

# The Mask and the Face: Imagination and Social Life in Russian Chat Rooms and Beyond

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores the dynamics of interaction between 'masks', the avatars that people create in chat rooms, and the 'faces' that they assume in life off-line. It is argued that the chat room is an Internet technology that gives rise to a particular relational imagination concerning the self and enables the manipulation of individual-social imaginative interactions that are specific to it. These novel forms of sociality are not 'risk-free' as some of the literature proposes. Furthermore, they may impinge dramatically on everyday lives off-line. The interesting question is what happens to the imagination when the technology creates relations (conversations) and these are consequential, exposing otherwise hidden aspects of personality.*

**KEYWORDS** *Chatroom, internet, imagination, risk, subjectivity, Russia*

'One's real life is often the life that one does not lead,' Oscar Wilde is supposed to have said. This is a sentiment with which many users of Russian chat rooms would agree. For them, their relationships in chat rooms are where they reveal deep aspects of the self that cannot be manifested in everyday life. Yet we cannot take for granted the 'realness' of the presentation of self in either the Internet chat room or the life among family, friends and work-mates. This article explores the dynamics of interaction between 'masks' that people create in chat rooms, and the 'faces' that they assume in life off-line. I argue that, along with what we might presume to be the fundamental line of such a dynamic – that tensions and longings give rise to or generate the imaginative avatars people assume – there is also a contrary move: the social life among the masks in the chat room can sharply affect subjectivities and relationships in the mundane, territorialized world.

It is by now a relatively familiar point that the Internet is not, as the early

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utopian view proposed, a homogenous, space-less, timeless expanse (Miller & Slater 2000; Sandvig 2003). Rather, it is located and 'clumpy', consisting of what we might conceive as nodes of dense and less dense interaction. Where these nodes are sited and who sets them up matters a lot. We know also that the early, relatively unified, culture of the Internet, which was dominated by North American computing experts (and elites from other countries who copied them), has been overtaken by diverse and volatile usage by non-experts from all over the world, a process that has been characterised as 'uncontrollable' and 'chaotic' (Voiskounsky 1998; McNair 2003). What is less explored in the literature is the particular social dynamics inside such densely interactive sites – those having emerged all over Russia being especially in want of study. The present article focuses on the two main Buryat sites, both of which use the Russian language. One is a 'diaspora' site located in Moscow<sup>1</sup> and the other a provincial site in the Buryat capital Ulan-Ude.<sup>2</sup>

The Internet is a technology that enables a particular relational imagination concerning the self. 'Technology' is seen here as a particular technical organisation and facilitation of communicative possibilities, and 'imagination' as a human faculty that is not delusional or contrasted with reality, but a capacity that stretches from everyday perception way out to the immaterial, symbolic and fantastical (see also the Introduction to this special issue). The relation between these two, technology and imagination, is far from simple. On the one hand, human imagination is at work in countless contexts that do not involve technology at all, such as daydreaming or composing poetry. On the other, techno-geeks pour scorn on the public, complaining that our imaginations are not up to their gadgets. In the case of the Internet technology, which obviously has multiple uses, we can see particular systems within it as burgeoning in popularity and then providing not just frameworks for, but instantiations of, certain hitherto unthought-of, non-purposive, possibilities of the imagination.

The chat room is one of these Internet systems, and this article will argue that this particular technology enables the manipulation of individual-social imaginative interactions that are specific to it. These are novel, and often incidental (see Introduction) forms of sociality that do not exist outside the net. Chat rooms are social formations in themselves – that is, not 'reflecting' other 'real-life' institutions like fan-clubs, friendship networks, special interest clubs, school classes or (in Russia) *zemlyachestvos*<sup>3</sup> (though these also exist on the net), but formations that have come into existence in the Internet medium itself. They have their own rules for interaction and holding the

floor, their own 'cultures' (as on the two different Buryat sites), and crucially their own understandings of merit, seniority, influence and status. They also have their own dynamics, with the splitting, springing up, closing down, etc. of forums happening at different rates on different sites.

As is well known, people in chat rooms assume 'masks' that are different from the 'faces' of humdrum daily life. And the masks engage in dances and disputes between themselves in the ether. Yet, in the cases to be discussed here, this sociality constantly interpenetrates with off-line life. First, the delineation of chat room identities uses a vocabulary that is not unique to it, but 'stretches' terms derived from mundane, mystical, historical or geographical contexts. And secondly, when the reverse happens, i.e. the relations created on the net impact on a person's everyday life, this does not just make them sad, happy, angry, etc. but also jolts the imaginative amour-propre and opens out possibilities for further action.

The paper will start by describing the virtual persona (*avatar* or *avatara*) assumed by the chat room participants, and then will proceed to discuss the emotional quality of messages, the social relations and politics of chatting, and finally the interaction between the chat rooms and what the participants call (contra Oscar Wilde) 'real life.' Taken together, these themes address whether the two chat rooms at hand, being more or less anonymous, constitute 'consequence-free environments' (Bargh & McKenna 2004: 582). The suggestion has been that these are 'risk-free' spaces, enabling the expression of aggressive, xenophobic, sexist, etc. attitudes that would not be possible in face-to-face encounters. As implied earlier, I shall argue to the contrary. Chat rooms in Russia are by no means 'consequence-free', an assertion that I will substantiate by referring to recent dramatic episodes in the Buryat Moscow-based website.

### **Russian Chat Rooms and Their Language**

Despite heavy advertising by Internet service providers, until recently the vast majority of Russians had never used the World Wide Web and most did not have access to personal computers. According to a poll in 2003, out of 2,000 persons questioned, 74 percent had never used a PC. Most users – 34.5 percent – use computers at work, while nearly 28 percent had access to PCs at school or college and other users mentioned relatives' homes, libraries and Internet-cafes. Only 15.8 percent of all those polled had computers in their own homes. Among those that used the Internet, only 7.7 percent did so on a daily basis. The great majority of Web users, 73 percent,

cited communication with relatives and friends as the main purpose of using the Internet. Though Internet use rose very rapidly in Russia (Saunders 2004) at the period this article refers to (early 2000s) it involved a small proportion of the population – considerably less than in Trinidad, for example (Miller & Slater 2000:29) – most middle-class and working in the media, politics, science and academia (Abdulova 2004:12). Significantly, this also indicates that participants already know many of the people they are interacting with on the net.

As regards the private–public quality of interaction, nowadays in Russia the days of shared e-mails – you wrote to a friend at a common work address and put ‘for the attention of so-and-so’ in the content box – are long over. E-mails are now private in principle. But the chat room, on the other hand, is a more or less public or shared space, which has its own conceptual and social organisation and rules of engagement. So the bare outlines of the chat room already suggest a distinctive structure: it is a public space for discussion, argument and simple nattering, where some but not all of the people know each other from everyday life, and through which participants can also contact one another privately via e-mails and ICQs. This broadly follows the overall structure of the chat room established by the first American founders, but Russians and Buryats have created local variants, such as those I describe in this article.

This article is about forums, and it will begin by pointing to the difference from plain chat. When you enter the Unified Forum of a website such as *x12.Buryatia.ru* based in Ulan-Ude, you are presented with around fifty chat rooms of various kinds, from serious ‘forums’ discussing issues of the day to notice-boards, government announcements, games, dating, and simple chit-chat. Simple chatting rooms have no theme for discussion, provide almost no information about the participants, and the users just natter on, putting each other down and sending each other up. The message can be posted in Russian, Buryat or English (or a mixture), using either Cyrillic or Latin fonts. The language is curt, slangy, ‘mis-spelled’, allusive, and full of in-words and puns that novices would not understand. For example, the similarity in writing the Cyrillic letter ‘ch’ and the number ‘4’ is played with, to produce ‘*chital*’ = *chital* (I/she/he read) or ‘*4e v piqali?*’ (why are you sad?). Other chat-room slang: *mylo* (soap) uses the similarity of sound with the English to denote ‘e-mail’; *ushol schasvirmus* renders the sound of spoken Russian, rather than the correct spelling, to say ‘went out just coming back’; ‘66’ uses the similarity of writing the Latin letters ‘bb’ to render ‘bye-bye’. A relatively

long sentence that epitomises the genre is: *zhorevo i porevo – eto ochen' zdorevo*, which uses rhyme and cod-Russian to say 'eating and porn are very good'. I will say little more about this type of chat room, which seems very similar to its British or US equivalents.<sup>4</sup>

The forum, by contrast, is a chat room in which serious matters can be discussed. Here the language culture is not without slang, English words, and English words with Russian grammatical endings, but the words and sentences are often fully formed, and one can also find long eloquent paragraphs in perfect Russian. Speed is not as crucial as in chitchat and people aim at expressiveness. Indeed, forum chat rooms normally provide a series of little faces, called 'smileys' or 'emoticons' (*smailiki* in Russian), expressing a number of emotions that can be added to sentences to indicate the writer's attitude to it.

Russians use the smileys known world-wide, but have added several others of their own, including *Krasno-armeets* (Red Army soldier), which apparently indicates resolve and daring (e.g. added to a sentence like 'Let's do it!'), and *Chukcha* (person of the Chukchi ethnic group; indigenous Siberian) which denotes 'I think that's stupid.' Even with regard to the standard set, Voiskounsky has noted that, since the perception of basic emotions by means of facial expressions differs according to age and ethno-cultural origin, 'dialects' in use of the lexicon of emoticons have emerged internationally (Voiskounsky 1998:6–7). It is highly probable that this is true inside Russia too: i.e., there must be distinctive use and recognition even of the standard smileys among Russians and other ethnic groups, not to speak of invention of their own emoticons. Presumably indigenous Siberians never use the 'Chukcha' smiley in the sense Russians do.

### **Moderators and Avatars**

The *moderator*, also called the *administrator* (both words written as in English), is highly important in Russian forums. He or she creates a chat room, monitors participants' registrations, assigns them a status, and can remove their messages – or even ban them from the chat room – and he can also close down the chat room for good. The position of moderator is obtained by expertise in computing and thus moderators tend to belong to the earlier generation who feel they know and understand the net and are the guardians of its rules.<sup>5</sup> The experienced elite is confronted, however, with an unruly, dynamic and inexperienced crowd of users. As we shall see, the moderator on Buryat forums is a constantly intervening presence, and it is important

to note that users always know which messages are his or hers – as they are marked ‘moderator’.

The ordinary members of a forum have to register, and in this way input quite a lot of information about themselves – but very little of it is ‘real’.<sup>6</sup> The three crucial items of information for registration are your nickname (which you choose for yourself), your e-mail address (normally not your everyday e-mail), and password (this is either chosen or assigned by the moderator).<sup>7</sup> Some sites require that participants give their sex, and I am told that, unlike in the West, in Russia it is considered unethical to falsify this. In any case, it is less easy to sustain the wrong sex in Russian, as a woman taking a male persona, for example, would have to keep remembering not to write *ya skazala* but *ya skazal* (‘I said’) and so forth. People who are unmasked as having portrayed the wrong sex can be ostracised by members of the group, a subject discussed later.

After people have interacted on the site for a while, they build up their on-line identity, the *avatar*.<sup>8</sup> This is made up of several components, all intended to present a particular personality. They include the nick-name, the photograph or logo that represents you visually, your location (which may be just ‘Moscow’ or ‘Ulan-Ude’ but also may be some imagined site like ‘nearby’ or ‘middle earth’), your ‘signature’ (*podpis*), which is the hidden ‘profile’ of yourself that can be accessed by a particular button, and the ‘sign-off’ message that appears under each of your postings.

Let us look briefly at the components of the *avatar*.<sup>9</sup> On the Buryat sites, the nicknames are often English, but also include versions of Buryat or Mongolian words. The photo or logo is only rarely a snapshot of the participant, but is the ‘self’ one wants to present. This can be comic (a cartoon figure), heroic (e.g. a tiger, or a male model in leathers on a motor-bike) or enigmatic (e.g. a map). Even seemingly realistic portrait photographs are usually false. The person who posted a svelte photo with the nick-name Dalena is in fact, I am reliably informed, a round-faced Buryat woman with short hair. The ‘signature’ varies like the photo from a mysterious phrase to a plunking banality, such as ‘The beauty of Buryatia is concentrated on Lake Baikal.’ The ‘sign-off’ is intended to be revealing of the inner self of the virtual persona, and at the same time to be witty and interesting. On the Moscow Buryat site the ‘sign-offs’ include:

*esli vy vse ponimaete, znachit vam ne vse govoryat* (if you understand everything, it means they haven't told you everything)  
*izvechnyi lya-minor* (eternal A-minor – i.e. conveying a message of sadness)  
*uroki istorii uchat tomu, chto oni nichemu ne uchat (k sozhaleniyu)* (the lessons of history teach that they teach nothing unfortunately)  
*moral'nyi urod* (moral freak)  
*khochesh' mira – gotov'sya k voine* (if you want peace, prepare yourself for war)  
*pravda – izobreteniyе man'yakov: kolet glaza i rezhet ushi* (truth is an invention of maniacs – it pierces your eyes and cuts off your ears)

Many of these sign-offs, created by Buryats living in Moscow, indicate the present-day fashion of celebrating the Mongolian ancestry of the Buryats (something that was not done in Soviet times, when it was popular to emphasise 'Russian' identity). However, the main observation in terms of my present concerns with 'technologies of the imagination' is that the *avatar* (or mask) is evidently designed to co-exist relationally in a social-cultural space and – in a sense – to *create* that space. Further, while it does of course screen off the everyday persona, that is not its main aim, which is to be different from other participants and thus to be positively interactive – to attract, surprise, interest and engage with other avatars.

Along with the *avatar* another item also appears with each message. This is the social status allocated by the moderator to each chat room persona. It usually relates to the number of messages the person has posted and their quality and character. This creates something like a scale of seniority, indicating how seriously messages from this person should be taken. Sometimes the status is indicated by a number of stars under the photo or logo. Occasionally, military ranks are given, from generalissimo to private. In other cases, a more idiosyncratic series is created by the moderator. For example, the Buryat-diaspora Moscow site has the following elaborate ranking system: *novichok* [novice]; *ne v pervyi raz* [not for the first time]; *veteran foruma* [veteran of the forum]; *zavsegdatai foruma* [forum regular]; *narushitel' konventsii* [breacher of conventions]; *bessmertnyi* [immortal]; *gost'* [guest] and *zvanyi gost* [respected guest], *professional*; *narodnyi nablyudatel'* [observer of the people]; *ukrotitel' shovinistov* [tamer of chauvinists]; 'relaxed and self-confident' (in English); *velikii i uvazhaemyi* [great and respected], and *admin* [i.e. the person is an administrator].

One reason why such rankings are more commonly found on Russian sites than for example English ones may be the more egalitarian ethos of the net in the west, and the fact that UK sites are more easily accessed by



volumes of people from all over the world, and hence participants are more difficult to categorise. Russian sites, on the other hand, tend to be smaller and 'denser' in the sense that the people interact more and feel they know one another. However, we cannot say that these ranking systems are simply taken out of the 'real world', shifted onto the net, and then reactivated within the on-line world of the chat room. The status-systems used are varied and idiosyncratic, which suggests, rather, something *ad hoc* and imaginative (see Introduction), that people are playing with such systems in order to represent a new form of sociality. Even the idea of using military ranks is not exactly a direct borrowing, because when they appear attached to all those crazy avatars the effect is always ironic. The 'technology' of ranking systems enables the representation of new, quirky, half-serious relations.

### **Sociality and Politics**

So far what I have described is a creation of identity that seems characteristic of the Internet technology as a whole, and thus not dissimilar to equivalent processes on other Russian chat sites or even elsewhere in the world. To go further I need to introduce the particular sociality of the studied sites, which have been created by Buryats – a people renowned for their respect for elders and their cultivation of kinship and territory-based networks. The literature on Russian chat rooms highlights a central issue, that of cultural unification and differentiation, and concludes that both processes are present.<sup>10</sup> My study broadly confirms these ideas, but it also suggests that some other interesting processes are happening.

Both Buryat sites are used mostly by young people, but according to people who know them both, the Moscow site has a 'different culture' from the one based in Ulan-Ude. First of all, the ethnic composition of the two is different. The Ulan-Ude site is a local one, and therefore probably has at least as many Russian as Buryat members, reflecting the population of the city. The Moscow site, on the other hand, was created for a diaspora; it is dominated by Buryats and 'metis' i.e. people who are a mixture of Buryat and some other, usually Siberian, nationality, with only a very few participants with no ethnic connection to the Buryats. But the distinction between the two sites is not mainly a matter of the pre-existing differences between the participants. Rather it concerns what happens on the sites themselves. The Moscow people think the Ulan-Ude site is clannish and 'closed', and immature and frivolous in its concerns. In fact, it is owned and run by a local businessman, and the Moscow diaspora accuses its members of being



‘subordinated’ and ‘unfree’, mainly because the moderators do not achieve their positions by merit and expertise but because they are managers in the oligarch’s company. Meanwhile, the Ulan-Ude people accuse the Moscow site of being dictatorial and arrogant, of laying down the law, of being nationalistic in an empty kind of way, and ignoring actual Buryat concerns, which in their view are mostly economic. They say the Moscow forums talk of nostalgia and Buryatia all the time, but in fact, they consist of people who left their homeland because they *did not* value it. Having pursued the wealth and privileges of the metropolis, they compound the insult by engaging in loud nationalistic rhetoric. Certainly, many of the Moscow participants are conscious of these accusations.

However this may be, it is the case that the two sites are almost enemies. It is hardly possible for a person to be an active member of chat rooms on both sites, and people who do tend to be ostracised or banned. Someone who tried is Dalena. She was banned from the Moscow forum – for not being nationalistic enough! Now Dalena, mentioned earlier, is a quiet and thoughtful young Buryat woman, a devout Buddhist, who lives at home in Ulan-Ude looking after her young children. She had written to the Moscow chat room saying that shrill calls for Buryat national rebirth could be misinterpreted, they could evoke xenophobic reactions from the Russians and Cossacks living all around. Better keep quiet and work out ways of peaceful coexistence. This posting received sharp criticism from the Moscow denizens. When Dalena refused to back down and even suggested that there was *no point in trying to revive the Buryat language*, there was a storm of protest, and she was banned. She now participates only in the Ulan-Ude forum. Now in this banning process the rules of the Moscow forum were observed, these being borrowed from football, namely the issue by the moderator of two yellow cards and then a red card. These are given out quite frequently for use of obscene language, racist and sexist expressions, or over-shocking political views. It is significant that the Ulan-Ude forum does not have such rules and rarely bans people. So clannish and immature it may be, but the Ulan-Ude site is also a good deal more anarchic, crude and democratic than its Moscow counterpart.

Chat rooms in Russia are not just an amusing diversion. Deeply felt concerns – for example over free speech or nationalism – are exposed and challenged there.<sup>11</sup> However, chat rooms cannot be seen *simply* as functional tools for implementing e.g. political goals (though they may sometimes briefly take on that purpose). Thus my materials suggest that the euphoric predictions of anthropologists like Appadurai should be taken with a pinch of salt. Ap-

padurai wrote (1996:5–6) that net technology has enabled imagination to become a collective social fact, ending the state's monopoly on national projects. In similar vein, Saunders argued that such social imagination has become 'an extremely powerful force, affecting newly minted, yet weak states and re-emerging, re-invigorated nations' (Saunders 2004). However, it seems that in Russia chat rooms create and underline divisions inside nations, that they are not effective means of political mobilisation,<sup>12</sup> and that while they may try to side-step statist organisations they do not in the end effectively challenge them.

My information about the two Buryat chat sites thus suggests that although the Moscow one is 'nationalist' and the one actually located in Buryatia is not, this – on first sight bizarre – outcome is not an accident. It seems that people are using chat rooms in the ways they do *because* they have a somewhat separate existence and a sociality peculiar to them. Because they are set up for the interplay of masks, not everyday faces, people using them are really concerned with what their *avatars* can do for them *on the internet*, with far-flung and centrifugal projections of personality and opinions. This is why the diaspora nationalism of Moscow is a virtual nationalism, and why the Buryats of Buryatia are not using the local chat rooms as their main channel for organisation. So far, authority relations inside chat rooms have been based on the internal criteria of members and chat room experience rather than state dictums or political pressures.<sup>13</sup> The identity-preoccupied, self-creative, self-critical, effervescent and yet deeply felt nature of the chat room network renders it non-trivial, but all the same an unlikely political tool. It is too non-prescriptively imaginative for that.

### De-coding the Masks

It is clear from both Buryat forums that the virtual interactions between *avatar* identities does not constitute a totally separate social space, but is always poised in potential linkage with the 'real' everyday personalities. In this intensively social environment, an absorbing new game has opened up: de-coding the 'masks'. This can be seen from the fact that there are several dedicated chat rooms on both sites where people discuss the correspondence between the *avatar* and its owner (*vladelets*). This could not be done of course unless that person was known off-line. So people write in to say, for example, 'Don't believe in the *avatar* of Golovastik [Big-head] – he's neither round nor fat!' More interestingly, participants insist on a certain *authenticity* of the image – for example, one participant wrote: 'The *avatar* is not designed to

demonstrate the person's face. It should convey the inner state of the person, his soul, one might say, or the condition of his soul.'

One message commented about Dalena: 'Dalena's *avatar* is very like her. Not so much externally, but more in the way she bears herself in society – in the forum and in reality. That's how I see Dalena, carefully placing her chin on her hands and conveying with her whole look, "Well, what can you tell me that's interesting?" This is a very delicate psychological moment, and I don't know how to put it, but I see Dalena in reality as in the forum – as one person.' Thus too much *avatar* falsity is condemned, and people try to see through it by reading between the lines of mysterious images, as the following analysis shows.

Here a 5-star administrator nicknamed in English 'Taking Over Me' is commenting on the *avatar* of another moderator, the 5-star 'Zhjckfd'. Taking Over Me wrote: 'Yaroslav [the real name of Zhjckfd], your *avatar* actually does correspond to the status of a strict admin who should be feared and respected. First, your signature "not lamo" [i.e. not a 'lamer' – novice] and your logo of a banned teapot [*chainik* – teapot – is another word for a novice] tells us of your extremely negative attitude to rubbishy ignoramus newcomers. Second, your signature 'Grandmother moderator [with "Irony" smiley added] Hi, my niggers!' indicates your contempt for ordinary living beings, like me and my neighbours, though I'd like to say that we aren't all niggers, only Sektor and Draiv. Thirdly, your 'sign-off', 'In truth there is nothing on earth more terrible than a woman. Try to stop their madness and they just start to cry. Women are not strong enough to be were-wolves or widows – they just can't hold out to the end' – is certainly a riddle. But I know you are not a completely cold-hearted admin and you may even allow Asmodeya [a female participant] to become a moderator. And fourthly, all that bullshit in your profile about you being an eighteen-year-old girl, giving a false address and workplace, tells us that you don't give a damn about other people's opinions, because you are an administrator. Grr-rr, in the end almost all of it corresponds to the real you.'

Taking Over Me's indignant message indicates the density of on-line and off-line information about other participants and the effort that is put into deconstructing their masks. This is a matter of imagining a virtual person's agency. Despite the use of the real name 'Yaroslav', note that the rules are observed here. A thin membrane of privacy is always preserved. It is prohibited to reveal in the chat room the full name and address of someone you know off-line. Similarly, people never reveal their virtual nicknames and avatars to

their parents and grandparents, etc. – that would be to reveal too much about one's inner imaginative life to people who know one in a different way.

So people in chat rooms are playing with surfaces and depths in a way that contrasts with people meeting face to face – at a party for example. In the chat forum, the physical appearance is exactly what you do not know, yet the whole assumption is that a certain deeper genuineness is what is revealed, whether you like it or not, through virtual interactions. To my mind, it is this – which is the opposite of the 'consequence-free encounter' of the literature – that can explain why emotions are so important here.

Perhaps it is for the same reason – the scariness of the potential nakedness of the virtual encounter (because in the chat room you cannot pretend that familial or workplace pressures prevent you appearing as you really are) – that the *avatar* is rarely in fact produced as a direct revelation of the self. Rather, its playfulness, its production of mystification, its puzzles that ask to be decoded, all suggest that the *avatar* is also about creating anticipation. It is a kind of mask of invitation to an interpretative game, 'make what you will of me' behind my surface. The identity of the one behind is of the essence. Perhaps we should see the *avatar* as a conductor or vector, a mask that by mystifying has effects, i.e. it incites interaction.

### **A Chat Room Drama**

The following case study is intended to illustrate the dynamics of the relations that can be sparked off between virtual identities, and to explore the interface between these and 'real life' consequences. In 2004, a Buryat participant called Poldark, with the sign-off 'moral freak' and a suggestive *avatar* had posted a short story onto the Moscow website, which was running a literary competition. The short story described, apparently in lascivious detail, the rape of a girl, a young child, by a gypsy. This posting gave rise to a furious controversy in the main 'general forum' of the site. Someone called Interested wrote in saying:

'I didn't want to raise this theme, but all the same it's necessary to talk about it. Today I went into the literary room, hoping to discover the theme of the competition. And what did I find? Paedophilia and disgusting *mat* [sexual cursing].

A certain Poldark – she's so ignorant she cannot even write Cyrillic properly – has exposed her inadequate fantasies to general view. Perhaps this Poldark was trying to imitate Nabokov?

I don't understand the role of moderators. They banned the completely inoffensive Sunduev and people like him, just because his views are different from their own, but rampant vulgarity and pornography is left to open view. Please, please, purge this Poldark.'

Guyuk then wrote in: 'No-one banned Sunduev. And as for Poldark... all you have to do is not enter the site. Poldark is under investigation, but let her work stand.'

Samurai wrote: 'Down with bans!!' [three 'demon' *smailiki* added]

But Interested kept up the campaign: 'Of course I can avoid that site and I'm not the kind of person in white gloves to say "Fye!" at the first sight of horse dung, but I simply think there should be definite standards. Would you allow yourself to say such things at home with your close and loved ones? I'm not proposing to ban Poldark but to cleanse uncensored [materials].'

DD wrote in support of Interested: 'Admins, get rid of this filthy stuff!'

Poldark then countered: 'OK, let's have an open vote then. What exists can't be killed off. And you, Interested, why don't you cut down your interest and leave people alone? If you were alive under Stalin, you'd have been great material for the KGB.'

DD replied: 'Poldark, so you openly propagandise for paedophilia? Read over your work again. Paedophilia is a serious crime against children, and now you want us to vote on it? I'm shocked! Moderators, are you dead, or what?'

After some more interventions about freedom of speech, and isn't Russia an Open Society these days, don't you idiots realise Lolita is a literary work of genius, and we all know where calls for persecution can lead, etc., the Moderator Alex intervened:

'So it turns out that Poldark for Buryatia.org is the same as Sorokin for Russia.' He was referring to the recent successful censorship of the alternative writer Sorokin after demonstrations in Moscow by *Iduschiye Vmeste*, the youth organisation that supports Putin.

The infuriated Interested now called for Poldark to be banned. '*BANIT* (in capital letters). If peace is not achieved in this world it is because of people like Poldark. Why do people like her like jeans material? Because on it DIRT IS NOT VISIBLE! Fu! I say, dirt is always visible!' Various veterans of the forum then intervened to try to calm things down. And this is where the statuses mentioned earlier become significant, because the next suggestion was to take a vote about suppressing the short story, but not among all the participants of the chat room, only among those classified as 'elders'. Meanwhile, the full banning of Poldark could only take place at an even higher level, in the 'Soviet of Administrators'. Another senior then wrote in saying, 'We have the institution of seniority in our forum [smiling face added], so let us use it. There are three *aksakals* [Kyrgyz word for a tribal elder] here. Why don't we three create a separate forum for adults only, remove Poldark's text there, and if she tries to sneak such stuff again onto the general forum, we'll ban her harshly.' But furious protests from the morally outraged continued. Shortly afterwards, the text was suppressed completely, Poldark was given a warning, and the whole forum closed down by the moderators.

This drama was not without consequences. Poldark was severely shaken, not so much by the hatred her story evinced, as by the damage to her *avatar* in front of the whole forum of hundreds of people. She then changed her signature from 'moral freak' to '*Na moem meste ya by davno i tikho spilsya* (in my place I'd have long ago and quietly taken to the bottle)'. Soon, however, she started up a new chat room, with the somewhat jokey theme, 'Let's ban Interested'. Some people then wrote in to say they had met Interested, and 'you have no idea what a spiritual charm and intelligence she has.' But most supported Poldark. This forum had a new moderator, who indeed banned Interested, not from all communication, but from starting up a new theme.<sup>14</sup>

Here, the on-line 'mask' and the 'face' people present in ordinary life become entangled in one interactive nexus. For the Poldark mask was attacked, changed a key aspect of its sign, and went on to win the battle with the Interested mask, but the everyday public face of this person – who is a student – was also considerably emboldened. Having gaily voiced the details of her victory to friends in Moscow, she went on a visit home to Buryatia. Here, however, a nasty surprise awaited her – an episode that should not have happened according to the conventions of chat room confidentiality. She was sitting having a quiet drink in a bar one day, when a well-known, highly influential local magnate, whom she had not previously met, sat down beside her and proceeded to insult her loudly before the entire room: 'I admire

your mother, a fine woman, but you are nothing! I despise you. Your writing is nothing but showing-off, completely without talent, just trying to shock people...' Poldark felt cowed and bruised by this encounter, particularly as the businessman has a very high position in Buryatia, and her friends present in the bar dared not, or would not, come to her support because they were his employees or under his patronage.

We can draw several points from this example. First, the conventions of the chat room and the whole idea of the *avatar* may make self-disclosure easier than in face-to-face encounters, but it does not reduce the risks of so doing, as the literature would suggest (Bargh & McKenna 2004:582). The chat room itself is a social arena where qualities of 'face', prestige, authenticity and respect are important. Poldark still keeps the same *avatar* two years later and is proud to maintain its rebelliousness. Second, we note the emergence of 'cultures' at sites, such as the quality of neo-tribal authoritarianism that seems to have established itself on the Moscow site. Following from this, a third feature of the Internet technology is that it enables a continual splitting off of interest groups, or people in discord with one another (e.g. the suggestion of a 'seniors only' forum for sexually explicit materials, or Poldark's setting up of the anti-Interested forum). Finally, although the bruising confrontation with the businessman was unusual, the fact that it could happen reveals that chat room battles can have consequences not only for the 'masks' but also for the 'faces' in everyday life. This is a feature of the specifically Buryat habits of sociality and the restricted size of the forums. The chat room support for Poldark's short story was only partially a matter of principles, such as freedom of speech, literary experimentation, and so forth. In fact several participants were relying on their offline knowledge of her, and equivalent information was put forward in support of Interested, who turns out to be a prosperous Buryat woman married to an American and living in the USA. In a social world where Buryats often comment on the density of their networks ('one way or another, we are all related'), it is no surprise that the everyday identities attached to virtual scenarios leak out. The magnate who attacked Poldark in the bar only did so because he too was an actor in the Buryat networks: he had visited the site and took an objection to Poldark's 'moral freak' persona, which he contrasted with his off-line knowledge of Poldark's mother.

We have the sense here of virtual and real relationships folded into one another. However, I do not argue like Miller and Slater that the Internet is fundamentally 'embedded' in ordinary social life, such that it has to be explained how people sometimes treat it as a world apart (2000:5). Chat rooms, in Russia



anyway, are used to enable the imagination, to project some self-image that is not evident in mundane encounters. The whole ideology of the *avatar* is that it reveals to the world the aspects of the self that are suppressed in the ordinary life because of conventions or the gender/age/status pressures of family relations. The Internet technology enables this by providing a medium for expression of an inner core that shuts off 'society'. Yet at the same time it produces a direct semiotic relationality between avatars. Thus chat rooms create their own ethereal relations, and in practice these are separable from domestic life. Although 'public' in a sense, these on-line dramas do not become completely common knowledge as if they were published in a newspaper. Poldark's mother does not know about the episode of the shocking story, and it would be regarded by users as the utmost betrayal were someone in the know to reveal it to her. The whole episode did not arise from outside the Internet, but from the relations created *inside* it.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

Internet chat rooms are spheres in which everyday identity is screened off, thus provoking the imagination of participants. This technology was invented and set in train in America, which has spread and salted down into a structure that is copied everywhere and seems set to stay in place for some time. It is what happens around this basic structure that is interesting. In the case of small, densely interactive sites in Russia, the *avatars* that appear to exist only in the realm of the imagination circle back and emerge in what people describe as 'real life'. The imaginary self of the avatar is not just an outer representation masking your true inner self, because it can come back and hit you in the 'face' (your everyday face, that is) thus placing a question mark over the 'reality' of the everyday. Chat room technology may be needed to produce such alternative identities, but it underdetermines (see Introduction) their sheer weirdness and also their agency, which circulates and has emergent effects undreamed of by their creators.

Thus people can post items like Poldark's explicit short story that they would hardly dare to bring up face to face, and the moot-like character of the forum with its apparatus of ranking, voting, warnings, banning, etc. means that – if they do not vanish because no one takes any notice of them – such items immediately become controversies. At the same time, there is much less here of the history that attaches to everyday life. The long creeper-like ties that we cannot escape in the 'real world', the things grandmother keeps reminding you of, the responsibility for what you said last year, and so forth

– all that does not have time to accrete. And if an on-line version of that does begin to trail around you, the technology makes it your choice what to do next – side-step and make a change to your mask, as Poldark did, or wipe the whole thing away and start again. The technologies of speed, obliteration and starting up again are essential here. Imaginatively, something else is always round the corner. Or someone else, including your self.

Such are the paradoxes of chat room sociality and subjectivities: you both expose your inner personality (an aspect of it, of course) to the appreciation or body blows of others, *and* you can quickly change what that ‘inner person’ consists of. You enjoy concocting a teasing persona, and yet a desire to have authentic and coherent forms of self-representation also seems to remain. Anonymity is the possibility given by the technology, but – and perhaps this is a transitional time – Buryats do not (yet) embrace it wholeheartedly and energetically burrow away at it in gossipy chat rooms set up for the purpose. Amid all these tensions, some central features stand out, however, and these apply to Buryats like anyone else. In forums, unlike in daily life, your given circumstances are insignificant and your future is *literally* in your hands. The forum life is no less real and objective than ‘real life’, but it is livelier, more talkative, angrier, more pluralistic and idealistic than everyday worlds hidebound by established authority.

In ‘real life’, it is difficult to make people think you are someone different from the ‘face’ they are accustomed to – a new hairstyle will not quite do it. But you can change central elements of your *avatar* overnight, create a new one, or set up a new forum, as Poldark did. And the whole practice of banning – at one touch of a button the prurient Interested is simply vanished – is something that even the most powerful tyrant in the world has never been able to do so easily till now. All this means that there is a strange quivering meeting of spirits in the Russian chat room – you can express your inner soul, but only for as long as other people can bear it. I have argued that experience of this technology – one might even think of training in it – is bound to change the practitioners. At the very least, it provokes both the dreaming up of mysteries and the imaginative effort of de-coding them. Through this activity people have to become more self-reflective and mutually probing – more so than if they had never conceived of stepping into an arena of argumentative masks at all.

Perhaps we need a whole *new term*, less enduring sounding than ‘social’, to talk about the relations between such evanescent (yet non-trivial) identities. For, collective in some sense though the mask may be, for the individual

concerned the *avatar* is the projection of an aspect of the naked self. This is what makes the encounters so acute and sometimes painful, and why they are so often used to try to find soul mates in the world of the imagination. This is one central reason why I have maintained that these forums are not 'consequence-free.' But implications for anthropology are interesting. Our discipline has often assumed that the long-term is what is consequential, and it has devoted much less energy to the sociality, and indeed technology, of the evanescent, the unpredictable, or the shocking.

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#### Notes

1. *Sayt Buryatskogo Naroda*, based in Moscow, was founded around 1999 and has about 2,000 registered and about 1,000 active users (written in 2005).
2. [www.buryatia.ru](http://www.buryatia.ru) is based in Ulan-Ude. Founded around 2002, it had about 1,000 registered and 500 active users in 2006.
3. 'Associations'. *zemlyachestvos* are based in Russian cities of people coming from one rural provincial area. In Buryatia all of the rural regions of the Buryat Republic are represented by *zemlyachestvos* in the capital Ulan-Ude. In Moscow, there are such associations, with premises and officers, to promote the interests of Buryats and many other nationalities and regional groups.
4. Note, however, that chat room talk, and indeed blog, generates its own dialect – often condemned by outsiders as vulgar or impious (c.f. Doostdar 2004:651–62 for the case of blogging in Iran). The easy tri-lingualism of the genre, its wit and irreverence, create a boundary-crossing international space that is also internationalist. In other words, it has an unspoken ideology (see Nair n.d.:4 for the equivalent in India). Yet, in Russia this is at the same time a limited space 'vertically', since it excludes people of older generations who do not know the lingo, and would probably recoil from it anyway. In Russia, as in India, there is a term for this chat room language. It is called speaking 'in Albanian' (*po-albanski*).
5. These rules include, for example, that chat rooms cannot be removed or destroyed without the moderator's permission, that guest visitors are not permitted to edit home-pages, that personal correspondence is not transferred into the public domain, etc.
6. The English word 'real' is regularly used on Russian sites to refer to life off-line.
7. Information, such as the 'real' home address, telephone number, and age, is normally not supplied to the site but kept hidden.
8. The word *avatar* is used worldwide; it is taken from Hinduism, where it means the descent to earth of a deity in various visible forms.
9. Sites sometimes provide palettes of the items for building an *avatar* (e.g. photos, logos and nicknames to choose from), but most people construct their own.
10. 'Unification' results mainly from the requirement of mutual comprehension between multiple, variegated and unpractised users, hence the tendency to simplify

and Americanise language, the use of standard emoticons, and the censure of irony and sarcasm, all this being managed through the authoritarian practices of moderators. Diversity, on the other hand, is produced by the very advent of all these newcomers, their setting up of endless new forums of their own, and their tendency to use Russian, English and other languages and emoticons in culturally specific ways (Voiskounsky 1996; Schmidt, Teubner & Zurawski 2004).

11. There is little published work on this topic regarding the Russian regions. Abdulova's examination (2004) of the image of the country of Mongolia on websites in Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude revealed substantive differences. In Irkutsk, essentially a Russian city, Mongolia was seen as a distant and exotic place, of little interest except for holidays. In Ulan-Ude, on the other hand, website discussions portray Mongolia as the homeland of the ancestors of the Buryats and also as a vitally important economic partner of the Buryat Republic.
12. According to Bargh and McKenna (2004:582–583) sexual minorities and stigmatised groups in Russia do not use the Internet widely to mobilise politically, unlike in many Western countries.
13. This is different from the Persian case because in Iran the state is concerned with 'vulgarity' and sexuality as political-moral issues, and hence does interfere with such sites, whereas this is not the case in Russia (Doostdar 2004). Compare the political character of virtual protest and rave demos in Japan (Hayashi & McKnight 2005) with the absurdist equivalent of flash-mobs in Russia (Gudkova 2004).
14. Moderators can exclude people for as long as they like, to the degree they want.
15. It can be seen that the virtual personality is in the end jointly produced. One develops one's *avatar* only after a period of interaction, and its 'meaning' for everyone else is then evinced by means of collective debates, for example those along the lines of 'whom do we most dislike in the forum?' It is significant how much energy goes into these public discussions on both sites. And, it is perhaps relevant to this fascination with collective personality construction (and de-construction) that purely individual interactions via chat rooms (i.e. one-to-one messaging through ICQs and MSNs) seem to be much less used by Russians than British or Chinese.

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