the Rambler.ru list of online news sources (<http://top100.rambler.ru/navi/?theme=440&page=1>) while, for example, Radio Liberty (not exactly the most popular website) ranked 43d.

2. What other sites do you follow for news and information? (Please list.)

Grani.ru, Gazeta.ru, Lenta.ru, Newsru.com, Echo.msk.ru, Svobodanews.ru, Ej.ru, Openspace.ru, Kommesant.ru, Vedomosti.ru, Washingtonpost.com, Nytimes.com...

3. Please compare the VOA web site with those other sites. In what ways was VOA's coverage or approach different from the other sources?

I am afraid a comparison by such basic criteria as relevance, focus on most interesting topics, timeliness, journalistic quality and - last not least - presence of renowned contributors would put VOA at a disadvantage.

4. Was there any information in the VOA website that you were unable to get elsewhere?

I don't think so. Perhaps the VOA website carries some information on America that is hard to come by in Russian online media, but since I can use American sources I didn't have to rely on VOA. It can be added that as knowledge of English among Russian Internet users is expanding, many of them turn to original sources of international news. Therefore, VOA is likely to face ever tougher competition.

#### F. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

1. Interactivity: Do you see opportunities to comment, offer opinion through a poll, or otherwise participate with or react to the content on the web site? Were the interactive elements in line with what you would expect on this type of web site?

The interactive elements are there all right, but it would seem that more often than not the content is not thought-provoking enough to stimulate meaningful discussion.

2. Sharing: Do you see opportunities for sharing this content using social media platforms (like Facebook or Twitter)? Do the options seem appropriate for users of this language?

See above.

3. Blogs: Starting at the homepage, are you able to find a blog? If so, please describe:

Alas, my effort was fruitless. I clicked on OUR BLOGS on the homepage only to find myself on a page ([http://community.livejournal.com/golos\\_ameriki](http://community.livejournal.com/golos_ameriki)) where I couldn't identify individual blogs. I would recommend that most interesting blogs, especially those by notable personalities, be marked by banners on the homepage.

(Note: If you find a blog, please complete the expanded questionnaire at the end of this evaluation.)

#### G. ENGLISH LEARNING

1. Are you able to find any tools or products that would help in learning American English?

Yes - I located Uroki angliyskogo (English lessons) on the homepage. It took some time though.

2. Does this section seem intuitive, easy to use?

No, not really.

3. If it navigates you away from the main site, are you able to get back easily?



Yes.

4. Are you satisfied with the topics in the English learning section? Do you have any suggestions for themes that would be more relevant?

Most of the topics seemed far too primitive to me. I imagine most users who would be interested in this section would prefer a more advanced level of learning. However, my opinion on this doesn't have much value. I learned English a long time ago and my memories of the process are rather vague. Nor am I ever been involved with language teaching professionally. I guess evaluations by learners and teachers would be more relevant.

#### OVERALL IMPRESSION OF PRESENTATION QUALITY & USABILITY:

*What is your overall feedback about this web site? Do you feel anything is missing?*

*Please provide at least 3 suggestions for improvement.*

At the risk of sounding repetitious, I'd like to stress that a radical change of the VOA website (and such a change is surely needed) must be based on a clearer understanding of the site's main purpose - its mission, if you will. I see no point in trying to provide an all-encompassing picture of events and developments all over the world: the site doesn't seem equipped enough to do that, and Russian Internet users are not likely to turn to VOA for such a picture anyway. And, after all, I am not sure that the United States government (or, for that matter, the American people) has an interest in informing this country's public about everything happening in the world. In my view, the site's thematic range could and indeed should be narrowed, enabling a better focus on the most relevant fields: a) controversial issues in Russian politics inadequately covered by government-controlled media in Russia; b) news and comments on various aspects of American life, with special attention to promoting American values and refuting widespread misconceptions about the U.S. Of course this shouldn't look like official propaganda. America's failures and shortcomings, real or alleged, must not be concealed or downplayed - attempts to do that are bound to have a negative impact on the audience.

It would seem that the proportion of political coverage should be somewhat higher than it is now. However, there are many non-political - or at least not entirely political - issues in Russia today that could feature more prominently on the VOA website. A systematic effort should be made to use VOA's unique advantage (so far potential rather than real): its ability to compare and contrast problems and their solutions in Russia and America. This applies to such diverse issues as high school reform, immigration, race and ethnic relations, big city planning, health reform, legal limitations to freedom of assembly and the press, prevention of terrorist attacks, fighting organized crime and corruption, combating hate speech, reform of penitentiary system, etc. Discussion of these and other topics from both Russian and American perspectives could be very stimulating and helpful in enhancing VOA's competitiveness vis-à-vis Russian online media.

History also matters. There is an apparent scarcity of historical themes on the VOA site. Meanwhile, there is a growing interest in public historical debate in Russia, and the site shouldn't stay away from it. For example, this year will see the 70th anniversary of both Russia's and America's entry into World War II - a good occasion to discuss some controversial issues in the war's history, for instance, the relative importance of the U.S. and the Soviet Union's respective contributions to the common victory.

I would also suggest that the site do something about the timeliness drawback (see B2). Perhaps it would even require moving part of the working team to Moscow in order to overcome the time zone obstacle (now the normal difference between Moscow and the U.S. East Coast is 8 hours, but soon, with the scheduled abolition of daylight saving time in Russia, it will be 9 hours.) I don't know, however, whether it's realistic.

I think something should also be done to promote the VOA website in this country. I am not an expert on advertising, but surely there must be ways to make the site better known in Russia - for example, through banner exchange with other online news organizations. Maybe Radio Liberty, whose position in the Internet's Russian segment is much stronger, could help. Perhaps more cooperation is needed with popular Russian search engines, above all Yandex.ru.

And my final suggestion (again, I don't know if it's realistic or not) is about personalities. If the VOA website wants to become more popular in Russia, it should have more well-known people among its regular contributors. Familiar names and faces on the homepage, banners etc. seem indispensable for success in the Russian segment of the Internet.

## **BLOGS**

1. How easy was it for you to find the blogs? Would anything have made it easier?

Finding the blogs was anything but easy. I would recommend that a few of them - most interesting and popular - be marked by catchy banners on the homepage so that the user could reach them directly.

2. What is your overall impression of the blogs? What is the first thing that catches your eyes? What item or topic looks the most interesting? Why?

My overall impression of this section is rather poor. To begin with, it took me some time to understand that the VOA blogs are organized as a LiveJournal community. This seems an obsolete and ineffective way - and is definitely far from what a Russian Internet user would expect from blogs section on an advanced website. If you look, for example, at the site of Ekho Moskvyy Radio (<http://www.echo.msk.ru/>), you will see that blogs are very prominent on its homepage, forming an increasingly important component of its content. This is primarily due to the fact that most bloggers are, in this way or another, prominent people: political figures, public activists, experts in various fields, arts and media personalities etc. - or perhaps ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, like a Russian tourist in Japan these days. Naturally, their opinions on relevant issues and immediate responses to current events (and this is essentially what blogs are for) evoke much interest from the audience.

Now, on the blog page of the VOA website ([http://community.livejournal.com/golos\\_ameriki/](http://community.livejournal.com/golos_ameriki/)), all you can find by way of orientation is a calendar, an enormous list of tags (which is no substitute for a concise list of topics and appears pretty useless), and a few most recent blog entries by some obscure authors. Even after you succeed in finding the complete list of blog hosts, or community members ([http://www.livejournal.com/tools/friendlist.bml?user=golos\\_ameriki&nopics=1](http://www.livejournal.com/tools/friendlist.bml?user=golos_ameriki&nopics=1)), you will see a huge list of nicks (not real names!), which is hardly helpful or stimulating either. And even to obtain this info, you will have to register and log in, which is not something everyone is willing to do.

As for the topics, no wonder that some of them are 'topical' (Libya, Japan etc.), but the content is hardly inspiring. At the same time, many entries don't seem interesting to anyone except those who posted them. Such is, so to speak, the price of freedom - that is, free LJ community status.

3. Are the blog topics organized and presented in a clear and useful way? What do you think of the categories of information, ease of navigation, archives and/or searchability?

See above. I can only add that navigation and search seem all right - the problem is that few people in Russia are likely to use these and other tools

4. What do you think of the blog hosts' writing style and tone? How well-written are the blog stories? Have they included links to related stories, blogs or sites if you want more information?

From what I read I gather the impression that most blog stories are written on a satisfactory level, but few if any of them contain original, much less unique information or ideas that could evoke wide interest or inspire meaningful discussion. It also appears that many blog hosts (as well as authors of comments at the bottom of entries) belong to the Russian émigré community in the U.S. Needless to say, I am by no means prejudiced against those people and there is no way they could be excluded from the VOA blogs. However, I don't think they are part of the VOA target audience.

5. What do you think of the overall attractiveness of the blogs - the design/layout?

I am afraid the blogs are anything but attractive in terms of design/layout. However, this matters only to those few Russian readers who actually use them.

6. What do you think of the comments at the bottom of each blog entry? Does anyone seem to be moderating the comments?

The comments are mostly scanty and uninspiring. Again, given the present situation, it's hard to imagine many Russian Internet readers who would be keen on using the VOA blogs for this sort of activity. As for moderation, I noticed obscene language in some of the comments. In Russia, it is supposed to be removed, but it must be admitted that this rule is not observed strictly enough.

7. Do you think the content of these blogs is unique? Why/why not?

I haven't come across unique content that would be of interest to a sizable audience. It may well be there - but it would take a lot of time, effort and courage to scan all the blogs in search for interesting communications.

8. What is your overall impression of the blogs? Do you have any suggestions for improvement, or anything else you would like to add?

As I said before, the way VOA blogs are organized doesn't seem satisfactory. I would suggest that the present pattern - free LJ community - be replaced by a more modern and attractive system, like the one used by Ekho Moskvyy, Grani.ru and some other Russian online resources. The key element is enlisting several (not too many - perhaps 20 or 30 could be enough for starters) regular bloggers whose names, status, expertise and other qualities would ensure real interest on the part of the Russian Internet audience. My idea is that such people could be recruited primarily among in America's political, business, academic, journalistic and other circles involved with the U.S. relations with Russia, Russian studies etc. For example, the emergence of Michael McFaul or Richard Pipes as VOA blog hosts would enhance the site's competitive position immensely. Notable members of Russian émigré community would be most welcome, too. I don't know how feasible this idea is, but this is something to think about.

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